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Review essay: What the Buddha Thought, by Richard Gombrich, London and Oakville: Equinox, 2009. xvi + 240 pp. Pb £14.99, 978 1 84553 614 5; Hb £55.00, 978 1 84553 612 1

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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

¹ One simplification for the public is referring to 'the *abhidharma*' as a 'one major school' of Buddhism and 'the *Vijñānavāda*' as another (p.3). There were of course several early schools that expressed their ideas through *abhidharma*, just as the *Vijñānavāda*/*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 others, 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.1.52–9*). 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 '*āsava*' and '*arahaṭ*'. 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).

² 'Prajāpati, the fire and *pancāgni-vidyā*', in Piotr Balcerowicz and Marek Mejer, eds., *Essays in Indian Philosophy, Religion and Literature*, Delhi, Motilal Banarsidass, 2004, pp. 4-60.

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-Pitika*', *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 Upaniṣdic 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 *karuṇā* 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 *Suttas*, 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 is 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).

⁴ Alexander Wynne, *The Origin of Buddhist Meditation*, London and New York, Routledge, 2007.

The author is enthusiastic about an article of 'Joanna Jurewicz,⁵ 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' (*Rg Veda* X, 129) and the first chapter of the *Bṛhad-āraṇyaka 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. *Bṛhad-āraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 1.4 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 *Bṛhad-āraṇyaka 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-gotta 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

⁵ 'Playing with fire: the *pratītyasamutāda* from the perspective of Vedic thought', *Journal of the Pali Text Society*, 2000, 26: 77–103. Gombrich says of her work, 'I wonder whether any other single scholar in the last hundred years has made so important a contribution to the field' (pp. ix-x).

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 *saccam* 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 *Suttas* 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 *Suttas* 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'?

⁶ *Identity and Experience: The Constitution of the Human Being According to Early Buddhism*, London, Luzac Oriental, 1996.

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 only a 'spoof' (p. 185) on the story in *Bṛhad-āraṇyaka 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 become '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*, *puṭhujjana* 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-ppavātana 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 (*Thānaso me taṃ ...viditaṃ yadidaṃ 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 *Bṛhad-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 *jāti*/birth 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-rūpa* 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 *Arahats* 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 his 1996 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. *Dhammasaṅgāhī*
- DN. *Dīgha Nikāya*
- MN. *Majjhima Nikāya*
- SN. *SaMyutta Nikāya*
- Sn. *Sutta-nipāta*
- Vin. *Vinaya*