H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

**Richard F. Gombrich**. *What the Buddha Thought.* London: Equinox Pub., 2009. xv + 240 pp. $95.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-84553-612-1; $24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-84553-614-5.

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**Published on** H-Buddhism (January, 2012)
**Commissioned by** Daniel A. Arnold

Richard Gombrich writes, he says, out of exasperation and admiration. He is exasperated because Buddhists and non-Buddhists alike persistently fail to adequately explain the Buddha's ideas. This has meant both that the Buddha's contribution to human thought has not been fully appreciated, and also that many are misinformed about what the Buddha taught; what can measure up, he asks, "to the idiocy of what educated people are prepared not just to say but even to publish about Buddhism?" (pp. 200-201). On the other hand, Professor Gombrich believes that the Buddha's ideas are in fact neither very complex nor difficult to grasp. And while Gombrich cannot agree with the Buddha on everything, he is nonetheless an admirer, believing that much that the Buddha thought and taught is of great value–indeed, that the Buddha should be ranked among "the greatest thinkers … of whom we have record in human history" (pp. 1, 4). What is perhaps slightly surprising about this book, given the rhetoric, is that the account it offers of what the Buddha taught is, albeit with some significant qualifications, not so different in substance from what I, studying as an undergraduate in the late 1970s, was brought up to believe the Buddha taught.

What Gombrich regards as misunderstandings are sometimes of a general philosophical nature (that the doctrine of "not self" involves a denial of personal continuity and moral responsibility, that dependent origination involves determinism); but for the most part they seem to derive from attributing perspectives from the later Buddhist tradition (the Abhidhamma, the Pali commentaries, and the Mahāyāna sūtras) to the Buddha himself. Thus, for Gombrich, the "tedious" second half of the Buddha's First Sermon, where we are told "the doctrine of the Four Noble Truths has twelve aspects … reeks of the systematizers who produced the *abhidhamma*" (p. 103); the "interpretation [of dependent origination] favoured by Buddhaghosa, that the chain covers three lives of the individual," is "contorted" (p. 142); the Buddha's later followers took his insights into "no soul" in "a completely literalist sense, so that they required a reductionist character" (p. 154); the Buddha's "personal style in the Pali Canon"–his way of adapting his message to his audience, his use of analogies–is to be contrasted with the "authoritarian [and] sometimes even strident" tone of the Lotus Sūtra (p. 165).

Viewing the Abhidhamma literature and the Mahāyāna sūtras as not having been taught by the Buddha is, of course, nothing new, and Gombrich's manner of doing so sometimes betrays a failure to properly consider the nature of later developments in Buddhist thought. Gombrich is surely right to see the five-*khandha* theory as representing something more like an analysis of how the mind processes experiences than a list of the constituents of an individual being–an analysis of how things work, rather than of what exists. Yet the Pali Abhidhamma literature can be read not so much as missing this point (as Gombrich suggests at p. 154), but as precisely drawing it out. As A. K. Warder observed of the *Paṭṭhāna*, the seventh work of the Abhidhamma Piṭaka, we have in it "a description not of what there is but of what happens: this is entirely in accordance with the Buddhist conception of the universe, that nothing 'is' … but that there occur forces … which act as conditions for one another."[1]

Where Gombrich's presentation of early Buddhist thought is more truly distinctive is in two principal respects. First is his emphasis on demonstrating that the genesis of Buddhist ideas is best understood as a response to the pre-existing system of thought promulgated in specifically brahmanical texts. Second, and closely linked to the first, is the extent to which Gombrich wishes to characterize those ideas as belonging to a specific historical personality: "One remarkable brain must have been responsible for the basic ideology" (p. 17).

The brahmanical background to early Buddhist thought is something that Gombrich has been exploring in his writings for twenty years. The present book revis-

its and summarizes many of the arguments found in his earlier publications. Gombrich's account of the manner in which the imagery of fire lurks behind some of the familiar concepts of early Buddhist thought and draws its rhetorical force from the Vedic sacrifice is in many ways compelling, and evokes a thought-world which we are in danger of overlooking when we read the earliest sources through the eyes of the later tradition. Yet his insistence that the interpretative key to the Pali Nikāyas lies in seeing the Buddha as responding to brahmanical thought remains contested. As Johannes Bronkhorst has recently argued, other models for the evolution of Indian religious ideas in the first millennium BCE are possible.[2]

From the perspective of later Theravāda tradition at least, the most radical suggestion Gombrich makes in this context is that the Buddha taught kindness (*mettā*) as a way to enlightenment, but that his immediate followers failed to understand this. The argument in essence involves the claim–made to the Buddha's brahmin audience in the *Tevijja-sutta*–that "companionship with Brahmā" (*brahma-sahavyatā*) after death is the highest religious goal; thus when the Buddha then redefines "companionship with Brahmā" as a meditative state that involves pervading the six directions with a mind that is full of kindness, he must intend to indicate his own highest religious goal, namely enlightenment. On Gombrich's view, however, the Buddha's followers misunderstood what the Buddha was up to and so arrived at the "dogma that someone who practised the *brahma-vihāras* was reborn in the Brahma world but no higher" (p. 88). If, as Gombrich claims, the teaching that "love and compassion can be salvific for the person who cultivates those feelings to the highest pitch" was such a crucial part of what the Buddha taught (p. 195), it remains something of a puzzle that he should have chosen to reveal this principally to brahmin outsiders, and in terms that were obscure to his own followers. Gombrich's claim that the subsequent compilers of the Abhidhamma define *mettā* as "absence of hatred" (*adosa*) (p. 90) is misleading. As Matilal pointed out with reference to the Buddhist understanding of "ignorance" (*avidyā*), the use of a term formed with the privative prefix *a-* does not necessarily entail mere absence;[3] in fact the Abhidhamma does not define *mettā* as *adosa*, but rather *adosa* as *mettā*, making precisely the point that *adosa* should be understood as a positive quality and not simply the absence of a negative one.

Gombrich's emphasis on the brahmanical background to the Buddha's ideas is closely linked to his project of presenting the Buddha as a particular personality. The confidence with which Gombrich draws his portrait of the historical Buddha is a challenge to those whom he views as unreasonably skeptical. Thus he is keen to argue not just that the Pali Nikāyas should be regarded as the most important source for early Buddhist thought, but also that they provide a reliable means of recovering the ideas of the Buddha himself. He regards the Pali Nikāyas as having been composed and transmitted orally as fixed texts in the manner of the Vedas. He does not specify a precise date for their composition, but given that he thinks the *Dhammacakkappavattana-sutta* in its present form "probably dates from as late as the Second Council" and that the Saṃyutta Nikāya was closed at that time (p. 104), it seems that he regards a significant portion of the Pali Nikāyas as dating from the middle of the fourth century BCE. (He places the death of the Buddha in 405 BCE and the Second Council sixty years later [pp. xiii, 101].)

The claim that the bulk of the *sutta*s in the Pali Nikāyas were transmitted verbatim as fixed texts from the Second Council (or even earlier) is, in my view, hardly credible. The Second Council evidently predates Buddhist sectarianism; traditions of ancient Buddhism other than the Pali also refer their collections of sūtras back to this council. Some of the texts of these other traditions–mostly, it seems, those of the Sarvāstivādins and the Dharmaguptakas–survive, both in Indian languages and in Chinese translation. While they are in many respects remarkably close to the Pali texts, there are also differences. This indicates that Buddhist communities continued, after the Second Council, to compose and redact the texts that make up the Nikāyas/Āgamas. To suggest that this situation should apply only to some Buddhist schools but not the Pali tradition–that it is, in effect, the other schools that have diverged, while the Pali tradition preserves the texts in precisely the form in which they were recited at the Second Council–involves special pleading that seems without basis. To begin with, the very language of the Pali canon (displaying as it does features of a western Prakrit) does not correspond with what we might expect for the language of a canon recited at Vaiśālī in the east.

Gombrich, it seems to me, seriously underestimates the significant extent to which the earliest sources are at least one step removed from the Buddha. The Pali Nikāyas and other comparable sources appear to be texts composed by the first few generations of the Buddha's followers in order to communicate how they viewed the Buddha and what they understood him to have taught. That they did indeed understand correctly something of what he taught seems a reasonable hypothesis. If they did, we would expect them precisely to have expressed

that understanding not only by parroting the Buddha's own words, but also by reformulating and adding to them in order to get the message across. And this is where the difficulties lie. The very nature of the texts and their complicated textual history mean that the task of identifying sharp fault lines between what the Buddha taught and what his early followers tell us he taught is far from straightforward. The danger is that we begin to see the fault lines where we want to see them.

Writing of the quest for the historical Jesus, E. P. Sanders observed: "People want to agree with Jesus, and this often means that they see him as agreeing with themselves."[4] It seems to me that much the same might be said of the Buddha. While Gombrich expresses his admiration for the Buddhist tradition, he emphasizes that the "admirable part of the Buddhist tradition … goes back in my view to the Buddha himself" (p. 1). Yet for all the emphasis on the brahmanical context for the Buddha's ideas, Gombrich's Buddha can seem a man at odds with the culture of eastern India of the fifth century BCE. The Buddha may have believed in some form of rebirth, but it is doubtful, Gombrich tells us, that he really believed in the existence of the divine beings of the Pali Nikāyas (pp. 73, 88). When the Buddha gave an account of the origins of human society involving realms and beings other than human, he intended this simply as a satirical joke, which his unimaginative followers failed to get and took literally. Gombrich's Buddha is concerned above all with ethics and moral responsibility; as for meditation, "what the Buddha was prescribing as mental training must initially have been what we nowadays take for granted in an educated person, a basis for moral and intellectual understanding" (p. 172). The Buddha deprecated the use of *iddhi* or "shamanic powers," regarding them as having no religious value (p. 72). "The Buddha declared ritual to be useless or worse" (p. 200). In establishing the rules of the Vinaya, the Buddha anticipated Karl Popper's "epistemology of refutation and conjecture" (pp. 173, 177); more generally the Buddha's approach was not unlike Popper's approach to social philosophy (p. 178). On all these issues, it would be possible to take the evidence of the Nikāyas and paint a rather different portrait of the Buddha from the one painted by Gombrich.

Modern scholarly studies of the figure of the Buddha have tended in one of two directions. The first, going back to Émile Senart and Hendrik Kern, has aimed to articulate the reality of how the Buddha was understood by his Indian followers, and so produces a vision of the Buddha as a godlike "superman" (*mahāpuruṣa*). The second, going back to Hermann Oldenberg and T. W. Rhys Davids, has aimed at stripping away the myth and legend seen as created by his followers, in order to reveal Gotama the man.[5] Gombrich's *What the Buddha Thought* clearly follows the latter route. In its extreme form, the first of these approaches may end in denying that the Buddha has any historical reality at all–a step that few scholars seem inclined to take today.[6] The kind of approach exemplified by Gombrich, on the other hand, ends in treating the truth the ancient authors wanted to communicate as a veil to be seen through.

Gombrich's account of what Gotama the man thought is executed with flair and conviction. The sketch of early Buddhist ideas is lively and often perceptive. But as the title of his final chapter puts it, is this book to be believed? As I have indicated, in my view the answer has to be: in some parts, yes, in others, no. Overall Gombrich's approach is much more speculative than he allows; no doubt he would defend this by reference to his Popperian method of conjecture and refutation (pp. 95-97).

Most scholars of Buddhism would probably accept the reality of the historical Buddha in terms similar to Étienne Lamotte's: unless we accept that Buddhism has its origins in the strong personality of its founder, it remains inexplicable.[7]Yet a strong personality can take various forms and be portrayed in various ways. Given the nature of our sources in this case, recovering a historical likeness may not be possible. What we are faced with is a choice between the fantasy of Gotama the man, or the reality of the Buddha as the texts portray him, ultimately untraceable (*ananuvejja*).[8]

Notes

[1]. A. K. Warder, *Indian Buddhism* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1970), 309.

[2]. Johannes Bronkhorst, *Greater Magadha: Studies in the Culture of Early India* (Leiden: Brill, 2007).

[3]. B. K. Matilal, "Ignorance or Misconception? A Note on Avidyā in Buddhism", in *Buddhist Studies in Honour of Walpola Rahula*, ed. Somaratna Balasooriya et al. (London: Gordon Fraser, 1980), 154-64.

[4]. E. P. Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus* (London: Penguin, 1993), 6.

[5]. See J. W. de Jong, *A Brief History of Buddhist Studies in Europe and America* (Tokyo: Kōsei, 1997), 31-32.

[6]. For a recent skeptical take see Hans H. Penner, *Rediscovering the Buddha: The Legends and Their Interpretations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

[7]. Étienne Lamotte, *History of Indian Buddhism* (Louvain: Institut Orientaliste, 1988), 639.

[8]. V. Trenckner, ed., *Majjhima Nikāya: Vol. 1* (London: Pali Text Society, 1888), 140.

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**Citation**: Rupert Gethin. Review of Gombrich, Richard F., *What the Buddha Thought.* H-Buddhism, H-Net Reviews. January, 2012.
**URL**: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=31586

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