This work, aimed both at scholars and the wider public,\(^1\) is based on the 2006 Numata Lectures, at London’s School of Oriental and African Studies, of Richard Gombrich, founder and President of the Oxford Centre for Buddhist Studies. Seeking to identify the key contributions to human civilization of the Buddha as a thinker, the focus is the first four Nikāyas and to a lesser extent the fifth Nikāya and the Vinaya of the Pali Canon. The method is historical and, looking beneath later commentarial glosses and Abhidhamma systematisation, Gombrich seeks to understand the main thrust of the Buddha’s teaching within the context in which it was developed and delivered: in dialogue with and in response to Jain and especially Brahminical ideas and practices, with an awareness of cultural differences, and in a socio-economic context that helped to make a range of people particularly ready to respond positively to what he taught (p. 195).

Gombrich admires the Buddha as ‘one of the most brilliant and original thinkers of all time’ (p. vii), whose ‘ideas should form part of the education of every child, the world over’, which ‘would make the world a more civilized place, both gentler and more intelligent’ (p. 1), and with Buddhism, at least in numerical terms, as ‘the greatest movement in the entire history of human ideas’ (p. 194). He admits, though, that he is not himself a Buddhist and that he disagrees with the Buddha as regards ‘some of his theories and does not subscribe to all his values’ (p. 1). He does not think the Buddha’s ‘powerful ideas, properly understood, are very complex or difficult to grasp’ (p. 3), but that they are a ‘coherent system’ (p. 17) evolved in the course of giving pragmatic advice on ethics and meditation (p. 164). But like all great thinkers, the Buddha would have changed his mind on some matters (p. 108).

In summarising his approach, Gombrich says ‘My method is historical…. I argue that the Buddha’s thought is characterized by the importance it gives to ethics … ethics are substituted for ritual … the Buddha in his preaching made extensive use of metaphor. I have also shown his capacity for abstraction’ (p. 75). While he does not see this as a ‘methodology’, a term he sees as used by ‘Mediocre academics [who] like using long words’ (p. 92), he values the general principle, applicable to all methods, of ‘conjecture and refutation’, as espoused by Karl Popper (p. 94). In an empirical subject such as his, ‘there is no final certitude: all knowledge is provisional. But this is not relativism. It is evident that knowledge does advance’ (p. 95). The

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\(^1\) One simplification for the public is referring to ‘the abhidharma’ as a ‘one major school’ of Buddhism and ‘the Vijñānavādā’ as another (p.3). There were of course several early schools that expressed their ideas through abhidharma, just as the Vijñānavādā/Yogācāra later did.
author admits that one of the motives for writing the book was ‘exasperation’ at ‘the idiocy of what educated people are prepared not just to say but even to publish about Buddhism’, (pp. 200–01) citing an example that says Buddhism teaches that the world is “nothing more than a dream”.

In the Introduction, Gombrich emphasizes how the Buddha was misunderstood:

The Buddha was startlingly original. Many of his ideas were formulated to refute other ideas current in his day, but to put them across, he had inevitably to use the language of his opponents, for there was no other... This inevitably led to misunderstandings, especially among those who knew his teachings only partially or superficially. (p. 2)

Gombrich makes it clear that the Buddha’s main opponents were the Brahmins and later says that ‘failure to understand the Buddha's relation to brahminism, and above all how he used their vocabulary figuratively, has resulted in massive failures of understanding by later generations – indeed those misunderstandings may even have begun during the Buddha’s lifetime’ (p. 195). Yet given that ‘we do find a disproportionate number of brahmins among his disciples’ (p. 172), the author does not explain why these disciples with a Brahmin background failed to educate their fellows in the Buddha’s Brahminical allusions.

The author also sees misunderstandings as having arisen as the Buddha made much use of metaphor and irony in critiquing the views of other, these being ‘registers imperceptible to the literal-minded’ (p. 2); and ‘irony does not weather well’ (p. 137).

Gombrich sees teachings on karma as ‘not only fundamental to the Buddha’s whole view of life, but also a kind of lynchpin which holds the rest of the basic tenets together by providing a perfect example of what they mean’ (p. 11). Karma teachings entail that Buddhism has a very strong idea of ‘personal continuity’, as this stretches over ‘an infinite series of lives’ (p. 11). Moreover ‘the entire Buddhist ideology depends on the proposition that karma is on the one hand conditioned but on the other not strictly determined ... We have free will and are wholly responsible for ourselves’ (p. 13).

Gombrich says that, ‘The Buddha made belief in this law of karma the first step on his noble eightfold path to nirvana ... ‘right view”’ (p. 27, cf. p. 154). This is correct as regards ordinary right view, yet not of the ‘noble’ right view that is wisdom (MN.III.72), and which is insight into such things as the roots of skilful action, the ariya-saccas (‘true realities for the spiritually ennobled’, but usually translated as ‘Noble Truths’), and Dependent Origination (MN.9). He emphasizes that the Buddha taught that ‘all thoughts, words and deeds derive their moral value, positive or negative, from the intention behind them’, though one should not be negligent as to what one's actions may result in (p. 13). That said, it would have been helpful to discuss whether cetanā simply means ‘intention’, or what such ‘intention’ is seen to involve.

Chapter 2, on ‘More about karma, and its social context’, discusses how the Buddha completely ethicised the idea of karma, which had been about ritual action for the Brahmins, and that in his teachings, ‘the whole universe becomes an ethical arena, because everywhere beings are placed according to their deserts’ (p. 25). Such an idea appealed to those involved in the new money economy, for whom worth was not ascribed by birth but due to personal achievement (p. 26). The idea of personal responsibility was well received as in this period an ‘unusually high proportion of people must have lived relatively free from oppression’ (p. 23), especially the ‘gentleman farmer, perhaps with a town house’ (p. 24), for whom the developing money economy helped give a greater independence from traditional ties (p. 25).
Gombrich claims that the Buddha’s audience simply ‘took rebirth for granted’ (p. 16), but this is questionable, given that there were materialist and skeptic renunciates (e.g. DN.I.52–9). It is interesting that these, and the fatalist Ājīvikas, get no mention in the book. Nevertheless, the author argues that karma and rebirth were not simply ‘beliefs that the Buddha inherited and simply could not shake off. I hope I have shown that this is the very reverse of the truth. The Buddha’s version of the law of karma was entirely his own; but to accept it was a leap of faith demanded of every follower’ (p. 28).

The novel aspects of the Buddha’s karma teachings are taken up on chapter 3, ‘The antecedents of the karma doctrine in Brahminism’. Gombrich sees ancient India as having developed a more refined version of a belief that Gananath Obeyesekere has identified as common to many small-scale societies: that humans oscillate between this world and an after-death world from which they later return to be reborn, usually to their previous family or clan (pp. 30–31). Moreover, he sees Joanna Jurewicz2 as having conclusively shown that a Ṛg Veda funeral hymn (X.16.5) shows a belief in rebirth, though this had nothing to do with one’s actions, as in later Indian religions, starting with the early Upaniṣads (pp. 32–3). The idea of alternating between two worlds according to the quality of one’s actions later developed – what Gombrich calls a ‘binary cosmology’ (p. 35), to which Indian religions also added the ideal of liberation from this cycle of rebirths. Early Jainism still had a kind of binary pattern: of bad rebirth due to one’s actions – all seen to be injurious and thus bad –, or liberation (pp. 34–5). However, ‘It was only in Buddhism that the binary model of the sphere of action and the sphere of experiencing the results is superseded, and the whole universe is ethicized. In other words, according to the Buddha’s teaching all sentient beings throughout the universe are morally responsible and can be reborn in a higher or lower station because of the good and evil they have done’ (p. 35).

In chapter 4, ‘Jain antecedents’, Gombrich argues that while Jainism was the first to ethicize the karma doctrine (pp. 34, 44), Buddhism emphasized it as based on intention, and universalized it (p. 44). By emphasizing intention or motive, the Buddha brought in the idea that some actions could lead to a good rebirth, and such actions were ‘the essential first stage of spiritual progress’ (p. 49). This produced ‘a better rounded (and indeed more plausible) ethicized’ karma doctrine (p. 51; Jains later accepted the idea of good karma, p. 58). The Buddha’s teaching ‘By karma I mean intention’ (p. 49) was ‘a direct response to Jainism’ (p. 50). That said, Gombrich later says that the Buddha may have been influenced by Brahminism in accepting good as well as evil karma (p. 58).

The author sees the Jain influence on the Buddha as ‘massive’ (p. 51), from: their ethicised form of the karma doctrine, emphasis on non-harming, setting precedents for the public’s expectations of renunciate behaviour, having female renunciates,3 and the terms āśava and ārahaṭ. Yet the Buddha rejected Jain austerities as he had rejected Brahmin rituals, ‘because they deal with externals. The Buddha’s great insight was that everything that matters happens in the mind’ (p. 58).

3 Gombrich cites (p. 54) Ute Hüsken as having shown that the account which has the Buddha only accepting an order of nuns with reluctance, and at a late stage in his career, was ‘a forgery’: ‘The legend of the establishment of the Buddhist order of nuns in the Theravāda Vinaya-Pitkā’, Journal of the Pali Text Society, 2000, 26: 43–69.
Chapter 5, ‘What did the Buddha mean by “no soul”?’, is on the anattā teaching. Here he elucidates Upaniṣadic ideas of Brahman and ātman and rightly says that:

Where the Buddha is positively influenced by the Upaniṣads is in his formulation of the basic conditions of existence. For the Upaniṣads, ultimate reality, being, is forever unchanging; and it is bliss, whereas everything else is the opposite of bliss. The Buddha agreed that the world we normally know and experience is forever changing, and therefore it is not bliss but the opposite, dukkha. (p. 68)

However, his justification for using ‘no soul’ for anattā (literally non-Self) is weak. He rightly pointed out that ‘such confusion surrounds our own use of the term “soul” that to translate the Buddhist concept of anattā as “no soul” is at best uninformative and at worst utterly misleading’ (p. 62), but then says that because Buddhism in India became identified with the catchphrase ‘anattā’, ‘I see no better shorthand expression than No Soul, which is how it has always been rendered in English’ (p. 62). But ‘no soul’ is not a universal rendering, but a rather dated one; existing poor translations can be challenged and changed. Moreover the argument based on anattā as a ‘catchphrase’ could only justify ‘no Self’ rather than ‘non-Self’, i.e. phenomena as nothing to do with an essential, permanent self: empty of ‘Self or what belongs to Self’ (SN.IV.54).

Chapter 6 is on ‘The Buddha’s positive values: love and compassion’, which argues that in the Tevijja Sutta (DN.13) the Buddha sees mettā and karunā as leading to full liberation, but that because he was speaking to Brahmins, he used their language and expressed that liberation as ‘dwelling with brahma’. This was misunderstood by his followers to mean that it led, not to liberation, but to rebirth in a ‘brahmā world’, thus generating belief in such a world, when the Buddha had not meant this (p. 88). But reference to such a world is found in many places in the Suttaṅgas, so such a ‘misunderstanding’ must have been very early, and pervasive. In any case, Gombrich says that the ‘vimutti’ that mettā etc. are said to lead to can only mean liberation from all rebirths (p. 83). Yet MN.I.296–98 talks of various kinds of ceto-vimutti, with only the final one being the unshakable ceto-vimutti of an Arahat.

In discussing the Mettā Sutta (Sn.143-52), Gombrich rightly says that ‘the purport of the whole poem is that kindness is salvific’, but then rightly adds ‘The poem does not clearly state that kindness alone will produce salvific results’ (p. 87). Given that he has been arguing that the tradition undervalued mettā etc., this is an important admission. As I understand the tradition, while it greatly values these states as key aspects of the path to full liberation, they are seen to work alongside other factors.

Gombrich is critical of the Abhidhamma for defining ‘love’ (mettā) in a ‘bloodless’ way as simply ‘absence of hatred’ (Dhs.1056) (pp. 90–91, 179), yet the passage in question is actually explaining the ‘adoso’ or ‘non-hate’ which the Suttas say is a root of skilful action (MN.I.47), explaining it positively by such qualities as mettā. This shows that the Sutta’s adosa is seen by the Abhidhamma – plausibly in my view – as not mere absence of hatred, but the opposite of hatred. Indeed, if it were a mere absence, it would not be listed as a dhamma in the Abhidhamma.

In chapter 7, ‘Assessing the evidence’, Gombrich argues that ‘the Pali version of the suttas and Vinaya stand unrivalled as our oldest evidence’ on the earliest Buddhism (p. 99), and that the commentaries have three ‘systematic defects’: homogenization of the Buddha’s message, excessive literalism, and that ‘they have largely lost the memory of the Buddha’s historical context … the Vedic background’ (p. 107). He sees these defects as ‘no less prevalent among modern scholars than they were in ancient times’.
He sees the Buddha as at first seeing right concentration as the culmination of the path he taught, but later changed his mind, seeing it as going from virtue to concentration to wisdom (p. 109). However, the Suttas see the latter sequence as actually about the order in which noble disciples master these qualities (AN.I.231–32, AN.IV.379–82), and in each case they need all the factors of the Noble Eightfold Path from right view to right concentration.

Chapter 8 ‘Everything is burning: the centrality of fire in the Buddha’s thought’, traces many allusions to fire in the Buddha’s teachings. For example, because the five khandhas are said to be ‘ablaze’ with passion etc., and as upādāna can mean ‘fuel’ and a blazing fire is often referred to as an ‘aggi-kkhandha’, Gombrich sees the upādāna-kkhandhas as ‘blazing masses of fuel’ (p. 114).

The author develops the interesting idea that the Buddha’s response to Vedic ideas and practices on fire ‘may have led him to what is perhaps his most important philosophical idea, the substitution of non-random processes for objects’ (p. 111). The Buddha drew on the Upaniṣadic idea of consciousness and its objects as fire-like, but used this idea to emphasize that consciousness depends on its objects as its fuel (p. 122), and to argue that ‘Our consciousness and its objects are like fire in that they are not things but processes, unceasing change’ (p. 125). As he later puts it the Buddha:

derived inspiration from Vedic speculation about fire, and saw it as a non-random process which was appetitive and yet operated without an agent, simply coming to an end when its fuel ran out. He took this as a model both for consciousness and more generally for how the life and experience of a living being … could be a self-generating process for which it was otiose to posit an additional, unchanging entity to act as an agent. (p. 196)

However, ‘If consciousness is itself on fire with passion, etc., the aim of anyone seeking liberation must surely be to eliminate consciousness… On the other hand …. [in] his ethicization, the Buddha apparently wanted to avoid that conclusion’ (p. 126). He did this by separating volition, which can be ethically negative, from consciousness.

The author holds that ‘recent scholarship⁴ … agrees with the Buddhist tradition in holding that what the Buddha learn from his teachers was the kind of meditation preserved within his own teaching as samatha, “calming” meditation’ (p. 126). Yet it is the four jhānas of samatha that the Buddha used as a basis for his enlightenment (MN.I.246–49), after he has been unable to attain this by austerities or the top two formless states (MN.II.240–45); so the latter must surely have been attained by a non-jhānic route different from samatha.

Chapter 9, ‘Causation and non-random process’ explores ideas of Dependent Origination and Nirvana, which Gombrich rightly sees as the extinction of the fires of passion, hatred and delusion, the one thing that is not causally conditioned and ‘the opposite of everything we normally experience’ (p. 130).

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The author is enthusiastic about an article of ‘Joanna Jurewicz,’ who has ‘showed that the formulation of the Chain of Dependent Origination is as it is because it represents the Buddha’s answer to Vedic cosmogony, and indeed the fundamental ontology of brahminical thought’ (p. 133), especially responding to the ‘Hymn of Creation’ (Ṛg Veda X, 129) and the first chapter of the Brhad-āranyaka Upaniṣad. The latter is on the origin of the universe, and the human being as a microcosm that corresponds to it, all ‘grounded on a primordial essence which is endowed with consciousness’ (p. 134). By contrast, the Buddha focussed on the ‘living individual’. Where the ‘Hymn of Creation’ has a cosmogony in which there is initially neither existence (including consciousness) or non-existence, then kāma/desire, then mind, the Buddha has avidyā (ignorance, but also possibly meaning ‘not found’, i.e. non-existence, p. 139), volitional activities and then consciousness. Brhad-āranyaka Upaniṣad I.4 sees consciousness as initially only aware of itself, then as aware of subject and object, then with further individuation, by nāma/name and appearance/rūpa; hence nāma-rūpa comes next in the Buddhist sequence. But while the Brhad-āranyaka Upaniṣad sees such a sequence as about ātman, the Buddha sees the sequence as “a chain of absurd, meaningless changes which could only result in repeated death” (Jurewicz, 2000: 101, cited p. 137).

Gombrich sees this account of the origin of the teaching on the first four nidānas of Dependent Origination as enriching and not running counter to traditional Buddhist ideas (p. 138). I am not convinced on the ‘enriching’. Gombrich argues that the chain originally started at craving, or perhaps the six senses, but once the above ideas developed, they were added on as stages leading to the senses, thence onwards. ‘It is quite plausible, however, that someone failed to notice that once the first four links became part of the chain, its negative version meant that in order to abolish ignorance one first had to abolish consciousness!’ (p. 138). While this should really be ‘the abolishment of ignorance entails the abolishing of consciousness’, this touches on a real issue: what the nirodha of consciousness really means. But to see the idea of this as arising due to someone’s ‘failure to notice’ something seems far too reductive.

The chapter includes the useful ideas that ‘saṃkhāra can mean “process”… [and] can also mean “result of a process”’ (p. 141) and that the Hua Yen type interpretation that sees Dependent Origination as saying all phenomena are interconnected is absent in the Pali Canon and would subvert the Buddha’s teaching on karma …[in which] all individuals are responsible for themselves’ (p. 143).

In a similar vein, Gombrich ends the next chapter (10), ‘Cognition; language; nirvana’, by rightly arguing that the Chinese Buddhist idea ‘that the Buddha taught a middle way between being and non-being … [such that] Buddhism flouts the normal rules of logic’ has its roots in a passage in the Kaccāyana-gotto Sutta (SN.II.17) that is a perfectly rational proposition on phenomena being a flow of causally conditioned processes, neither permanently existing nor being wholly non-existent.

Chapter 10 addresses various issues. Having previously said that Buddha’s teaching is a kind of ‘pragmatic empiricism’ (p. 10), he now says that ‘empiricism’ is a questionable label, given that the Buddha saw the mind, too, as a sense-organ (p. 145). Having argued that the Buddha was not primarily interested in ontology, ‘what
exists?’ (p. 2), but with what we can experience, he says ‘the khandhas are not so much what we are as how we work: and in particular how we cognize. I repeat: epistemology, not ontology’ (p. 145). On these points he takes his cue from the work of Sue Hamilton,6 which he admires.

Having earlier said that a key thrust of the Buddha’s teaching as ‘everything is process’ or ‘nothing exists without a cause’ (p. 10), Gombrich says ‘The Buddha’s view of language was … also basic to his metaphysics. If there are no unchanging entities but only processes, how can words have a fixed and determinate relationship to reality?’ (p. 148), ‘The very act of conceptualizing, the Buddha held, thus involves some inaccuracy’ (p. 150). He then qualifies his above ‘everything … nothing’ by saying that Nirvana ‘is defined by being the precise opposite of everything in our normal experience’ (p. 155), that ‘for the Buddha, “to exist” means to exist without changing’ (p. 155) and ‘There is … just one thing that does exist in its own right, and that is nirvana. That does not just “appear”: it is.’ (p. 155). He rightly criticizes Rahula, though, for referring to Nirvana as ‘TRUTH’ (p. 40 of What the Buddha Taught, 1959) as ‘truth can only be a property of propositions … This confusion arises, perhaps, because the Sanskrit word satyam and the corresponding Pali word saccaṃ can indeed mean either “truth” or “reality”. But in our language this will not work’ (pp. 156–7).

Chapter 11 is on ‘The Buddha’s pragmatism and intellectual style’. Here the author rightly says that ‘The Buddha was a pragmatist as we use the term idiomatically, but not in the modern technically philosophical sense’ (p. 161), as the tradition holds the teachings to work because they are true – not to be ‘true’ because they work. Moreover, ‘The Buddha did not take a purely instrumental view of ethics: he found many reasons for being good’ (p. 169). Gombrich discusses the Vinaya as a ‘pragmatic legal system’ (p. 173), with the rules developed by a ‘process of trial and error’ (p. 177) and says that the Buddha’s ‘favourite style of exposition was by analogy, with appeals to common sense. … The sermons are chock-full of analogies, similes and metaphors. … It is hard to exaggerate how amazingly different the suttas are from most early Indian religious texts’ (p. 165).

Gombrich claims that very little is said in the Suttaś on the ideas that underpin the Buddha’s advice on how to advance towards Nirvana by ethics and meditation: ‘What the Buddha thought, in the sense of his underlying ideas, has largely to be teased out of the material’ (p. 163). But this is to wrongly claim that the Suttaś contain only advice on how to act, and ignores many teachings on the nature of reality. Gombrich’s claim, here, is really about his ideas on how the Buddha came to have his ideas, and how these in various cases came to be ‘misunderstood’.

As regards meditation, Gombrich sees that taught by the Buddha as culminating in ‘a very high pitch’ of awareness and concentration, yet being initially what ‘we nowadays take for granted in an educated person, a basis for moral and intellectual understanding’ (p. 172). But while the latter might be all that was needed to productively listen to a sermon, practising the satipaṭṭhānas or jhāna are surely of a different nature. Gombrich says that ‘we have both to control our emotions and to train our intellect; and Buddhist meditation is designed to achieve both goals’ (p. 74). This rightly recognizes the affective and cognitive aspects to meditation; but is the latter only about the ‘intellect’?

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Elsewhere, the author is dismissive of certain Buddhist ideas on meditation. When *DN*.II.156 talks of the meditative stages the Buddha went through on his death-bed, as discerned by Anuruddha through the meditative power of mind-reading (e.g. *AN*.III.27–8), he says, ‘Obviously the onlookers could not tell which meditative state the Buddha was in, so the whole account must be an ideological construct’ (p. 108). Elsewhere (p. 27), he says that ‘The Buddha made belief in this law of karma the first step on his noble eightfold path to nirvana … “right view”, yet the relevant statement of right view also includes that there are people who ‘proclaim this world and the world beyond, having realized them by their own super-knowledge (*abhiññā*)’ (*MN*.III.72).

Chapter 12, ‘The Buddha as satirist; Brahmin terms as social metaphors’, argues that ‘The Buddha’s fundamental criticisms of Brahmins is that they do not live up to their own stated ideals. Brahmin terms remain as metaphors for those ideals’ (p. 181). Gombrich sees the *Brahmajāla Sutta* (*DN*.I.17–18) story about how Brahmā acquired the delusion he was the Creator is a only a ‘spoof’ (p. 185) on the story in *Bṛhad-āranyaka Upaniṣad* IV.1–3. I agree there is satire here, but that need not exclude a positive teaching, too. The author sees the mind-made beings that the text refers as just ‘part of the Indian religious heritage’ and the Buddha may not have actually believed in them, but in any case ‘they are the device by which the Buddha turns what Vedic literature intends as a true cosmogony into an account of why such a thing appears to us to be about the origins of the world, but is no such thing is properly understood’ (p. 186). I find the meaning of this key sentence somewhat obscure.

In discussing the *Aggañña Sutta* (*DN*.27) as the Buddha’s parody of Vedic creation myths (p. 186), Gombrich says that the Buddhist tradition wrongly takes the text’s content seriously as an account of origins, thus ignoring the fact that the Buddha strongly deprecates taking any interest in such matters …. Moreover, his teaching on causation denies that the world can have an origin; but the text gets round this by reliance on a theory, here implied rather than stated, that the world goes through periods of what one might call contraction and expansion. (p. 186).

I find this statement rather odd and convoluted. Gombrich acknowledges that the Buddha saw everything but Nirvana as arising from causes, so why cannot a world have a cause, as long as this is not an uncaused cause (p. 131)? The *Sutta* is not saying the universe as a whole arises from such a cause, or from nothing, but that our own current (local?) world has arisen from a series of causes, which is perfectly in accord with the principle of Dependent Origination. The *Sutta*’s account no doubt contains elements which satirise Vedic ideas on creation of the world, but that need not mean it is wholly a satire, with no positive teachings of its own. Why cannot it, for example, be an account which is intended to show, with irony, how the Vedic account gets things wrong?

In the final chapter, ‘Is this book to be believed?’, Gombrich justifies his approach and gives some summaries of his key points. In the Vedānta metaphysics:

- Individuality is … an illusion – and so, therefore, is individual responsibility.
- With his theory of karma, the Buddha not only established individual responsibility, but more generally argued for a principle of individuation.

The Buddha’s theory of karma not only substituted ethics for ritual, but made intention, a private matter, the final criterion for judging ethical value. This was a great step forward in the history of civilization, because it meant that on the ethical plane all human beings are in a general sense equal, even if they differ in their capacity for making sound moral judgements [he says elsewhere
that ‘morality is closely linked to intelligence… a good moral choice is an intelligent and informed choice’ (p. 15).

…Rarely in human history, before very recent times, has this doctrine of individual responsibility caught on. (p. 195)

Gombrich says that ‘The growth of Buddhist rites and liturgies was surely a wholly unintended consequence of the Buddha’s preaching’ (p. 200). He has previously said, ‘The point of ritual lies in doing, not in intending. Thus ritual is ethically neutral for the Buddhist. It has no moral and hence no soteriological value. It is not normally forbidden, unless it involves an immoral act such as killing, but it is certainly not commended’ (p. 14). Yet this assumes that ‘ritual’ is only an external action, which is arguably only ritual that has becomes ‘empty ritualism’; good ritual does involve the mind and in Buddhism it can be used to help to cultivate skilful states of mind.

The book ends with an appendix, ‘The Buddha’s appropriation of four (or five?) Brahminical terms’, which discusses the terms brahma-cariyā, saṃkappa, ekodibhāva, puthujjana and papañca.

Professor Gombrich laments ‘If I had a more thorough knowledge of the Pali Canon than, alas, I can claim’, (p. 194), and welcomes other people trying to publicly show, from evidence in the Pali Canon, that his analysis may not be correct (p. 201). Well, there are a range of points where his statements seem to me to misdescribe or overlook relevant passages.

Several statements about the Dhamma-cakka-ppavatana Sutta, seen as the Buddha’s first sermon, are problematic. The author says that, in it, ‘the Buddha says of each truth in turn that he glimpsed it, that he realized he should learn it thoroughly (we might say ‘internalize’ it), and that he had thoroughly learn it. … This reeks of the systematizers who produced the abhidhamma’ (p. 103). However, the contents of the text is here not as he reports, and the details are more substantive. They concern knowledges of each of the four sacca/realities, how each is to be responded to (respectively by understanding, abandoning, realizing and developing), and that these have been done. The author also sees Koṇḍañña’s statement at the end of the Sutta, that he sees ‘whatever is of a nature to arise is all of a nature to pass away’, as not matching the earlier content, on the saccas (p. 104). He argues (p. 131) that Koṇḍañña’s words were put in the Sutta once it came to be held that the Buddha’s idea of Dependent Origination was his greatest discovery, for ‘whatever is of a nature to arise is all of a nature to pass away’ is attributed to Sāriputta when he heard a verse of Dependent Origination (Vin.I.40). Yet the teaching on the saccas is, precisely, on how dukkha arises dependently, so Koṇḍañña’s statement sits perfectly appropriately at the end of the Sutta. Moreover, the author says that Koṇḍañña’s realization at the end of the Sutta is ‘tantamount to Enlightenment, to becoming an arahat’ (p. 130), yet it is clearly gaining the Dhamma-eye at streamentry, with him only later becoming an Arahat after another teaching (Vin.I.14). Likewise, Sāriputta’s above statement does not signal his enlightenment (p. 131), as he only later becomes an Arahat (MN.I.501).

Gombrich claims that the Buddhist karma doctrine entails that ‘there is really no undeserved suffering’ (p. 26), yet a passage at SN.IV.230–1 and AN.II.87 clearly states that it is wrong to see all experiences or illnesses as a result of past karma, giving a list of different kinds of causes, including medical ones, with past karma as just one of the possibilities. Gombrich discusses this passage (p. 21), but says it is ‘misleading’; for in order for the karma teaching to be an adequate ‘theodicy’, and be
able to make sense of diseases people are born with, such as AIDS, karma must be ‘the cause behind causes’, rather than one cause amongst several. But while this comment seems relevant to an illness arising from who a being is born to (itself determined by karma), there is no reason why it must apply to all other illnesses. The author has simply assumed that karma must be an explain-all ‘theodicy’. Here one can make the logical point that saying that all karma has result is not the same as saying that all results come from karma. What one does matters –yes – but everything that happens to one is not rooted in one’s past karma.

Gombrich suggests that we cannot know if the Buddha really believed in the beings such as petas (ghosts) and gods that he talked about (pp. 72–3):

The question of whether such beings exist is not amongst the ‘unanswered questions’. But then the Buddha rejected all questions of the type ‘Does x exist?’. He rephrased it: ‘Can we experience x?’.

Since evidently those around him were experiencing gods and petas, he let it go at that … I am sure that the fully developed cosmology that can be found in the Pali Canon cannot be attributed to the Buddha himself, if only because it would be so flagrantly contradict his deprecating any concerns with such matters.

Yet this assertion is not supported by the evidence. At MN.II. 212–3, the Buddha is asked ‘do gods exist? (Kin nu …atthi devā ti). He replies ‘it is known to me based on (good) grounds … that there are gods (Ṭhānaso tam …viditaṃ yaddam atthi devā ti)’, explaining that he replies in this way as ‘it is widely accepted in the world … that there are gods’. That is, he asserts his belief in the existence of gods, but that this is more soundly based than the then commonly held cultural belief, as it is based on his direct knowledge (as e.g. at AN.IV.302–03).

The author also sees the Buddhist idea of the ‘non-returner’ as arising from the Buddha’s satirising of the Brhad-āraṇyaka Upaniṣad’s saying that a brahma-knower does not return from the brahma-world after death (pp. 89-90). He then says that ‘post-canonical’ sources say the non-returner is reborn in the formless worlds, and that these worlds ‘were added to accommodate him’ (p. 90). Yet, such worlds are already referred to in the Suttas, and not just with non-returners in them (e.g. MN.III.102-03), and the Suttas also talk of some noble disciples attaining Nirvana in named rebirth realms corresponding to the four jhānas (AN.II.126–30) as well as in the formless rebirth realms (AN.I.267–68, AN. II.160), with the pure abodes as rebirth realms in which only non-returners are reborn. So what Gombrich suggests is a post-canonical development was already an integral part of the Nikāya teachings.

Again, the author says that it is ‘unnecessary to accept the complicated, indeed contorted, interpretation favoured by Buddhaghosa, that the chain [of Dependent Origination] covered three lives of the individual’ (p. 142). Yet this idea is well based in the Suttas. The Mahānidāna Sutta makes clear (DN.II.63) that nāma-rūpa would not come to develop in the womb if consciousness did not first arrive there. Moreover the jātibirth link clearly primarily means the start of a new life (MN.I.50). Hence the chain of twelve nidānas does include two transitions between lives, so as to cover three lives.

In discussing how the term nāma-rūpas had an Upaniṣadic background, the author says that the Buddhist tradition did not understand this and ‘made nāma-rūpa equivalent to the five khandha’ (p. 136). This is incorrect, however, as MN.I.53 explains nāma as feeling, perception, volition, contact and attention, and rūpa as the four elements and rūpa derived from them: at most, these amount to the four khandhas other than consciousness, not the five khandhas. The author then oddly
goes on to talk of 'the division of consciousness into name and form', implying this is talked of by the Buddha as well as the *Upaniṣads* (p. 137).

The author says that the Buddha 'claimed ... that he could remember all his former births .... But these abilities were an inherent part of becoming enlightened; in other words, all enlightened people, all *arahants*, had them too' (p. 164). This statement clashes with the *Sutta* statement that not all *Arahat* can remember past lives (*SN*.II.120–24), and also, by saying the Buddha could remember ‘all’ his past lives, wrongly implies that there was a limited number of these, and hence a first one.

The author also says that the texts are clumsy in not making *mano* as of a different nature to the five senses, as something that responds to all kinds of sense-input (pp. 59, 145), yet *MN*.I.295 precisely says that it does do this, while the other five senses do not. Again, the author says that, unlike the Jains, the Buddha ‘offered no explanation for life as such’ (p. 51) – but at *MN*.I.296, the difference between a live and dead body is the presence or lack of ‘vitality, heat and consciousness’.

It is not necessarily the case that the above infelicities all undermine key arguments, but where they do, it is not clear whether the author would say: ‘Ah yes, but this passage cited as evidence against me is itself based on a misunderstanding of the Buddha’. If this were said, though, one wonders if the arguments would be starting to become circular.

Professor Gombrich is fulsome in his praise for scholars who have influenced him, especially Joanna Jurewicz and Sue Hamilton, and other than one criticism of Rahula, he follows the principle of putting forwards his own views ‘without explicitly arguing against scholars with whom I disagree’ (p. 155). This shows both generosity and kindness. Unfortunately, though, a book review cannot also eschew criticism.

Overall, this book deserves a wide readership, representing the mature views of a great scholar of Buddhism. It develops a series of very thought-provoking arguments for ‘How Buddhism Began’, to cite the title of his1996 book, that scholars need to further reflect on. It provides what might perhaps be termed evidence-based ‘just so’ stories, for ‘how Buddhism got its spots’. Gombrich’s admiration shines through for what he sees as the Buddha’s central teachings: an ethicized karma doctrine based on intention, and entailing full personal responsibility for whatever happens to one, and an analysis of reality as a set of essence-less changing processes. He sees much or all of early Buddhist ideas on gods and *petas* as arising from Buddhists taking literally what the Buddha said in satire or metaphor, sees no positive role for any ritual, and while he sees that meditation as important in Buddhism, sees it in rather prosaic terms as training of the emotions and intellect. It is fairly clear that there are many strands of the teachings of the four main Pali *Nikāyas*, as we have them, that he sees as not what the Buddha actually taught. This arguably arises from a tendency to over-generalise, and hence over-simplify, what is probably our best record of what the Buddha is remembered as having taught.

*Abbreviations for Pali texts:*

AN. *Aṅguttara Nikāya*
Dhs. *Dhammasaṅgaṇī*
DN. *Dīgha Nikāya*
MN. *Majjhima Nikāya*
SN. *SaMyutta Nikāya*
Sn. *Sutta-nipāta*
Vin. *Vinaya*