

# What the Buddha Thought

Richard Gombrich



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For Geoff Bamford and Sarah Norman,  
fellow enthusiasts



## PREFACE

This book argues that the Buddha was one of the most brilliant and original thinkers of all time.

While the book is intended to serve as an introduction to the Buddha's thought, and hence even to Buddhism itself, it also has larger aims: it argues that we can know far more about the Buddha than it is fashionable among scholars to admit, and that his thought has a greater coherence than is usually recognized. Interpreters both ancient and modern have taken little account of the historical context of the Buddha's teachings, but relating them to early brahminical texts, and also to ancient Jainism, gives a much richer picture of his meaning, especially when his satire and irony are appreciated. Incidentally, since many of the Buddha's allusions can only be traced in the Pali versions of surviving texts, the book establishes the importance of the Pali Canon as evidence.

Though the Buddha used metaphor extensively, he did not found his arguments upon it like earlier thinkers: his capacity for abstraction was an intellectual breakthrough. His ethicizing older ideas of rebirth and human action (karma) was also a breakthrough for civilization. His theory of karma is logically central to his thought. Karma is a process, not a thing; moreover, it is neither random nor wholly determined. These ideas about karma he generalized to every component of conscious experience – except nirvana, the liberation from that chain of experience. Morally, karma both provided a principle of individuation and asserted the individual's responsibility for his or her own destiny.

The book is based on the Numata Lectures which I gave by invitation at the School of Oriental and African Studies, London University, in autumn 2006. I gave ten lectures under the general title 'The Origin and Greatness of the Buddha's Ideas'. I am extremely grateful to the Numata Foundation, Bukkyo Dendo Kyokai, for financing those lectures; they are by far the greatest

patrons of the study of Buddhism in the world. I thank Dr Tadeusz Skorupski and Dr Kate Crosby for inviting me. The lectures were open to the public, and I am particularly grateful to members of the audience who came long distances and asked excellent questions, some of which have, I hope, enabled me to improve my material.

Like the lectures, the book is ambitious in being intended for two audiences. It contains much that is new, so that I dare to hope it will interest, perhaps even excite, experts in the field. It is, however, also intended to reach a wider public – in fact, anyone remotely interested in Buddhism – even though it does not fully cater for those who have no idea whatsoever about the Buddha’s teachings. I have not used up space by providing the rudimentary knowledge which can be picked up from any work of reference – or better, perhaps, from such books as *What the Buddha Taught* by the Ven. Walpola Rahula or *The Buddha’s Way* by the Ven H. Saddhatissa. On the other hand, I have included, for easy reference, the text of a handout which was distributed at the lectures, entitled ‘Background Information’.

As I explain more fully below, I have tried to make the book accessible by not using foreign words in the body of the text when it is not absolutely necessary, but there are also places where I cannot convey my message without discussing Pali words in detail. I do hope that those discussions will not deter non-linguists; they should not. I have used initial capitals for some English words to indicate that they are standard translations of Pali fixed terms.

The title of this book is a gesture of homage to the late Ven. Dr Walpola Rahula, who taught me much of what I understand of early Buddhism. I trust it will not be taken amiss if I admit that at the same time I not only wish to supplement his book by approaching the subject more from a historical angle, but even on one topic, nirvana, venture to clarify what I fear is a somewhat muddled presentation.

This book is intended to be read through, rather than dipped into, since it contains some quite complex arguments and builds up the case for the Buddha’s coherence and brilliance as a thinker cumulatively. Nevertheless, readers may find a brief guide to its contents useful.

After introductory remarks, the first two chapters are mainly occupied with karma. Chapters 3 and 4 then deal respectively with the brahminical and the Jain backgrounds to the Buddha’s ideas.



Chapter 5 shows how some of the Buddha's main concepts relate to concepts in the Upaniṣads and thus how they relate to each other.

Chapter 6 is a case study of a very important topic, the Buddha's view of love and compassion; it aspires to show by example how my approach, as a historian of ideas, can cast fresh light on the Buddha's thought. Chapter 7 then discusses the method I have exemplified in Chapter 6, and gives my view of the evidence for what I am saying. I realize that it is unusual not to explain my method until halfway through the book, but I hope it keeps people reading.

The next three chapters, 8 to 10, present what I take to be the main ideas underlying the Buddha's teaching; one might even call them his 'philosophy'. I would have liked to make my text as accessible as *What the Buddha Taught*, but here at least I have surely failed, because I have to deal with some sophisticated and unfamiliar ideas. Should any readers feel so discouraged that they lay the book down, I hope that they will nevertheless persevere with the remaining chapters, because those are not only more colourful but also (particularly Chapter 11) important for getting to know the Buddha's extraordinary mind and personality. The centrality of the theme of karma in the Buddha's thought is summarily reviewed in the final chapter.



In arriving at my own ideas, I owe enormous intellectual debts, above all to Joanna Jurewicz and to Sue Hamilton. I am conscious that my text does not adequately convey how much I owe to Sue Hamilton's insights; in particular, had I felt it appropriate to devote more space to cognition in Chapter 10, I would have cited her at length. Her demonstration that the Buddha is always talking about experience chimes beautifully with Joanna Jurewicz's early work on the Ṛg Vedic 'Hymn of Creation', in which she shows how from the recorded beginnings of Indian thought, existence and consciousness are intertwined. Though the Buddha disentangled them, this philosophy of experience, as one might call it, influenced him profoundly. Joanna Jurewicz's other discoveries are no less momentous. Not only has she deciphered the original meaning of the chain of dependent origination. Her discovery of belief in rebirth in the Ṛg Veda also makes the entire early history of Indian religion far more plausible and coherent. I wonder whether any

other single scholar in the last hundred years has made so important a contribution to the field.

I must also make special mention of my comparatively recent students Noa Gal Ronkin and Alexander Wynne. Teachers can have no greater reward than to find their pupils reaching higher by standing on their shoulders. This is central to the process of conjecture and refutation which I regard as the only way forward.



## BACKGROUND INFORMATION

**Y**ou are advised to read this through quickly, and then use it for reference.

### LANGUAGES

**Sanskrit (S)** is native to India. It is an Indo-European language, and therefore is related to English. The oldest texts in Sanskrit go back to the second millennium BC, but through an oral tradition (therefore very hard to date); writing was first used in India in the third century BC. The oldest texts are called the Vedas (see below) and were preserved as sacred by the males of a hereditary priestly group, the brahmins.

**Prakrit** is the Indian term for languages directly derived from Sanskrit. The oldest extensive Indian inscriptions, put up by the emperor Asoka in the mid-third century BC, are in Prakrit. Some words in Prakrit are the same as in Sanskrit.

**Pali (P)** is a Prakrit language. It is not exactly what the Buddha spoke, but fairly close to it. The sacred texts of the Theravada tradition, also known as Southern Buddhism, constitute the Pali Canon. Though not immune to change over time, some of these texts must be our oldest evidence for Buddhism.

For more on Pali, see my introduction, entitled “What is Pali?”, to Wilhelm Geiger’s *Pali Grammar* (1994).

## BASIC DATA ON BUDDHISM

### *The Three Jewels*

Buddhism consists of the 'Three Jewels': the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Saṅgha. They are also known as the 'Three Refuges', meaning that Buddhists rely on them, place trust in them. Though many dislike calling Buddhism a 'faith', it is not unfair to say that Buddhists have faith in the Three Jewels.

**Buddha** (S/P) is, strictly speaking, a title. Literally it means 'Awoken' but we tend to use 'Enlightened'. His family name was Gotama (P).

Non-Buddhists simply regard the Buddha as the founder of Buddhism. For Buddhists he re-founded it in the area and period of the universe in which we are living; there are other similar Buddhas who do the same when and/or where Buddhism is extinct.

**Dhamma** (P) or **Dharma** (S) is what the Buddha taught (according to Buddhists: what all Buddhas teach). The term has many applications and many translations, according to context. It is both descriptive and normative, the law of the universe.

Dhamma translates 'Buddhism' if by the latter is meant the system of ideas. For Buddhism as a historical, empirical phenomenon, Buddhists use a different word, *sāsana* (P) or *śāsana* (S) (accent on first syllable). This word also means 'teaching', but 'dispensation' captures the purport better. So a Buddha founds a *sāsana*, but the *dhamma* is a set of truths, eternal but sometimes forgotten.

**Saṅgha** (S/P) means 'community'. This term too has several applications but they are not hard to distinguish. The Buddha may originally have used it to refer to all his followers who had reached the first stage of spiritual progress. But by far its commonest use is to refer to the ordained: monks, nuns and novices of both sexes. (However, in orthodox Theravada the female Saṅgha is extinct.) The term may refer to the monastic community as a whole or to a particular local community.

The Saṅgha is governed by rules, collectively known as the *Vinaya* (S/P) 'discipline'. This term may refer to the rules or to the texts containing those rules.

### *Fundamental texts*

The **Pali Canon** is in Pali called the *Tipiṭaka*, ‘Three baskets’. They are (the order matters):

1. *Vinaya Piṭaka*, the rules for the Saṅgha, both for individual members and for the whole community. The two codes of disciplinary rules for individuals (one for monks, one for nuns) are called the *pātimokkha* (P)/*prātimokṣa* (S). Though much of the *Vinaya Piṭaka* is a commentary on these rules, so that they are embedded in it, strictly speaking they stand outside the Canon; they have a kind of supreme status, because one cannot receive full ordination (at least in theory) without knowing the *pātimokkha* by heart.
2. *Sutta Piṭaka*. *Sutta* is P, *sūtra* is S. A *sutta* is a text, prose or verse or both, containing teachings. Many are in a narrative setting. The main collection of the Buddha’s sermons is in the four *Nikāya*, collections arranged mainly on formal criteria.
3. *Abhidhamma Piṭaka*, ‘higher teachings’, the teachings analytically rearranged into a systematic and wholly literal presentation. While the early schools have the main texts of the first two *piṭaka* in common, they differ in *abhidhamma* (S: *abhidharma*).

When one says something like ‘the early canonical texts’, one is usually referring to most of the *Vinaya Piṭaka*, the four *Nikāya*, and a few other verse texts from the *Sutta Piṭaka*.

## HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL BACKGROUND

### *Time*

Since the Buddha lived well before writing was used in India, it is not surprising that the various Buddhist traditions differ widely about his date. The canonical account of his death says that he passed away aged eighty. For a while modern scholarship dated this to 483 BC or thereabouts and this dating is still found in many reference works. But it is too early. He must have died round 405 BC.

For more detail, including an explanation of the limits of possible precision, see my ‘Dating the Buddha: a red herring revealed’, in

*The Dating of the Historical Buddha/Die Datierung des historischen Buddha*, Part 2 (Symposien zur Buddhismusforschung, IV, 2), Heinz Bechert, editor (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1992), pp. 237–59. For a less technical account, see my ‘Discovering the Buddha’s date’, in Lakshman S. Perera (ed.), *Buddhism for the New Millennium*, London: World Buddhist Foundation, 2000, pp. 9–25.

The emperor Asoka, who was largely responsible for the spread of Buddhism, ruled from c.269 to c.231 BC.

### *Space*

The Buddha was born close to the modern border between India and Nepal, which did not then exist, into a tribe called the Shakyas. He spent his life in the part of north-east India now known as Bihar (the name is derived from the Buddhist word for ‘monastery’) and the eastern UP. Modern Benares (Varanasi in Indian languages) already existed; Patna (ancient name: Pataliputra), which was to be Asoka’s capital, was founded soon after his lifetime.

### *Social environment*

The Buddha lived when the first cities were coming up in India. (We ignore the prehistoric Indus Valley civilization.) With this arose larger and better organized states, mostly monarchies, and a great increase in trade, which led to contact with the world beyond India.

A complex religious and cultural system had already been articulated by the brahmins. Their leadership was, however, contested by the new political and mercantile classes, who tended to support heterodox teachers. (‘Heterodox’ means not accepting the authority of the Vedas and hence of their brahmin interpreters.) The Buddha’s contemporary Mahāvīra was one of them; he taught, though he did not found, Jainism, a religion still alive today.

See my *Theravada Buddhism: A Social History*, 2nd edition. London: Routledge, 2006, Chapters 2 and 3.

### *Brahmin religion and society*

Brahmin ideology posited a hierarchic social structure which we call ‘the caste system’. According to this, society had four strata, which they called ‘colours’ (S: *varṇa*). The brahmins (S: *brāhmaṇa*) were at the top, then came the nobility (S: *kṣatriya* or *rājanya*),

then the *vaiśya*, originally stock-rearers and farmers but by the Buddha's day primarily traders, and then the *śūdra*, artisans and labourers. Even below these came the outcastes, who in theory were associated with unclean work dealing with corpses and/or excreta. This brahmin theory is first mentioned in the tenth book of the *R̥g Veda*. Kings were supposed by the theory to enforce its rules. In fact, however, enforcement has always been extremely variable.

Early brahmin religious literature is vast. It all carries the name *Veda*, meaning 'knowledge', and is all in an ancient (but not uniform) kind of Sanskrit. It is internally stratified by genre and to some extent the genres also constitute a chronological sequence. The oldest genre is sometimes known in the West as the Vedas, which is confusing. The *R̥g Veda*, a collection of 1,028 hymns, is the oldest text in this genre. The latest genre/stratum is that of the *Upaniṣads*. These were composed over several centuries; the oldest and longest is the *Bṛhad-āranyaka Upaniṣad*, which was certainly known to the Buddha, though not necessarily in exactly its present form, so it must antedate 500 BC.

### *Kinds of Buddhism*

There are two main Buddhist traditions in the world today: Theravada and Mahayana. Theravada is a Pali word (*Theravāda*) meaning 'Doctrine of the Elders'. Mahayana is a Sanskrit word (*Mahāyāna*) and means either 'Great Path' or 'Great Vehicle' – it is ambiguous. The Theravada regards only the Pali Canon as authoritative, the Mahayana arose around the beginning of the Christian era and venerates many other texts. Theravada is dominant in most (not all) of South and Southeast Asia, Mahayana in East and Central Asia. Further details are not relevant to this book.



## ABBREVIATIONS

<i>AN</i>	<i>Aṅguttara Nikāya</i>
<i>BĀU</i>	<i>Bṛhad-Āraṇyaka Upaniṣad</i>
<i>Ch.Up.</i>	<i>Chāndogya Upaniṣad</i>
<i>Dhp.</i>	<i>Dhammapada</i>
<i>Dhs.</i>	<i>Dhammasaṅgaṇī</i>
<i>DN</i>	<i>Dīgha Nikāya</i>
<i>J</i>	<i>Jātaka</i>
<i>MLD</i>	<i>Middle Length Discourses</i>
<i>MN</i>	<i>Majjhima Nikāya</i>
<i>PED</i>	<i>Pali-English Dictionary</i>
<i>RV</i>	<i>Ṛg Veda</i>
<i>Ś.Br.</i>	<i>Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa</i>
<i>SN</i>	<i>Saṃyutta Nikāya</i>
<i>Snip.</i>	<i>Suttanipāta</i>
<i>Thg.</i>	<i>Therīgāthā</i>
<i>Ud.</i>	<i>Udāna</i>
<i>Vin.</i>	<i>Vinaya Piṭaka</i>
<i>Vism.</i>	<i>Visuddhimagga</i>





## *Chapter 1*

# INTRODUCTION

I have been motivated to write this book mainly by two feelings: admiration and exasperation.

My admiration is for the Buddha, whom I consider to be one of the greatest thinkers – and greatest personalities – of whom we have record in human history. Ranking people in an order of merit is a pursuit fit only for parlour games, but I maintain that the Buddha belongs in the same class as Plato and Aristotle, the giants who created the tradition of western philosophy. I think that his ideas should form part of the education of every child, the world over, and that this would help to make the world a more civilized place, both gentler and more intelligent.

This does not mean that I consider that all the Buddha's ideas were correct. Given the distance between the Buddha and me in time and space, it would be extraordinary if I did. I disagree with some of his theories and do not subscribe to all his values. I therefore do not call myself a Buddhist. However, I believe that my understanding of his ideas makes me at least as sincere an admirer of the Buddha as the millions who identify as Buddhists. Moreover, my admiration extends to a great deal of what those born into the Buddhist tradition think and do. And that admirable part of the Buddhist tradition, or traditions if you will, goes back, in my view, to the Buddha himself.

Those Buddhist traditions, which have lasted for over two and a half millennia and extended over a vast geographical area, are so diverse that some scholars scoff at the very notion that one can talk about 'Buddhism', and insist on using the word in scare quotes, if it has to be used at all. I disagree. Granted, Buddhism itself, as a human phenomenon, is subject to the Buddha's dictum that 'All compounded things are impermanent'.<sup>1</sup> It would be astonishing if over such a long time, as it moved to different regions and cultures,

it had not undergone vast changes; the same has happened to every human tradition. But the historian should be able to trace every branch of the tradition back to another branch, until we arrive at the trunk and root, the Buddha himself. To change the metaphor from trees to rivers: on their way, the various streams of the Buddhist tradition have been joined and adulterated by streams from other cultures, whose influence must likewise be analysed. Yet I think that in most traditions – or at least in the scriptural traditions, which have done most to shape human history – it is what owes its origin to ancient Buddhism that preponderates.

Many will remain sceptical. They may grant that the Buddhist Order of monks and nuns, the Saṅgha, is the oldest institution in the world, and easily recognizable as the same institution from age to age and country to country; but they may protest that Buddhist beliefs today are hopelessly diverse, and ask why. I believe I have an answer. 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. As I shall explain at many points in this book, he infused old terms with new meanings. This inevitably led to misunderstandings, especially among those who knew his teachings only partially or superficially.

Let me give a salient example. Again and again I find propagated in modern Indian university teaching and publications the view that the Buddha taught virtually the same as the *Upaniṣads*, texts sacred to the brahmins, and significantly differed from them only in attacking the caste system. This arises from the fact that the Buddha's main ideological opponents were brahmins of Upaniṣadic views, so he used their own terms to attack them. Moreover, those attacks were conducted mainly by using metaphor and irony, registers imperceptible to the literal-minded. To illustrate this will be one of the main themes of this book.

But more needs to be said. In many cases, the Buddha was not asking the same questions as his opponents, or indeed as the successors of his opponents in India down the centuries. He did not always follow the unspoken rules of what philosophy, or systematic thought, was supposed to be about. Naturally, this led to misunderstandings after his death, even well before Buddhism became implanted in countries beyond India. Another salient example may clarify this. The orthodox tradition, Vedic thought, was much concerned with ontological questions: what exists? The

Buddha said that this is a wrong question. But this was too much for his followers. One major school, the *abhidharma*, gave his teachings a realist interpretation; another, the *Vijñānavāda*, an idealist interpretation; it is possible to derive both these interpretations from the early Canon, particularly if one highlights certain texts and ignores others. There are indeed also texts which, if taken in isolation, seem to be ambiguous on this matter.

Before many centuries had elapsed, things went even further than this. When Buddhism reached China, the great difficulties of translating Indian texts into Chinese, difficulties both of a practical character and inherent in the vast difference between the cultures of the two countries, soon led to mysticism: mysticism in the sense that the Buddha's teaching was held to transcend rationality and to be inexpressible in language. Though not the only view, this view has been dominant in Far Eastern Buddhism, particularly in the school known in the West by its Japanese name, Zen. While I shall show in this book that I agree that the Buddha held the goal of the religious life to be an experience which language has no power to express, I strongly disagree with interpretations of his teachings, which are of course expressed in language, as being mystical in the vulgar sense of defying normal logic.

I therefore hold that a successful interpretation of the Buddha will make clear not only the ideas he expressed but also how those ideas lent themselves to the various interpretations which are in fact historically attested. The Buddha will thus stand as the source for a successful history of Buddha ideas – even though to compose such a history, even in outline, may be beyond the powers of any single scholar. Moreover, that must be beyond the scope of this book.

### MISUNDERSTANDING AND PSEUDO-PROFUNDITY

The above paragraphs may give the reader a first hint of why one of the motives that drives me to write is exasperation. However, I can put the matter even more plainly from another angle. I find the Buddha's ideas extraordinarily powerful and intelligent, a work of genius. I do not think those powerful ideas, properly understood, are very complex or difficult to grasp. Yet Buddhists and non-Buddhists alike persist in regarding the Buddha's thought as

immensely 'deep' in the sense of complex and therefore difficult to understand. I do not share this view.

Just as traditional exegesis of the Four Gospels has not taken much account of Jesus' Jewish background, traditional exegesis of the Buddha operated in almost total ignorance of his historical context. After all, if he preached eternal truths, historical context did not appear to have any relevance! That may excuse the blinkered approach of the early commentators, but it will not serve for modern scholars. Statements, obviously, derive their meaning largely from context. Therefore to understand what anyone is saying, particularly if it transcends the banal, one needs to try to reconstruct its historical context.

I have taken first steps in this direction in the early chapters of my book *Theravada Buddhism: A Social History*, and gone further in my next book, *How Buddhism Began*. I shall follow the same path in this book; this will lead to my repeating myself a little, but I hope not too much. My method is therefore historical.

Most books written by academics – and I confess that I am one of those – feel that they must begin with a chapter on what they call methodology, i.e., 'How do I set about writing this book?' For historians this usually means how they find what they consider relevant evidence and how they treat it. For me, the proof of the pudding is in the eating, and I find it boring and unhelpful to read about how something can or could be done in theory, before one has witnessed the practice. For this reason I discuss my method, i.e., my use of evidence, only halfway through the book, once the reader has had a chance to see how my method works.

Why do I think that the Buddha's thought has been so undervalued? I would not go so far as to say that the undervaluation is in proportion to the veneration; but there is something in that nevertheless. While I consider that Buddhism has been by and large a great force for good in human history, a civilizing influence, I think that regarding the Buddha purely as a religious teacher can be unhelpful. It is of course a fact that he founded what we call a religion; in his terms, indeed, he saw himself as teaching a path to salvation. But to stress that can be a hindrance in the educational systems of today. Naturally, I am not disputing that as the founder of a religion the Buddha can be classed with Moses, Jesus or Mohammed. But let us not thereby exclude him from the category of thinkers like Plato, Aristotle and Hume.

## TERMINOLOGY AND CLARITY

One of my teachers, the Ven. Dr Walpola Rahula, was given to saying that one could teach Buddhism to a non-Buddhist audience in their own language without using any foreign words at all. I agree. And yet at the same time I have always held that if one wants fully to grasp the meaning of a Buddhist text, one needs to read it in the original language. What do I mean?

The key terms in Buddhism – and probably in any system of ideas – do not refer to external objects, such as nose, tree, cup. They are abstractions. Linguists understand that there are very few words which have *precise* equivalents in another language, except sometimes in a closely related language: the word ‘cup’ will not have a precise equivalent in Chinese, because the Chinese traditionally have a different range of utensils from English-speakers, and the closest Chinese word may, for instance, cover a broader or a narrower range than ‘cup’. Nevertheless, once the word ‘cup’ is used in a context, it is often no problem to convey what it refers to with enough precision to serve the needs of communication.

The translation of abstractions is much more problematic. This is not just because the terms do not have precise equivalents in foreign languages, though in the case of abstractions the ambiguities and semantic range of a term may well baffle translators and those dependent on their translations. Let me give two simple examples. Italian *coscienza* can be either ‘conscience’ or ‘consciousness’. German *Geist* can be ‘soul’, ‘spirit’, ‘ghost’, ‘mind’ or ‘wit’. The problem becomes far worse when the ideas one is trying to understand are expressed in the original by relating one to the other or even explaining one in terms of the other.<sup>2</sup>

The oldest extensive evidence for the Buddha’s ideas, I hold, is found in large parts of a huge collection of texts known in English as the Pali Canon.<sup>3</sup> Pali is a language derived from pre-classical Sanskrit and closely related to it – even more closely than Italian is related to Latin. It is also closely related to the language (likewise derived from Sanskrit) that the Buddha himself must have spoken. Of that language we have no direct record, because writing was not used in India, so far as we can tell, in the Buddha’s lifetime (unless it be that there was a system of writing numerals). For most purposes one can expound Indian Buddhism equally well whether one uses the Sanskrit terms or their Pali equivalents; there are a few exceptions to this, but they are mostly irrelevant to the contents of

this book. On the other hand, Sanskrit has a very long history and many different genres of texts, and to gain insight into the meanings of Pali words one needs to compare them not to Sanskrit in general but to the Sanskrit of the Buddha's day – what is generally referred to as late Vedic Sanskrit.

From this point on, the discussion will use only Sanskrit (S) and Pali (P) terms; on the other hand, it is not useful in this context to stick to either S or P consistently.

### THE BUDDHA'S USE OF METAPHOR

The preaching recorded in the *suttas*, the texts containing the Buddha's sermons and discourses, is mainly delivered with what Pali calls *pariyāya*.<sup>4</sup> Literally, this word means 'way round' and so 'indirect route', but it refers to a 'way of putting things'. The translation 'circumlocution' will not quite do, because that wrongly suggests long-windedness or evasiveness. *Pariyāya* refers to metaphor, allegory, parable, any use of speech which is not to be taken literally. A text delivered 'with *pariyāya*' is contrasted with one delivered without, in other words, with a text which is to be taken literally. In the early canons, it is the *abhidharma* texts which are 'without *pariyāya*' and thus claim to give us the Buddha's meaning literally.<sup>5</sup>

What does this mean for us? It is the primary task of a modern expositor like myself to present in our language what the Buddha meant, literally. Removing the figurative use of language which fills and enlivens his discourses is likely to make them less vivid and interesting; besides, it is always debatable to what extent that which is expressed by a metaphor can be conveyed by its literal equivalent, particularly when the subject matter is religious. I can, of course, try introducing metaphors of my own, but unless I am very careful to make clear what I am doing, this runs the risk of distorting the message, particularly because our own world is so far removed from that of ancient India. I had better stick to the task of decoding what the Buddha said by recognizing when he is speaking figuratively, and preferably also understanding why. But simply to ignore the metaphors is to lose an essential part of the meaning.

## SKILL IN MEANS

The Buddha's use of metaphor is linked to what became known as his Skill in Means. In the Mahayana, Skill in Means (S: *upāya-kauśalya*) acquired the status of a technical term. That term is not found in the early Pali texts, but what it stands for is found all over them.<sup>6</sup> The term refers to the Buddha's skill as a communicator. This, in turn, is manifested by the Buddha's ability to adapt what he says to his audience, to their prejudices, expectations and capacities. When he encounters non-Buddhists, the Buddha hardly ever initiates a discussion or begins by putting forward his own views. As T. W. Rhys Davids pointed out a century ago,<sup>7</sup> this reminds us of Socrates, who always got discussions going by asking the other party to state their views. When the Buddha's interlocutor has spoken, the Buddha's normal technique is to agree – and then to carry on. He says, 'Yes ... and ...'

This is a wonderful bargaining or diplomatic tactic, from which anyone can learn. The Buddha avoids an adversarial stance. What he does after his initial agreement is to take what has apparently been agreed on and turn it upside down. One of his main ways of doing that is to make the words used by his opponent mean something quite different.

The way in which the Buddha infuses new meaning into accepted terms is so bold that in some instances one might almost call it outrageous. The word 'karma' itself<sup>8</sup> offers a perfect example. It is a noun derived from one of the commonest of all Sanskrit roots, *kr*, meaning 'to do' or 'to make'. Sanskrit *karman* and Pali *kamma* thus mean 'act, action, deed'. Regardless of what kinds of action the word is used to refer to, an action is something which takes place in the physical world. So when the Buddha said, 'It is intention that I call karma,'<sup>9</sup> he was doing something logically analogous to saying that he chose to call black 'white', or to call left 'right'. This example is so extreme that perhaps it does not describe it adequately to say that what his opponents meant literally he took metaphorically. There are, however, many examples of the latter procedure. When he took a word for sacrifice which the brahmins meant literally, and turned that into a metaphor, we are on more familiar territory.

Already in ancient times, this matter became explicit in the Buddhists' view of their own tradition. Though every Buddha was thought to have attained moral perfection in a whole set of virtues, two were of paramount importance: compassion and wisdom. Odd

as it may sound to our ears, the prime instance of his compassion was his preaching. There was no necessity for him to preach, but he was kind enough to do so, and thus show to all living creatures the path to liberation from rebirth. Consonant with the idea of individual responsibility, the Buddha's compassion consisted above all in helping others to help themselves. And it was his wisdom that provided the Skill in Means which made his preaching so effective.

### DECODING AN IDEOLOGICAL STRUCTURE

The meaning of Buddhist texts is never going to be clear to us if we stick to reading word-for-word translations, or exegesis which clings closely to such translations. Here is a typical statement of one of the Buddha's basic teachings: 'The Buddha taught that living beings have no self, but what we think of as the self in fact consists of five aggregates.' Many people are so used to sentences like this, which are so obscure as to be meaningless, that they read (or listen) on without a murmur of complaint. Some even fancy that if they cannot understand such profundities, it must be their fault!

Of course, the teacher making such a statement may well have explained that 'self' here corresponds to S: *ātman* (P: *attā*), which besides 'self' can be translated 'soul', and that 'aggregates' translates S: *skandhāḥ* (P: *khandhā*). True. But as an explanation of what the Buddha was teaching, this is still totally inadequate.

The only way fully to explain matters to an English-speaker is to use clear, normal English. This will not be possible through just translating terms or sentences containing those terms. However, a large part of the explanation will consist of dealing with those terms, exploring their semantic range and discussing their uses, both literal and metaphorical.

Let me begin with the 'self', briefly postponing the 'aggregates'. Throughout ancient times, in the cultures where it was known, the salient doctrine of Buddhism, its most distinctive feature, was held to be the doctrine of No Self or No Soul. Both these two-word English phrases translate S: *anātman* and P: *anatta/anattā*. When Buddhism was discovered by the West (mainly in the nineteenth century), it was being expounded by and to Christians, who were no less struck by Buddhism's denial of a supreme creator god; but for modern scholars too, the denial of a self or soul has been the



most striking characteristic of Buddhism and of the teaching ascribed to the Buddha.

It will be easiest to grasp my argument if I come straight to the main point, and say baldly that all the fuss and misunderstanding can be avoided if one inserts the word 'unchanging', so that the two-word English phrases become 'no unchanging self' and 'no unchanging soul'. I shall explore the matter in detail later in the book, but here it suffices to say that for the Buddha's audience *by definition* the word *ātman/attā* referred to something unchanging; in that linguistic environment, to add a word meaning 'unchanging' would have been redundant. Thus, there are several ways of expressing this doctrine clearly and accurately in English. One can say, for example, 'There is nothing in living beings that never changes,' or 'There is no unchanging essence in living beings.' (Since the main concern is with people, it may be helpful to substitute 'people' or 'human beings' for 'living beings'.)

So far, so good. If Buddhism is just a way to gain salvation, it seems enough to know that this applies to us humans. In fact, however, the doctrine is far wider. It applies to everything within our normal experience. In this broader context, the word 'soul' becomes inappropriate and one wants a word like 'essence'. So the cardinal teaching becomes: 'Nothing in the world has an unchanging essence,' or 'There is nothing in our normal experience that never changes.'

On the one hand, these are simple, intelligible statements. On the other hand, 'in the world' has been equated with 'in our normal experience'. Thus each statement of the doctrine leads us on to another. In other words – and this is my most fundamental point – we are dealing with a system which is not merely coherent but interlocking. It is perfectly understandable, but to understand it correctly you have to know how the entire set of key terms is being used. Thus, for the Buddha 'the world' is the same as 'that which we can normally experience'.

Yes, we should now go on to explain what is meant by 'normally'. But if we were thorough about following from link to link, the introduction would become the whole book. So for the moment it must suffice to point out that the Buddha is not primarily concerned with what exists – in fact, he thinks that is a red herring – but with what we can experience, what can be present to consciousness. For his purposes, what exists and the contents of experience are the

same. At this level, if we want a label, his doctrine looks like pragmatic empiricism.

To go a step further: this accords with what is known as the First Noble Truth. Traditionally, this is expressed in a single Pali word, *dukkha* (S: *duḥkha*). This 'truth' is expressed as a single word, not a sentence, and thus looks more like an exclamation than a proposition. Again, there has been a lot of argument over how to translate the word *dukkha*; and again, the choice of translation must depend heavily on the context. But what is being expressed is that life as we normally experience it is unsatisfactory.

Thus we arrive at what is known in Pali dogmatics as the *ti-lakkhaṇa*, 'the three hallmarks'. The hallmarks of what? Of life as we can normally know it. The hallmarks are that it is *anicca*, *dukkha*, *anatta*: 'impermanent (i.e., ever-changing<sup>10</sup>), unsatisfactory, not/without self/essence'. We have already seen that since by definition self is unchanging, the first and third hallmarks are virtually tautologous. In Chapter 5 we shall show that the same applies to *dukkha*: that in the terms in which the Buddha was thinking and preaching, nothing impermanent could be fully satisfactory. This may not be obvious to us, and indeed it sets the bar for satisfaction far higher than many of us would want to, but for the Buddha, we shall see, this is a fundamental postulate.

Another point which we must for the moment be content to gloss over is the ambiguity between not *being* a self or essence and not *having* a self or essence. For the purposes of this summary exposition, the ambiguity hardly matters, and we shall return to it in Chapter 5.

The most basic point of the Buddha's teaching that we have so far displayed is that everything in our lives changes: that most of us have no experience of anything unchanging. Moreover, in this view of the world, to 'exist' is not to change: existence and becoming are defined as opposites. But is change random? Surely not. Even if we and everything around us change all the time, life could not go on if we did not recognize continuities at every step. The change, in other words, is not random. The Buddha axiomatized this in the proposition that nothing exists without a cause.

Another, simpler way of saying that all phenomena exhibit non-random change is to say that *everything is process*. That is indeed, in my view, the Buddha's position. But now the question must surely be: if the Buddha was saying something so simple and straightforward – which is not to say that all the implications are straightforward –

why is this not what we read in every book about Buddhism? I am going to suggest that this may well be because Pali and Sanskrit lacked a word which closely corresponds to the idea of 'process', and had to express it figuratively. I also believe that the word *saṃkhārā*, which is translated in an astonishing variety of ways, often comes closer to 'process' than has hitherto been recognized.

## KARMA AS PERSONAL CONTINUITY

It is time to return to where I began this summary exposition: to the human being, the suffering individual, doomed to continual change, while for both him and his loved ones the great change of life to death is forever looming. It is time, indeed, to say more about karma. Karma is my favourite point of entry to the Buddha's world-view. Rather than begin with a demolition job, as I did when I showed that the common understanding of No Soul is severely deficient, I can introduce karma as a positive doctrine. I believe that it is 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 the perfect example of what they mean.

If the doctrine of No Soul means that there is no personal continuity, this suggests the alarming consequence that there is no moral responsibility. But the slightest acquaintance with Buddhism, in virtually any of its forms, shows that this cannot be the correct interpretation, because Buddhism teaches that when people (or other beings) die, they are reborn according to their moral deserts. For those who consider the soul to be the locus of good and evil in the individual, this makes Buddhism bafflingly incoherent. How did such an illogical religion ever survive, let alone appeal to millions?

The answer, of course, is that the idea that Buddhism denies personal continuity could not be further from the truth. In fact, Buddhism probably has the strongest idea of personal continuity found anywhere. Christians, for example, believe in personal continuity through just the one life that we live here on earth, and perhaps in a second life in a place or state of reward or punishment, a heaven or a hell – although, since that is often considered to be 'outside time', it is not clear how the term 'continuity' can there apply. Buddhists, by contrast, believe in personal continuity over an infinite series of lives.

Infinite? Well, the series can have no beginning, because the Buddha established that nothing can come into being without a cause. So, like the world, life cannot have a beginning. (The Buddha advised against spending time on racking one's brains about this.) All of us have already lived infinitely many lives. The series can, however, have an end: that is achieved by the attainment of nirvana. One who has attained nirvana, according to the Buddha, will not be reborn.

We are thus heirs of our own deeds over an infinite number of lives. The best-documented series of lives in Buddhism is that of the person whose last life was as the Buddha, Gotama Buddha. This person resolved to attain Buddhahood a vast number of years ago. (The Buddhist term for someone who takes such a resolution is *bodhisattva*.) Stories of more than five hundred of his previous lives (called *Jātaka*) are retold in scriptures<sup>11</sup> and sermons, painted on temple walls and dramatically recited or re-enacted; they form an integral part of Buddhist culture.

Karma is not the only element of continuity in our lives. Those lives have five sets of components, and each of these five sets is denoted by the term which above was translated by the English word 'aggregate'. In fact, the word should not be detached from a word that precedes it in a Pali compound, *upādāna-khandha*, and that compound is complicated, because it is a pun of which one meaning is a metaphor: 'a mass of burning fuel'. In this latter sense it is part of the same metaphorical structure as nirvana (P: *nibbāna*), which means the going out of a flame. I shall explain this metaphor in Chapter 8. For the moment, we need only note that these five masses of burning fuel are, metaphorically, the five sets of processes which constitute our lives. In the traditional order, these five are: interactions with the physical world through the five senses, feelings (as of pleasure and pain), apperceptions (perceptions which serve to identify objects), *saṃkhārā* and consciousness.

I have left the fourth untranslated. Common translations are 'mental formations' and 'volitions'. *Samkhārā* in this context refers to those mental processes not covered by the second, third and fifth categories, and they are indeed emotions and volitions. Far the most important of these processes is intention. While it is admitted that some intentions are morally neutral, the focus is on intentions which are morally good or bad.

The Buddha taught that all thoughts, words and deeds derive their moral value, positive or negative, from the intention behind them. This does not make the effect of actions irrelevant: Buddhism is no less familiar than is modern law with the idea of negligence. But the basic criterion for morality is intention. Morality and immorality are mental properties of individuals. Metaphorically they were often referred to as purity and impurity. Each good deed makes a person purer and thus makes it slightly easier to repeat such a deed. For instance, I may find it a wrench to give money away the first time, but each time I do so the generosity will come more easily. The same applies to bad qualities, such as cruelty. An intention, carried out, becomes a propensity. A proverb cited by Damien Keown in his little book *Buddhism: A Very Short Introduction*<sup>12</sup> puts it admirably: 'Sow an act, reap a habit; sow a habit, reap a character; sow a character, reap a destiny.'

Though karma, ethical volition, is thus only one of the elements of continuity in an individual's life (and beyond), from the religious point of view it is the most important. This volition, moreover, is presented as a process. It is far from random, and is partially conditioned by preceding volitions; but it is not wholly determined. If it were, the volition could not be the responsibility of its agent, and for that agent to suffer consequences would be completely unjust, and indeed make nonsense of the very idea of volition as a separate category of thought or mental event. While I shall have more to say about karma and determinism below, it suffices here to say that the entire Buddhist ideology depends on the proposition that karma is on the one hand conditioned but on the other not strictly determined.

## INDIVIDUAL AUTONOMY AND RESPONSIBILITY

Since ethical value lies in intention, the individual is autonomous and the final authority is what we would call his conscience. There is no external agent, such as a God, who can take the blame for our decisions. We have free will and are wholly responsible for ourselves. Further, this responsibility extends far beyond this present life. So we are entirely responsible for our moral condition and what we make of it.

As a general rule, a monk could not be disciplined for an offence to which he did not admit. Similarly, the moral rules laid down for

the laity (which also apply, *a fortiori*, to the Saṅgha) are formulated as personal undertakings: the Buddhist layman declares, 'I undertake to abstain from taking life' and so forth, and thus articulates personal conscience. At least in theory, even the recitation of the words is useless and pointless unless one is consciously subscribing to their meaning.

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. The Buddha, following his custom of putting new meanings to old words, often asked his followers to substitute moral for ritual practices. One of the Three Fetters which tie men to continued existence in this world was declared to be infatuation with ritualistic observances,<sup>13</sup> clinging to the letter rather than the spirit of actions.

The Buddha took the brahmin word for 'ritual' and used it to denote ethical intention. This single move overturns brahminical, caste-bound ethics. For the intention of a brahmin cannot plausibly be claimed to be ethically of quite a different kind from the intention of an outcaste. Intention can only be virtuous or wicked. The very term *sva-dharma*, the Sanskrit word meaning one's own particularistic duty, is absent from the Buddhist Canon. It is 'purifying action' (*puñña kamma*) which brings the good Buddhist rewards in this and future lives. But since acting is really mental, doing a good act is actually purifying one's state of mind. In meditation, such purification is undertaken directly, without any accompanying action. Thus there is a logical continuum between the moral actions of a man in the world and the meditations of a recluse. This shows why the Buddhists claim morality to be a prerequisite for meditation. The system is all of a piece.<sup>14</sup>

A great deal of modern education and psychotherapy consists of making people aware that they are responsible for themselves. In fact, we consider that it constitutes a large part of what we mean by becoming a mature person. It is amazing that someone should have promulgated this idea in the fifth century BC, and hardly less remarkable that he found followers. In Chapter 2 I shall suggest what socio-economic conditions made this possible – though certainly not inevitable.

Introductions to Buddhism written for westerners tend to begin by quoting the Buddha's advice to a group of people called the

Kālāmas.<sup>15</sup> They had complained to him that various teachers came and preached different doctrines to them, and they were confused about which to follow. The Buddha replied that everyone has to make up their own mind on such matters. One should not take any teaching on trust or external authority, but test it on the touchstone of one's own experience. Naturally, the implication is that people would then find out for themselves that it was the Buddha whose teaching their experience showed to be correct. It is natural and appropriate for modern authors to highlight this teaching: its implications for tolerance and egalitarianism, at least on the intellectual level, resonate with post-Enlightenment thought. The attitude was not unique in the ancient world: one can imagine the same advice coming from Socrates – though not from Plato. But it is astonishing to find it in the generally hierarchic society of India.

The Buddha's views on politics are fascinating, but since I have virtually nothing to add to what I have written about them elsewhere,<sup>16</sup> I shall leave them out of this book. So let me at this point draw attention to his egalitarianism: that the only true criterion for ranking people is moral, and that morality is closely linked to intellectual ability. The first of these propositions may remind us of Christianity, but the second less so.

If people are responsible for their own decisions, and in particular for deciding which teaching to follow, this sets a high premium on intelligence. The usual term that the Buddha seems to have used for a morally good act was a word, *kusala*, which in Sanskrit<sup>17</sup> can mean either 'healthy, wholesome' or 'skilful'. Scholars have debated which of these translations is more appropriate in Buddhism. Perhaps one need not really decide between them, for the ambiguity could have been intentional and words may be selected not only for their literal meanings but also for their overtones. Nevertheless, let me concede that it may make sense to ask which metaphor was uppermost in the Buddha's mind. My answer is that for him *kusala* primarily means 'skilled', because a good moral choice is an intelligent and informed choice. I have little doubt that 'skilful' fits the bill.<sup>18</sup>

If you have intellectual autonomy, you had better have the brains to make good use of it. In every traditional society, including that into which the Buddha was born, education consists largely in parroting what the teacher says. If later some Buddhists parroted, 'The teacher says I must think for myself,' we cannot blame the Buddha for that. The Buddha even made a monastic ruling that

























































































































































































































































































































































































































































































































# What the Buddha Thought

Richard Gombrich

In *What the Buddha Thought* Richard Gombrich argues that the Buddha was one of the most brilliant and original thinkers of all time.

Intended to serve as an introduction to the Buddha's thought, and hence even to Buddhism itself, the book also has larger aims: it argues that we can know far more about the Buddha than it is fashionable among scholars to admit, and that his thought has a greater coherence than is usually recognized. Interpreters both ancient and modern have taken little account of the historical context of the Buddha's teachings; but by relating them to early brahminical texts, and also to ancient Jainism, Gombrich gives a much richer picture of the Buddha's meaning, especially when his satire and irony are appreciated. Incidentally, since many of the Buddha's allusions can only be traced in the Pali versions of surviving texts, the book establishes the importance of the Pali Canon as evidence.

The book contains much new material. The author stresses the Buddha's capacity for abstraction: though he made extensive use of metaphor, he did not found his arguments upon it, as earlier thinkers had done. He ethicized and radically reinterpreted older ideas of karma (human action) and rebirth. Similarly, building on older texts, he argued for the fundamental importance of love and compassion, and analysed fire as a process which could stand as a model for every component of conscious experience. Morally, the Buddha's theory of karma provided a principle of individuation and asserted each individual's responsibility for his own destiny. To make the book completely accessible to the general reader, the author provides an introductory section of 'Background Information', for easy reference.

**Richard Gombrich** is founder and President of the Oxford Centre for Buddhist Studies, and Chairman of the UK Association for Buddhist Studies. Before his retirement in 2004, he held the Boden Chair of Sanskrit at Oxford University and a Professorial Fellowship at Balliol College for twenty-eight years. The author of 200 publications, he continues to lecture and teach at universities round the world.

Cover image: Seated Buddha, Lan Na Kingdom, Northern Thailand, 16th to 17th century.

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