Personal Review: If You Find the Buddha
I'm not really qualified to evaluate the quality of photography in this or any other book. When I sit down and try to review a book of photography such as this, I basically ask two questions: can I see what the photographs are supposed to be showing me, and is there a concept that ties all of them together? If You Find the Buddha makes it rather easy for me in this regard: obviously, there is some representation of Buddha to be found in each photograph, and the whole point of the book seems to be an inspirational one, as it's a veritable signpost helping point readers in the direction of their own individual paths toward enlightenment and a sense of purpose in life.

Jeff Greenwald's Foreword and photographer Jesse Kalisher's introduction are no less enlightening than the photographs themselves. In comparatively few words, they give the reader a good feel for who Buddha is and what he represents, while also tearing down some of the veil of misunderstanding that separates many Western minds from this
traditionally Asian way of life. I feel rather stupid to even admit it, but I had always assumed that Buddhists worship Buddha - they do not, for Buddha was a supremely enlightened soul but never a god. He even forbade his followers from making any images of his likeness - a fact which is somewhat ironic, giving the ubiquity of Buddhist statues and icons all over the world today (Greenwald explains how this came to be). Another little insight I picked up here has to do with individual reactions to different religious icons. Seeing an image of Jesus turn up unexpectedly doesn’t exactly put you at your ease; for a Christian, such a sighting is the equivalent of a "straighten up and fly right" moment. In contrast to this, the Buddha normally engenders a calming influence on just about everyone. Even as a Christian, I feel a sense of reverence (which is not the same as worship) and otherworldliness when I see a Buddha statue. I believe that is the very thing that rests in the heart of this book.

The gorgeous photographs that make up the bulk of this book are impressively diverse, capturing images of the Buddha in all shapes and forms. If you're like me, you tend to think of Buddha only in terms of the large golden statues typically found at holy sites, but this book shows us that Buddha is basically everywhere. Many of Kalisher's photographs do come from Buddhist shrines in several Asian countries, but the most arresting inclusions capture images of normal life in America as well as Asia. For example, you'll find the Buddha in an impressive sand castle, in yard ornaments, in small statues sure to draw tourists' eyes, on dashboards, in clothing patterns, and even in a Thai sex market. Having spent the best years of my life in Chapel Hill, I was especially interested in a significant number of photographs from that city (now the photographer's home) and some of its neighbors. A few of the photographs did prove to be a challenge of sorts to me (Where's Buddha?), but that actually just encouraged me to pay more studious attention to them than I probably would have otherwise.

Certainly, If You Find the Buddha gave me a better appreciation for Buddha and the type of thinking he represents. I suppose many a reader will see the title of this book and ask: what does happen if you find the Buddha? That is something you have to answer for yourself (and this book only starts you on such a spiritual path), but I think most individuals will definitely take away something of value from Kalisher's photographs.

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