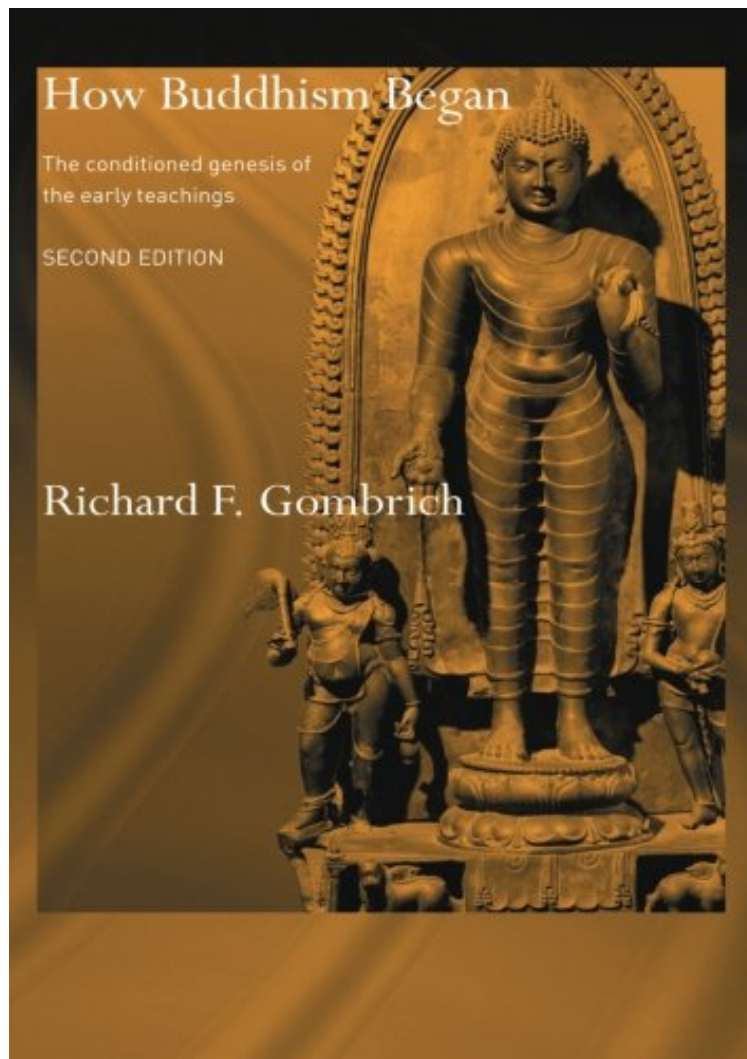


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Richard F. Gombrich

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Richard F. Gombrich : How Buddhism Began: The Conditioned Genesis of the Early Teachings (Routledge Critical Studies in Buddhism) before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised How Buddhism Began: The Conditioned Genesis of the Early Teachings (Routledge Critical Studies in Buddhism):

4 of 4 people found the following review helpful. A Trend Setter In Scholarship About BuddhismBy Samuel F.It becomes increasingly evident to those who have studied the development of Buddhism over the last 2500 years that

there are many Buddhisms. Of course, it is also true that there are many versions of Judaism, Christianity, Islam and Hinduism. But the changes that have occurred in Buddhism are rather mind-boggling. In spite of all the claims that there were several turnings of the Wheel of Dharma - several teachings of Buddha given in different circumstances - it would seem that the only turning we can be certain of is Buddha's turning in his grave at what has been done to his teachings. (And I say this as a practitioner of what is called the third turning.) Not only have successive Buddhisms seemingly turned away from the original teachings, but have turned into their opposites, e.g., from a doctrine of no-self (or as some people put it, not-self) to various doctrines of a self by other names, or from a monastic tradition to a tantric teaching where everything in the world is considered food or tinder for spiritual development. There are some who despair of knowing what Buddha originally taught, since it took about 200 years before his teachings were written down. Yet it would seem that early Buddhists put the Buddha's teachings into formulas which could easily be remembered. And while there must have been revisions and even differentiation between various Buddhist groups, we can probably detect what was there to begin with if we look closely enough. Professor Gombrich is one of those who think we can gain a fairly good idea of Buddha's original teachings, and he has been followed in the last twenty years by other scholars who are trying to set Buddhism in its original context to get a better picture of its original form. (Another example of this approach is Alexander Wynne's "The Origin of Buddhist Meditation.") It is impossible to give a decent account of what Gombrich accomplishes in "How Buddhism Began" without getting into details, and so I will give several examples to indicate what makes this work so valuable. Among the principles Gombrich uses are: "a sacred tradition is at least as likely to iron out inconsistencies as introduce them," and "the banal reading is more likely to replace the oddity than vice versa" (or "the more difficult reading is the one likely to be original"). Furthermore, Buddha "might on different occasions give different accounts of [his] ineffable experiences" and explain himself differently depending on what would be best for the person(s) he was talking to. And building on this, we cannot assume the Buddha was always talking literally rather than metaphorically or allegorically, for he did not want people clinging to his specific words. Finally, "to present the Buddha's teaching without explaining its Indian background must be to miss many of its main points." As an example of the last point, Buddha was opposed to "the Upanishadic theory of the soul" as an unchanging essence. However he sometimes used prevailing Hindu practices to get his point across. For instance, "Many people know that nirvana/nibbana means 'blowing out,' but probably few of them know...what is being blown out." In the context of Buddha's famous "Fire Sermon," what is blown out are the three fires of passion (in the sense of craving or desire), hatred and delusion. In fact, Buddha compares these fires "to a set of three fires which the brahman householder was committed to keeping alight and tending daily, so that they came to symbolize life in the world, life as a family man." The takeaway is that what most Buddhists now call "the three poisons" - passion, hatred and delusion - were probably called "the three fires" by Buddha as a way of using the Hindu context of his time but reinterpreting it. Indeed, the five skandhas (the aggregates which make up what we call our selves) were probably viewed as five bundles of firewood which, as objects of grasping or craving, fuel the fire which is burning us up. The next to last chapter deals with what seem to be differences between even early Buddhist groups on whether insight (spiritual understanding) alone is necessary for enlightenment, or whether concentration (meditational experience) is necessary as well, and if the latter, which takes primacy. The book ends with an allegorical reading of the story of Angulimala, a cutthroat who was originally going to kill the Buddha but changed his mind on meeting him. In this edition of his book, Gombrich includes a section on responses to criticisms of the first edition. All in all, "How Buddhism Began" is one of the best books on Buddhism I have ever read, and I've read quite a few. It is well-written, insightful, and dare I say it - enlightening. 1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. Thought provoking

By jonnos
This book is not for beginners, but it is sure to inspire those interested in the origins of the early Buddhist teachings. Gombrich's interpretation of the evolution of the Buddhist suttas is based on his belief that not all the contents go back to the Buddha himself, and he agrees with other well known scholars that it is, at least in principle, possible to distinguish the early strands of the texts, presumably those that stem from the Buddha himself, from the later ones. But his primary interest is in investigating the doctrinal history and the evolution of ideas in early Buddhism. Gombrich believes the suttas and its contents were the product of argument and debate between the early Sangha members. He discusses the suttas many allusions to Brahminism or at least to its vocabulary. He finds it significant that the old Buddhist commentaries often seem not to understand these references, and concludes from this that they were part of the Buddha's teaching but that the meaning was forgotten by the later tradition. This led to an excessive literalism, particularly in the Theravada tradition, although the meanings were lost in all traditions. Gombrich also sees the Buddha as influenced by the Brahmanical teachings. The three knowledges of Enlightenment is seen as a response to the ancient texts known as the three Vedas. More controversial is his idea that the Buddha agreed with or took for granted some of the doctrines of the early Upanisads. His view of karma as an original Brahmanical concept stemming from the Upanisads is surprising and probably wrong. Here we come to the weakest point of the book, which is the relative lack of references to other scholars work and findings. Although he pays respect to some of his own students, this is not the case for other scholars who happen to disagree with him. When it comes to the known inconsistencies in the sutta texts, Gombrich believes they could be explained by the Buddha changing his teaching style or even changing his mind, as well as by debates among the Sangha after the Buddha was

gone. He has a very interesting discussion of the meanings of various terms for liberation, which may not always have meant liberation for real. All in all a thought provoking book which should be of interest to all students of the Buddhist teachings. 0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Crowley, Vivianne. Review: 'How Buddhism Began: The conditioned genesis of the early teachings' by Richard F. Gombrich. By Vivianne Crowley. Crowley, Vivianne. Review: 'How Buddhism Began: The conditioned genesis of the early teachings' by Richard F. Gombrich. The Middle Way: Journal of the Buddhist Society 81, no. 3 (November 2006): 182-183. As one of the foremost Western scholars of Buddhism and a former Boden Professor of Sanskrit, Professor Gombrich is well placed to challenge and undertake radical reanalysis of many scholarly assumptions about early Buddhism. How Buddhism Began: The conditioned genesis of the early teachings is based on his Jordan lecture series at the University of London's School of African and Oriental Studies in late 1994. Two of the book's five papers explain how Buddhist teachings emerged through the Buddha's engagement, dialogue and refutation of ideas promulgated by other spiritual teachers of the period. The third paper explores the more controversial theme of how teachings may have been interpreted by the Buddha's followers and how, in the process of transmission, at first through centuries of oral repetition and then through written texts, they may have undergone some significant changes. To give an example, to illustrate how a text might have been misinterpreted, Professor Gombrich uses the example of the story of Angulimala, Finger-Garland, the robber and murderer converted by the Buddha, and argues that the story is much more interpretable if Angulimala is a follower of Shiva. To establish whether texts have changed through miscopying or misinterpretation, the natural response would be to turn to the earliest versions, but, as Richard Gombrich points out, this is problematic given that few of the surviving copies of the texts are more than 500 years old. How Buddhism Began is by no means a beginners book, but for academic scholars of Buddhism it is a seminal text, and it can also be the source of thought-provoking ideas for the experienced practitioner.

Written by one of the world's top scholars in the field of Pali Buddhism, this new and updated edition of How Buddhism Began, discusses various important doctrines and themes in early Buddhism. It takes 'early Buddhism' to be that reflected in the Pali canon, and to some extent assumes that these doctrines reflect the teachings of the Buddha himself. Two themes predominate. Firstly, the author argues that we cannot understand the Buddha unless we understand that he was debating with other religious teachers, notably Brahmins. The other main theme concerns metaphor, allegory and literalism. This accessible, well-written book is mandatory reading for all serious students of Buddhism.