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How Buddhism Began: The Conditioned Genesis of the Early Teachings.
Richard F. Gombrich. London & Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Athlone, 1996

Reviewed by

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This book is a slightly revised version of the Jordon Lectures in Comparative Religion, which the author delivered in 1994. Despite the title, the book does not offer a sequential account of the origins of Buddhism but has a narrower focus, namely, the formation of early Buddhist doctrine as found in the Pāli Canon. The subjects Gombrich investigates range widely from fundamental doctrinal issues to the interpretation of rare expressions. His approach to this variegated material is unified by the thesis, developed in chapter 1, that the ideas, terminology, and didactic techniques of early Buddhism must be understood in relation to its historical context. Gombrich emphasizes two kinds of influences to which Buddhism responded in the formulation of its teachings. One was external, the philosophical and religious milieu within which it arose and against which it had to define itself; the other was internal, the competing currents of thought that were circulating in the Sangha. Gombrich contends that monastic debates, as well as the growth of scholastic literalism, left their imprint on the canon, and one of the challenges Buddhist scholarship faces is to uncover the doctrinal tensions hidden in the records.

Gombrich does not subscribe to the narrow type of historicism which would explain early Buddhism in its entirety as a response to the social and intellectual environment. He recognizes that the Buddha's Enlightenment was "private and beyond language" (p. 13) and he prudently avoids a reductionist interpretation of Buddhist doctrine. All he maintains is that when the Buddha sought to convey the truths to which he had awakened, the demands of communication required him to draw upon the oral culture of his contemporaries, and this helped shape the way he expressed the truths that he had realized.

Gombrich focuses primarily upon the interaction between early Buddhism and brahminism. He cites the teaching of non-self (*anattā*) as an example of how Buddhist teaching must be interpreted in relation to the brahminic background, maintaining that to understand this teaching properly one must realize that the Buddha intended it as a denial of the Upanishadic doctrine of the self (pp. 15-16). On this point I believe Gombrich leans too steeply towards historicism. While it is true that the *anattā* doctrine excludes Upanishadic ideas about the self, the purpose for which the Buddha expounded it was not to negate any specific theory of the self but to correct the universal human proclivity to seek a substantial basis of personal identity amidst the five aggregates. If this were not the case, the teaching of *anattā*, like the Buddha's rejection of sacrifice, would hardly have any relevance outside the narrow context of ancient brahminism.

Chapter 2, "How, not What: Kamma as a Reaction to Brahminism," explores in finer detail the contrast between the Buddha's Teaching and its

older rival. Gombrich regards the specific doctrinal differences that separate the two traditions as expressive of a more fundamental difference in orientation: brahminism was principally interested in the essences of things, in *what things are*, while the Buddha favoured a pragmatic functionalism which sought to understand *how things work*. Thus, he points out, when both parties inquired into the nature of the person and the world, they came to opposite conclusions. The brahmins saw both person and world as derived from a single ultimate reality, the One; the Buddha saw the two as devoid of any substantial core, hence as ultimately Zero (pp. 32–33).

Gombrich locates the Buddha's most radical departure from brahminism in his decision to make action or *kamma*, rather than being, the key to understanding existential reality. He stresses the revolutionary nature of the Buddha's teaching on kamma, which he says "turned the brahmin ideology upside down and ethicized the universe," thus marking "a turning point in the history of civilisation" (p. 51). Nevertheless, Gombrich carries his comparison between the two systems to an untenable conclusion. In an extended discussion of the *Tevijja Sutta* (DN No. 13) he contrasts the Buddha's description of the four divine abodes (*brahma-vihāra*) as the "path to union with Brahmā" with the Upanishadic dictum that the way to attain brahman is through knowledge of the true self. This, he says, once again illustrates the distinction between the ethical standpoint of Buddhism and the ontological orientation of brahminism. So far, so good. But Gombrich then goes on to argue that for the Buddha "union with Brahmā" is simply a metaphor for Nibbāna, and thus he concludes "the Buddha taught that kindness ... was a way to salvation" (p. 62). Such an inference, however, cannot stand, for in many texts the Buddha declares the divine abodes to be inadequate for attaining Nibbāna (e.g. DN 17, MN 83, MN 97, etc.); it would also mean that *paññā*, insight or wisdom, is not needed for final liberation. Gombrich is not unaware of the texts that contradict his position, but he casually dismisses them as the work of "the compilers of other *suttas*" (p. 61). The contrary evidence, however, is just too weighty to allow such an easy way out.

Chapter 3 spans a wide range of miscellaneous material to show how the Buddha drew upon various non-literal teaching devices to communicate his doctrine. Here Gombrich discusses the use of imagery, metaphor, extended simile, allegory, and satire, which he brings into relation with such subjects as the defilements, Nibbāna, the *nāgas*, *Māra*, cosmology, and ideas on time.

Chapter 4, "Retracing An Ancient Debate," is the meatiest in the book, but also the most controversial. Gombrich proposes that two developments in the early Sangha led to major changes in the canon. One was scholastic

literalism, the practice of seizing upon differences in terminology as marking real distinctions; the other was debates among the monks. Gombrich envisions a contest being waged in the early Sangha between monks who advocated meditation as the most effective means to attain Nibbāna and those who favoured insight. He also supposes that the proponents of insight prevailed, so that texts were admitted into the canon which allowed “that Enlightenment can be attained without meditation, by a process of intellectual analysis (technically known as *paññā*) alone” (p. 96).

While it is hard to deny that the canon depicts the relationship between concentration and insight in diverse ways, I cannot follow Gombrich to his conclusion that these diversities are indicative of unresolvable differences. Though a full-length paper would be needed to show in detail the flaws in his arguments, I would briefly object to two methods he uses to establish his position. One is an apparent arbitrariness in distinguishing between those texts he is ready to accept as genuine and those he regards as the work of later exegetes, an impregnable device that can allow one to assign virtually any inconvenient text to the latter class. This line of argument appears most obtrusively when he claims, on the basis of two inconclusive texts, that *dhammānusārin* and *saddhānusārin* were originally descriptions of a single type of disciple, a claim he can maintain only by ascribing to “scholastic literalism” the more numerous *suttas* (in all four *Nikāyas*) that define them differently (pp. 107–10). We again find the same style of argument used to defend his thesis that the differentiation among the various types of *cetovimutti* was a scholastic innovation (pp. 116–18). Again, this requires him to dismiss as products of later scholasticism, without cogent grounds, the many *suttas* that draw such distinctions.

My second objection is to his insistence on interpreting alternative approaches to the path advocated in the *suttas* as competitive opposites. Thus, because the canon recognizes two types of arahants, those “liberated in both ways” and those “liberated by wisdom,” Gombrich holds that a debate was underway between those monks who favoured meditation and those who thought insight was so far superior that meditation could be dispensed with. He appeals for support to the *Susīma Sutta* (SN 12:70), which he reads as implying that enlightenment can be attained without meditation (pp. 125–26). But if we turn to the *sutta* itself, we would see that all it shows is that there is a class of arahants who do not possess the supernormal powers (*abhijñā*) and the formless meditative attainments (*ārūppa*). This position is hardly unique to the *Susīma Sutta* but is met with throughout the Pāli Canon. True, the commentary describes these arahants as “dry insight practitioners, without *jhāna*.” But even this does not mean that they reach the goal by mere “intellectual analysis,” without medita-

tion. It means, rather, that they have followed the path of bare insight meditation (*suddhavipassanā*), a strenuous system of meditation that does not rely on the *jhānas*, the meditative absorptions, but involves direct contemplation of mental and material phenomena with only a minimal base of concentration. While this system is not explicitly recognized in the canon, its proponents point to the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* as its original source, a claim that stands on good grounds.

In Chapter 5, “Who Was Aṅgulimāla?”, Gombrich takes a fresh look at the popular Buddhist story of the serial killer whom the Buddha converted to a life of holiness. As every Buddhist knows, before his conversion Aṅgulimāla used to waylay innocent people in order to slay them and make a necklace from their fingerbones. The story has always raised the question why he engaged in such a gory enterprise. The commentators answer with a background narrative so improbable that any reflective reader has to conclude either that the story is sheer legend or that the original reason for Aṅgulimāla’s life of crime has been irretrievably lost.

Not so, says Gombrich, who thinks he has discovered the reason concealed behind the garbled text of one of Aṅgulimāla’s verses. Gombrich proposes a few emendations to the verse (MN II 100, *Thag* 868), which leads him to the conclusion that Aṅgulimāla was a devotee of Mahesa, a title of the Indian god Shiva, and that he engaged in his murderous scheme to fulfil a religious vow. While the changes Gombrich proposes in the verse would have to be evaluated by one more proficient in Pāli prosody than myself, I found his solution to the problem ingenious, and taken on its own merits it seems quite plausible. This chapter concludes with some illuminating discussion of tantra.

Gombrich opens *How Buddhism Began* by stating that he is “more concerned with formulating problems and raising questions than with providing answers,” and he admits that many of his conclusions are tentative (p. 1). Though I cannot agree with all Gombrich’s conclusions, I feel that in this book, as in his earlier work, he has opened up important avenues for future scholarly research into early Buddhism. Nevertheless, I must remain sceptical about the scholarly enterprise of stratifying the *suttas* and discovering doctrinal tensions in their contents. To my mind, the texts of the four *Nikāyas* form a strikingly consistent and harmonious edifice, and I am confident that the apparent inconsistencies are not indicative of internal fissuring but of subtle variations of method that would be clear to those with sufficient insight.