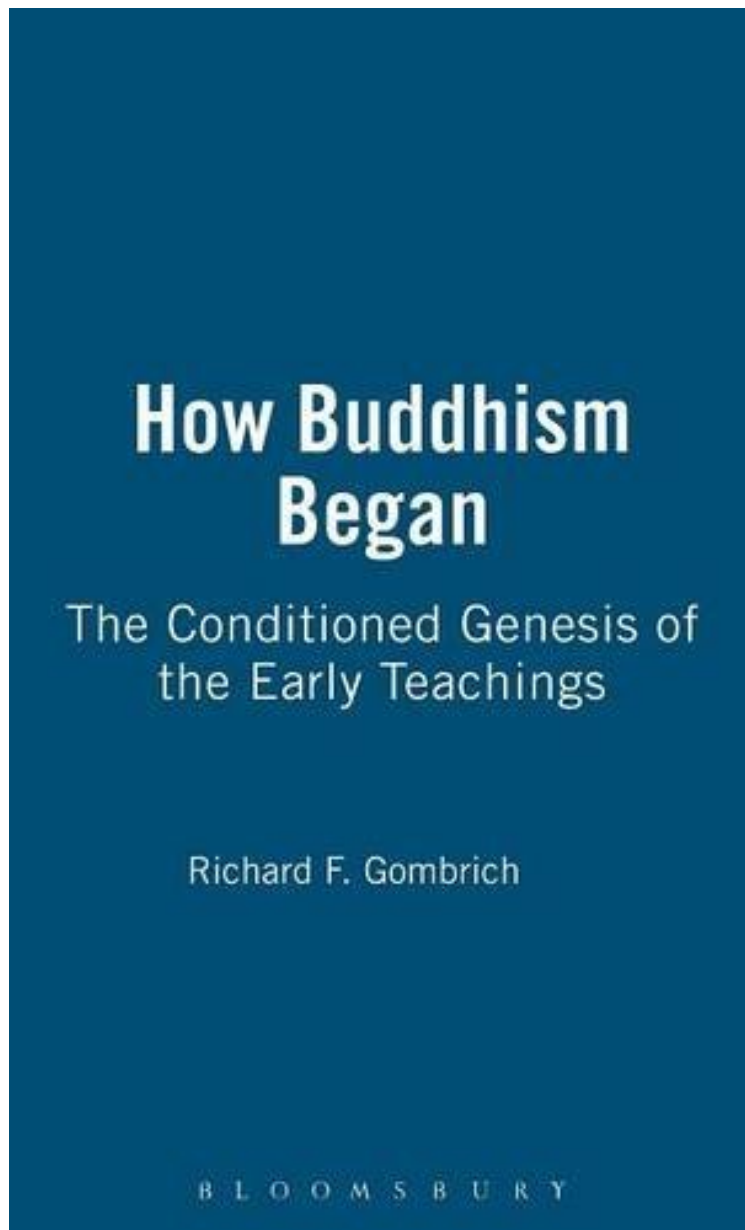


[DOWNLOAD] How Buddhism Began: The Conditioned Genesis of the Early Teachings (Jordan Lectures in Comparative Religion)

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Richard F. Gombrich

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Richard F. Gombrich : How Buddhism Began: The Conditioned Genesis of the Early Teachings (Jordan Lectures in Comparative Religion) before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time,

and all praised *How Buddhism Began: The Conditioned Genesis of the Early Teachings* (Jordan Lectures in Comparative Religion):

14 of 15 people found the following review helpful. A pleasure to read, illuminating, and controversial...By Craig Shoemake
The book consists of five related essays based upon lectures Gombrich delivered in 1994 at the School of Oriental and African Studies. Certain characteristic interests, however, give them a semblance of unity. In each case Gombrich attempts to look at how specific doctrines developed based on the texts, and how those doctrines often misconstrued the texts via over-literalism, lack of a sense of context, or by readings based on corrupted words or phrases. His approach is primarily investigatory and exploratory as opposed to strictly didactic. He starts with these words: "In these lectures I am more concerned with formulating problems and raising questions than with providing answers" (1). In this, Gombrich is certainly successful. That is, he excels in illuminating issues begging further clarification. However, I have to confess that despite my enjoyment of his work I am not convinced by some of his arguments. More on this to follow...
The first essay, "Debate, skill in means, allegory and literalism," discusses the role of debate in the evolution of the Buddha's teaching. Gombrich writes: "...the Buddha, like anyone else, was communicating in a social context, reacting to his social environment and hoping in turn to influence those around him" (13). He therefore emphasizes the importance of understanding the Buddha's environment to understand his message, while at the same time noting the difficulty of properly reconstructing that environment. Consider, for example, the anatta teaching. Hindus, emphasizing the Buddha's role as a "reformer," have downplayed it, attempting to claim the Great Man as one of their own. (Anatta, of course, flies in the face of Upanishadic teachings.) Westerners, however, have misconstrued the "soul" the Buddha was apparently denying, seeing it from a Judaeo-Christian-Platonic perspective. "But none of this has anything to do with the Buddha's position," Gombrich tells us (15). "[The Buddha] was opposing the Upanishadic theory of the soul..." He then goes on to elaborate how anatta only makes sense from that context. This was my first point of significant disagreement with Gombrich. Did the Buddha argue against the notion of an atman such as you find in the Upanishads? Certainly. Consider, for example, Brahmajala 1:30, 2:18, 2:38, all of which condemn Upanishadic teachings of one form or another about the Self. (The Upanishads, it should be noted, are not monolithic, but contain multiple stances on this issue.) But the Buddha's anatta teaching is not primarily concerned with a metaphysical Self that, for most of us at least, is little better than an abstraction. It is concerned, rather, with our experience of a locus of control, of inherent identity, of continuous being-ness, of "I am-ness," as Ken Wilber likes to say. (One of my gripes with the Great Integral Master...) If it purely concerned the Upanishadic doctrine, the Dhamma would have no relevance to anyone today, unless they were followers of Upanishadic teachings. (A few hundred million Hindus, I would guess.) But then Gombrich redeems himself to an extent when he says "[The Buddha] was refusing to accept that a person had an unchanging essence. Moreover, since he was interested in how rather than what, he was not so much saying that people are made of such and such components [i.e. the five aggregates], as that people function in such and such ways, and to explain their functioning there is not need to posit a soul. The approach is pragmatic, not purely theoretical" (16). I would go one step further and say it's one hundred percent practical and not theoretical at all. (As I've noted elsewhere, a three month Vipassana retreat should convince you of the reality of the anatta teaching, even if you don't reach stream entry. The moment-to-moment examination of experience and the inability to find a controller, a doer, even though suffering the sense one is lurking there somewhere, severely challenges any notion of identity. Heady stuff...) My objection here though is minor compared to the delights offered by this essay. Gombrich goes on to discuss the Buddha's skill-in-means, the assertion that the later tradition attempted to "level out" inconsistencies in his modes of expression, and concludes with a marvelous discussion of the simile of the raft (which confirmed a suspicion I'd had for a long time).
The second essay, "How, not what: kamma as a reaction to Brahminism," illuminates the differences between the Buddha's ethical orientation and the more ontological orientation of Brahminism. Here, too, he sees the Buddha in argument with the Upanishads, specifically the Brihadaranyaka U. (31). The Upanishads asserted essence (especially as regards consciousness), the Buddha denied it (viz. dependent arising). Gombrich says "that just as Being lies at the heart of the Upanishadic world view, Action [karma] lies at the heart of the Buddha's" (48). He runs with this idea, citing Lamotte, who called karma "the keystone of the entire Buddhist edifice" (49). I think, however, that Gombrich goes too far. In the Tevijja Sutta (D.13) the Buddha discusses how to attain the Brahma worlds via meditation on the four immeasurables (brahma-viharas). Gombrich correctly notes that the Buddha says by such practice one can become like Brahma in his moral qualities, and gain ceto-vimutti, "release of the mind." He equates this with the liberation of nirvana. "I am claiming that a close reading of the Tevijja Sutta shows that the Buddha taught that kindness--what Christians tend to call love--was a way to salvation" (62). Now, I don't need to cite texts to make my point here. If you've got enough meditation practice under your belt, you will know that a heart practice like loving kindness (metta-bhavana; Mahayana practices to develop bodhicitta and Tibetan lojong are elaborations on this) is fundamentally different from an insight practice like vipassana or anapanasati. While the former is intellectual and emotive and can develop concentration (i.e. it works with the contents of consciousness), the goal of the latter is to see directly the nature of experience itself. While not at cross purposes, they are, you might say, at 90 degree angles to one another. The development of concentration, which

is absorption in a particular state of consciousness, as well as (in the brahma-viharas) the development of positive emotions and feelings, does not enable one to see the nature of one's experience, which is what insight is all about. Here we have Gombrich the scholar missing the truly applied--that which lies beyond the texts, in their lived experience--nature of the Buddha's teaching. Chapter three, "Metaphor, allegory, satire," examines the Buddha's manner of communication; specifically, how he used turns of speech, the flipping of terms, satire, etc to make his points. This is probably the least weighty--and controversial--of the essays. For me it was of interest in that it served to give a more human and concrete feel for the Buddha and his time. Subjects discussed here include time, naga cults, allegory and satire, Mara, the Enlightenment, cosmology, and apperception. (A lot!) Chapter four--"Retracing an ancient debate: how insight worsened concentration in the Pali canon"--is controversial in the way the second essay was: it questions long-held assumptions about the nature and meaning of Buddhist practice and soteriology. Briefly put: Gombrich believes the suttas point up tension between those who took an intellectual approach to the Dhamma (the insight or "wisdom" school) and those who advocated meditation (which he identified as concentration practice). As Gombrich puts it, it was a battle between those who think "Enlightenment can be attained without meditation, by a process of intellectual analysis (technically known as pa') alone" (96) and those who do not. While it is clear there are tensions in the suttas between scholasticism and practice, I am not aware of the Buddha or any of his enlightened disciples propounding the notion one could get enlightened simply by thinking about it. In other words, the identification of pa' solely with intellectual analysis is gravely mistaken. What in fact appears to be the case is that those who favored pa' were monks (or laity) who were "dry insight" practitioners, much like the Mahasi satipathana practice out of Burma. Thus we have those who follow the more conventional concentration-and-insight path (attaining jhanas first and then the insight stages) versus those who go straight to insight. But insight practice is not an intellectual exercise; anyone who has any familiarity with the Mahasi system can tell you that. If you think the above is a trivial discussion, I want to assure you that in Sri Lanka, where opposition in the Sangha to the Mahasi practice was for a long time wide and vocal, a lot of ink has been spilled--and, probably, a few harsh words or blows exchanged--concerning which is the "right" or "correct" method of practice. Regrettably, I have to say I don't think Gombrich adds much to this discussion. "Who was Angulimala?" is the last essay of the book, and possibly my favorite. Who has not wondered about the true origins of this sutta, with its fantastic story of the homicidal bandit collecting fingers from his victims? Who was this man, really, and what his motivation? The sutta (and even its commentaries) does not come across as particularly reasonable in its internal logic, so these questions ought to naturally arise. In this essay Gombrich offers some ingenious speculation on these questions that is quite possibly correct--though of course, we'll never know. All in all, while I found some of Gombrich's arguments implausible, his book is a pleasure to read and a worthy contribution to the literature of Buddhist textual analysis. His is a refreshing, learned and intelligent voice, and he admirably succeeds in unlocking closed doors, leaving it to us to open them and peer in and wonder what might be hidden behind them. 0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. An introduction to textual criticism of Buddhist scriptures By R. Griswold Dr. Gingrich does a good job performing textual criticism of the Buddhist canon of scripture. He sheds light on how historical and linguistic research can illuminate the intricacies of the development of religious dogma. I loved the essay on the conversion of Angulimala as a historical parable of Buddhism's encounter with the Tantric tradition. 0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. A Refreshing Look At Buddhism By Samuel F. I have to agree with the other reviewers that "How Buddhism Began" is a very high quality work, even if here and there one might quibble with Gombrich's views. I can all but guarantee that if you read this investigation of early Buddhism, the understanding of Buddha's message you come out with will be very different from the one you went in with. For specifics see my full review of the paperback version of the second edition of this book.

This book takes a fresh look at the earliest Buddhism texts and offers various suggestions how the teachings in them had developed. Two themes predominate. Firstly, it argues that we cannot understand the Buddha unless we understand that he was debating with other religious teachers, notably brahmins. For example, he denied the existence of a 'soul'; but what exactly was he denying? Another chapter suggests that the canonical story of the Buddha's encounter with a brigand who wore a garland of his victims' fingers probably reflects an encounter with a form of ecstatic religion. The other main theme concerns metaphor, allegory and literalism. By taking the words of the texts literally - despite the Buddha's warning not to - successive generations of his disciples created distinctions and developed doctrines far beyond his original intention. One chapter shows how this led to a scholastic categorisation of meditation. Failure to understand a basic metaphor also gave rise to the later argument between the Mahayana and the older tradition. Perhaps most important of all, a combination of literalism with ignorance of the Buddha's allusions to brahminism led buddhists to forget that the Buddha had preached that love, like christian charity, could itself be directly salvific.

...few indeed have attempted a critical study of the philosophical and religious ideas proffered by early Buddhists. How Buddhism Began...is an excellent small book that begins to fill this lamentable void in Buddhist studies...highly recommended for both the expert and novice in the field of Buddhist studies. --John R. Holder, Philosophy East and

WestAbout the AuthorProf. Gombrich is Boden Professor of Sanskrit at Oxford.