

# 5 Easy Steps for Leading Book Discussions

Excerpted from Reading Group Choices  
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## 1 Acknowledge your role as “facilitator”—not expert.

If it's your turn to lead the discussion, know that you are not expected to be an authority or expert on the chosen book. Your primary tasks are to open the discussion, keep it going, maintain a lively dialogue and end the discussion on time. A great book discussion is the result of the thoughts and perceptions of a variety of different people.

## 2 Note your own response as you read.

Make notes as you read the book, highlighting or marking passages. What are your reactions, questions or insights? Add the personal touch to your discussion. Share your thoughts during your discussion and invite others to comment.

## 3 Lay some ground rules.

After you've introduced yourself to the group, remind members of the ways they can contribute to the discussion:

- Avoid “crosstalk” or talking over others.
- Be respectful. Keep an open mind.
- Try not to repeat what others have said. Speak up with something new or add to the previous comment.
- Acknowledge that there is no right or wrong, just differences of opinion.
- Be open to learn from others.
- If you are outgoing, be careful to allow space for others to share their thoughts.

## 4 Call the question.

If you feel the group has begun to repeat itself, acknowledge your observation, ask for agreement if necessary and pose a new topic.

## 5 Balance the discussion.

Invite quiet members to share their thoughts. Watch for introverts who have something to say but are having a hard time getting in a word.

## From the Preface of *The Living Buddha*

“It is my firm conviction that one can seek to discover and understand another human individual only through the medium of one's own identity as a human being, and it is on this premise that I have attempted to transcend the barrier of time and approach the man we call the Buddha. In this respect, my portrait of him, rather than being drawn strictly from bibliographical sources, is no doubt strongly colored by the image that I have formed in my mind of him as the leader of a religious organization. For the subjectivity of this approach, I can only beg my readers' indulgence.”

## Host a Reading Group

Reading group discussions—in your home, at a bookstore or in a library—are great opportunities to learn something new, see things in a new way, examine deeply held beliefs or simply enjoy the company of other book lovers. Middleway Press is happy to provide this discussion guide, which gives you everything you need to host a successful meeting: a descriptive summary, topics to consider, endorsements and hosting tips.

For more copies of this guide, or guides for other great Middleway Press books, contact us at:

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## DISCUSSION GUIDE

### THE LIVING BUDDHA AN INTERPRETIVE BIOGRAPHY

THE SOKA GAKKAI HISTORY OF BUDDHISM SERIES

DAISAKU IKEDA

TRANSLATED BY BURTON WATSON

## *The Living Buddha* *An Interpretive Biography*

*(The Soka Gakkai History of Buddhism Series)*

By Daisaku Ikeda

Translated by Burton Watson

MIDDLEWAY



P R E S S

## About the Book

An intimate portrayal of the Buddha, one of history's most important and obscure figures, this chronicle reveals him not as a mystic, but a warm and engaged human being who was very much the product of his turbulent times. This biographical account traces the path of Siddhartha Gautama as he walked away from the pleasure palace that had been his home and joined a growing number of wandering monks, ultimately making his way toward enlightenment beneath the *bodhi* tree, and spending the next 45 years sharing his insights. The Buddhist canon is expertly harvested to provide insight into the Buddha's inner life and to grant a better understanding of how he came to play his pivotal role as founder of one of the world's largest religions.

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**Purchase From:** Indie Bookstores, Amazon.com

**Available in:** Trade Paperback, 176 pages, \$14.95 USD

**ISBN:** 978-0-9779245-2-3

**Subject:** Buddhism/ History/ Biography

## About the Author

**Daisaku Ikeda** is the author and co-author of more than 60 books on a wide range of topics including the history of Buddhism, Buddhist philosophy, dialogues with world leaders, poetry, novels and books for children. He is the founding president and leader of the Soka Gakkai International ([www.sgi.org](http://www.sgi.org)), one of the largest lay Buddhist organizations in the world with members in more than 190 countries and territories. He is the recipient of the United Nations Peace Award, the Rosa Parks Humanitarian Award and the International Tolerance Award of the Simon Wiesenthal Center.

**Burton Watson** is a widely known and respected translator of Chinese and Japanese literature. A former professor at Columbia, Stanford and Kyoto universities, his translations include *The Lotus Sutra*, *The Vimalakirti Sutra*, *Chuang Tzu: Basic Writings*, *Mo Tzu: Basic Writings*, *Ryokan: Zen Monk-Poet of Japan* and *Saigyō: Poems of a Mountain Home* among others. He received the PEN Translation Prize in 1981.

## CONVERSATION STARTERS

- 1 Because of the limited known facts of the Buddha's life, this book is subtitled "An Interpretive Biography" and the subtitle of the Japanese edition is subtitled "My View of Shakyamuni." Did you find this personal interpretation successful? Does Daisaku Ikeda bring the Buddha to life? How does this biography differ from those based on first and secondhand sources, family and friend interviews, and other methods employed by biographers?
- 2 The biographer points out that Shakyamuni, Socrates, Confucius and the prophet Isaiah were all alive at approximately the same time, constituting the dawn of spiritual civilization. Discuss how each contributed to that dawn. Have there been other eras when several great thinkers and leaders have been alive at the same time? If so, in what way did they influence the world in which they lived? (p. 35)
- 3 Deeply affected by the human tragedies he witnessed, Shakyamuni gave up his wealth and influence and refused remuneration and riches. How did this strengthen his appeal to his followers? (pp. 23–27)
- 4 Daisaku Ikeda differentiates between the Eastern concept of emancipation within the individual and the Western view of freedom, which, he states, relates to the rights of the individual within their society. He theorizes that perhaps this difference has led the East to neglect the problems of society. Do you agree, and if so, in what areas do you think that this difference is most evident? (pp. 40–45)
- 5 After his enlightenment, the Buddha spent the rest of his life teaching what is described as the Middle Way. Discuss what is meant by this. (pp. 69–85)
- 6 Daisaku Ikeda states, "From the perspective of Buddhism, religion should not attempt to dictate social activity but should exert a spiritual influence over those who carry out that activity." Do you agree? Have there been eras where this has not been the case? (p. 97)
- 7 The Buddha is quoted as saying: "No Brahman is such by birth; no outcaste is such by birth. An outcaste is such by his deeds; a Brahman is such by his deeds." Comment on this philosophy expounded 2,500 years ago. Is this a universal ethic? Why or why not? (p. 111)
- 8 The essential difference between Buddhism and most other religions is, in the words of Daisaku Ikeda, that "no religion places greater emphasis upon the dignity of the individual and one's subjective nature than Buddhism. . . most religions recognize the 'absolute' as existing outside the self, Buddhism does not." Discuss this difference between the major religions as drawn by Daisaku Ikeda. (p. 132)
- 9 In what ways does this interpretive biography placing Shakyamuni, the Buddha, in his historical and geographical context lead to a deeper understanding of the Buddhist philosophy and legacy?
- 10 The fundamental spirit of Buddhism, as described by Daisaku Ikeda, strongly emphasizes practice, employing the active and positive rather than the merely passive. Discuss how the Buddha embodied this philosophy in his own life and encouraged it in his followers down to the present day. (pp. 80–81)