

Review: What the Buddha Taught by Richard Gombrich

What the Buddha Thought by Richard Gombrich, Equinox: London, 2009, 256 pages, ISBN 978-1-84553-614-5, UK £14.99pb £55hb.

Reviewed by Dhivan Thomas Jones

Any book that combines thorough and judicious scholarship with ambitious and original ideas is exciting to read; it is an education and a challenge; one's mind is caused to grow. Richard Gombrich's *What the Buddha Thought* is one of those books. It begins: 'This book argues that the Buddha was one of the most brilliant and original thinkers of all time' (p.vii). While many Buddhists have long suspected this, Gombrich's contribution is a series of closely-argued chapters which put the nature of the Buddha's brilliance and originality into historical context with a new exactitude and sensitivity.

Richard Gombrich is a well-known British scholar of early Buddhism, and *What the Buddha Thought* develops some themes from his 1996 book, *How Buddhism Began*, besides introducing some new ones. Like that earlier volume, the present book is based on a series of lectures, in this case, a series of ten given in 2006 at SOAS in London. These were given under the auspices of the Numata Foundation, which has instituted visiting lectureships and chairs in Buddhist Studies at several European and North American Universities. Some enthusiastic friends and I attended the lecture series, enjoying Prof. Gombrich's stentorian delivery in the crowded room, and the generous manner in which he took questions after each weekly talk. The book expands slightly upon those lectures, and has a narrative continuity indicative of careful rewriting, as well as notes and bibliography.

Readers of *How Buddhism Began* will recognise in the new book the discussion of the Buddha's conception of karma as a response to Brahmanism (in chs.1–4). This theme is developed in relation to new discoveries by the Polish Vedic scholar, Prof. Joanna Jurewicz, concerning evidence for belief in rebirth in the *Rg Veda*. Gombrich also draws

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upon the recent work of Gaganath Obeyesekere, in *Imagining Karma: Ethical Transformation in Amerindian, Buddhist and Greek Rebirth*, on the wider anthropology of belief in rebirth. The result is an emphasis on how the Buddha's conception of karma involves *ethicization* of a pre-existing religious conception of karma. Hence one of the Buddha's great contributions to humanity: the idea of *individual responsibility for destiny*. Another chapter on Jain antecedents to the Buddha's idea of karma highlights the Buddha's capacity for abstract thought, and his consequent use of metaphor in teaching, to get across his meaning in terms his audience would understand.

Chapter 8, on the Buddha's use of the metaphor of fire, is also familiar from *How Buddhism Began*, but Gombrich expands his analysis using Jurewicz's work, and the work of Sue Hamilton who, in *Early Buddhism: a New Approach*, shows how the Buddha's teaching, including that of the five *khandhas*, is concerned only with experience. A quite new topic, however, is the re-evaluation of the twelve *nidānas* of dependent arising (in ch.9), in relation to Prof. Jurewicz's discovery that they constitute a parody of Vedic cosmogony. Gombrich's attention to the Buddha's teaching on karma and dependent arising (he sees the two as closely connected) shows up another of the Buddha's contributions: *reality is a non-random process*, without a fixed essence.

This brief account of some of the content of *What the Buddha Thought* highlights a tension in its conception: while the book is intended to serve as an introduction to the Buddha's thought for anyone interested, it also deploys some challenging contemporary scholarship, and does not shrink from philological argument to make its points. The result will perhaps be best appreciated by readers already familiar with the framework of Buddhist doctrine – as well as by scholars of Buddhism, whom Gombrich hopes to excite and perhaps inspire.

The title is a 'gesture of homage' (p.viii) to *What the Buddha Taught* by the late Ven Walpola Rahula, an introduction to the Buddha's teaching that has served the needs of many a student of Buddhism. I remember reading it myself during the first year of a Religious Studies degree, with a sense of pleasure and relief, as the strange new concepts – Noble Truths, *khandhas*, impermanence, *anattā* – seemed to naturally arrange

themselves into a coherent account of 'Buddhism'. As well as praising this book's 'coGENCY, economy and beautiful clarity', Gombrich comments that the book 'might be more appropriately entitled *What Buddhaghosa Taught*' (p.156). Buddhaghosa was the great 5th c. CE commentator, whose *Visuddhimagga*, or *Path of Purification*, became the orthodox interpretation of Theravādin doctrine.

Gombrich believes that Buddhaghosa, along with the commentarial tradition which he epitomises, failed to recognise the historical context in which the Buddha taught – that is to say, the context of Brahmanical thought, preserved for us in the *Vedas*, and especially in the *Upanisads*. This is understandable, Gombrich adds, considering that the Buddhists were not interested in the Brahmanical thinking that the Buddha had very severely criticised. The result, however, is that the Buddhists took literally many teachings which should rather be understood as responses to specific contemporary Brahmanical doctrines. The Buddha's use of metaphor, as well as his irony and satire, were all taken quite literally and seriously – to the detriment, Gombrich believes, of an appreciation of the true greatness and originality of the Buddha's ideas.

Gombrich therefore takes a historical approach to the interpretation of the Buddha's teachings, seeking to understand them in relation to their time and context. This approach can be contrasted to what one might call a transcendental approach, which treats the teachings of the Buddha as timeless truths, formulated by the enlightened mind independent of any cultural context. In exploring the historical context for the Buddha's teachings, Gombrich opens up ways of understanding their greatness that is relative to their context. One is put in mind of the work of the 19th and 20th century theologians, such as David Strauss and Albert Schweitzer, who sought to understand Jesus as a historical figure. Their efforts made his supposed divinity seem like transcendental make-believe, and made Christianity appear to be a weird travesty of the teachings of a radical Jewish humanist. Happily, though, Gombrich's historical approach is unlikely to provoke such a split between scholarship and religion as that caused by critical theology, because he is not at all sceptical about the Buddha's claim to have attained enlightenment, nor about the ineffability of the enlightenment experience (p.152). The distinction between the historical

and transcendental approaches concerns only the nature of the teachings resulting from the awakening; from the historical point of view, the teachings are culturally relative attempts to communicate an ineffable experience.

Gombrich's approach enables him to argue (in ch.6) for a correction to traditional Buddhist teachings regarding the role of love and compassion in the path to awakening. This is a theme he has explored in previous publications, but here expands upon significantly. According to Theravādin tradition, the Buddha taught the importance of cultivating the *brahma-vihāras* of *mettā*, compassion, sympathetic joy and equanimity, but that the attainment of these states is said to lead to rebirth in the *brahma*-worlds, and is not the same as *nibbāna*. Gombrich argues persuasively that in fact the Buddha taught these states as a path not merely to heaven, but as equivalent to awakening. When the Buddha said that the *brahma-vihāras* led to union with Brahmā, he was employing a metaphor to describe *nibbāna* that would make sense to his Brahmanical audience. But "his own tradition unfortunately failed to understand his use of metaphor and took him literally, with disastrous consequences" (p.78). The consequences were that mainstream Buddhism failed to teach love and compassion as means to *nibbāna*, a failure only rectified with rise of the Mahāyāna centuries later, with its greater emphasis on compassion.

So what did the Buddha think? The picture that emerges from Gombrich's book is of a kind of transcendental humanist, someone whose thinking is practically oriented towards the universal human possibility of awakening, but whose ideas emerge from an ineffable private experience that was very difficult to articulate. The Buddha's thought was very largely formulated in relation to Brahmanical thinking, and hence everywhere is shaped by the assumptions of that tradition even while it satirises, provokes, and modifies it. The most surprising aspect of the Buddha's thinking that emerged for me in reading *What the Buddha Thought* concerned karma: Gombrich argues that the Buddha's conception of karma as intention, and consequently of individual responsibility, for this and for future existences, is a *positive* doctrine, something that the Buddha demanded his followers to believe in as 'a leap of faith' (p.28), for the sake of 'right view'. It was not just a doctrine he inherited from Brahmanism and could not shake off; Gombrich's Buddha comes across not

at all as a pragmatist or rationalist sceptic, but a profound metaphysician whose ideas were presented with great imaginative flexibility as need required.

Gombrich forestalls a possible objection to the book's general project. He draws attention to the fashionably sceptical attitude of some contemporary academics of Buddhism, for whom the textual traditions of Buddhism do not allow us to access the thinking of the historical Buddha, who (if he existed) must remain hidden behind the layers of compilation and redaction implied by the Pali canon as it now exists. For Gombrich, this attitude is unreasonably pessimistic. His book shows that the Buddha's ideas, which are quite evident in the Pali texts themselves, 'are powerful and coherent'. But, if the sceptical view was to be believed, 'Buddhism... is a ball which was set rolling by someone whose ideas are not known and can never be known' (p.194). To suppose that the ideas Gombrich has explored came about by some process of accumulation is absurd, like the idea of blindfolded monkeys typing out the words of Shakespeare. It is much more logical to assume that the Buddha in fact existed and that the Pali canon has preserved something of his powerful originality and genius.

With the details of *What the Buddha Taught* it will always be possible to quibble, because the arguments are complex and creative. Certainty is not a realistic aim in ascertaining the original form of the Buddha's thinking, because of the limitations of the sources available, and the daunting cultural distance involved. But Gombrich does not claim any certainty; only that he has ventured some ideas that are more likely than those made previously. In this he maintains a philosophical position towards his research based on the philosophy of Karl Popper, who advocated the advance of knowledge through the making of conjectures that are always susceptible to subsequent testing and refutation. It therefore falls to readers and scholars to read *What the Buddha Thought*, and test its conclusions for themselves. Even if some of Gombrich's arguments and conclusions are one day shown to be wrong, the result can only be a more precise and more adequate account of the genius of the Buddha. Meanwhile, Richard Gombrich's latest book offers us the richest collection yet available of investigations into the profound thinking of the historical Buddha.

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