

What Gombrich Wants the Buddha to Have Thought

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Introduction

Richard Gombrich's book *What the Buddha Thought* is something of a riposte or sequel to Walpola Rahula's *What the Buddha Taught*, both books being influential in Buddhist studies. Gombrich's thesis is that we better understand the mind of the Buddha by understanding the Brahminical and Jain context in which he lived. I will show here however that Gombrich's book is far from making that case and introduces many new errors of interpretation of the canonical record. Instead, the book largely shows what Gombrich would prefer the Buddha to have thought.

I first describe in brief what I think are the twenty-nine mistakes that Gombrich makes in his book, and then expand my arguments by working through the book chapter by chapter. I then summarise my findings. I believe that Gombrich has muddled the Dharma; my aim here is to restore its pristine nature.

Keywords: Buddha, Dharma, Richard Gombrich, Pali Canon.

Usage of terms

My usage of a few terms need setting out. Different writers on Buddhism use a variety of terms for the original in Pali, while the wider field of religious studies and philosophy adds further terminological variety. My usage is drawn from all these sources, is solely my preference, but defined in advance here to be consistent and avoid confusion.

I use the term 'enlightenment' where others may prefer 'awakening', 'liberation' or similar. Where I use 'arahant' I follow the usage in the Pali Canon to denote an enlightened person. Following Maurice Walshe in his introduction to his translation of the *Digha Nikaya*, I use 'deva' to describe a spirit-being of any type, where in English we might use ghost, god, spirit, angel, fairy etc and where the translators of the Pali Canon may use brahma, naga, god, devata' etc. I use 'deva-world' for all those planes of existence where devas live. I use 'no-self' as a placeholder for the Buddha's complex and subtle thinking on the nature of the transformed self required for arahantship. In the absence of any accepted short English term I use 'guru' when referring to a spiritual teacher, so this includes the Buddha and the

other teachers of his day. I use 'jhana' – as often left untranslated in the Canon – to denote the eight meditative states or altered states of consciousness (translators sometimes use 'jhana' for the first four and 'base' or 'sphere' for the second four). I use 'Sangha' for the Buddha's community of monks and nuns, though the term would apply to the community of any of his contemporary gurus. I use 'sutta' for the discrete units of text that make up the Canon, whether prose or verse, whether long or short. In general if I use the Pali it is because I believe, contrary to Gombrich, that there are no equivalent English terms that precisely convey their usage in the Canon.

When referring to the four major Nikayas or volumes of the Sutta Pitaka in the Pali Canon, I use DN to denote the *Long Discourses of the Buddha* (*Digha Nikaya*); MN to denote the *Middle Length Discourses* (*Majjhima Nikaya*); SN to denote the *Connected Discourses* (*Samutta Nikaya*); and AN to denote the *Numerical Discourses* (*Anguttara Nikaya*).

Twenty-nine mistakes in 'What the Buddha Thought'

In the following I list twenty-nine assertions by Gombrich that I think are mistaken; some major and some minor. A more detailed analysis of each is found in the section that follows.

1) The Buddha's thinking is better understood in the context of Brahminical and Jain doctrines.

Gombrich believes that the Buddha's thinking is better understood in the context of Brahminical and Jain doctrines. While those influences cannot be completely ruled out it is a mistake to not first thoroughly understand the Buddha's thinking as discoverable from a systematic reading of the Pali Canon.

2) The Buddha is to be seen as a philosopher

Gombrich classes the Buddha along with philosophers such as Plato, Aristotle and Hume, though acknowledges that he is also the founder of a religion. This is a mistake because the Canon presents the Buddha as a teacher of enlightenment and dismissive of the speculative views found in philosophy.

3) The Buddha's teachings are easy

It is a mistake to think that the Buddha's teachings are easy. Firstly the Buddha repeatedly states that they are not and secondly a thorough reading of the Canon shows variations in his teachings that confirm their subtlety, and hence the effort required to understand them.

4) The Buddha's definition of karma is an inversion of customary thought

It is a mistake to take the Buddha's teachings on karma as radical, as the Canon shows firstly that what is new in them is merely a matter of emphasis, and secondly that in countless suttas the Buddha uses the term conventionally.

5) The doctrine of no-self is incompatible with ethics, so Buddhism is illogical

It is a mistake to see the doctrine of no-self as logically incompatible with ethics. The teachings of enlightenment by definition cannot follow ordinary logic.

6) The doctrine of no-self is made comprehensible by inserting 'permanent' in front of 'self'

It is a mistake to believe that the doctrine of no-self is made comprehensible by qualifying 'self' with 'unchanging' or 'permanent'. The Buddha's teachings on no-self are subtle and not so easily simplified, while the insertion of the qualifier provides a get-out clause that he at no point hints at.

7) The Buddha's past lives are to be found in the Jataka Tales

The idea that the *Jataka Tales* is a proper source for the Buddha's statements on his past lives is a minor mistake. Instead, the seven or so past lives as a human described by the Buddha in the major Nikayas should be examined, along with his claims to have been devas in different deva-worlds.

8) The Buddha's teachings on conditioned origination are compatible with free will

The assertion by Gombrich that the Buddha's teachings on conditioned origination are compatible with free will is merely opinion. At no point in his discussions of conditioned origination does the Buddha say or imply this.

9) The Buddha's view on rebirth is merely a culturally inherited belief he could not shake off

The idea that the Buddha's view on rebirth is merely a culturally inherited belief he could not shake off is not born out by the Canon. It would have been a fabrication for the Buddha to have spoken about his seven or so human past lives and therefore would not have passed the Buddha's test of right speech.

10) The results of the Buddha declaring mind to be the sixth sense in addition to the usual five are clumsy and unsatisfactory

The idea that clumsy and unsatisfactory outcomes arise from the Buddha's declaration of the mind as the sixth sense is merely Gombrich's opinion. It fails to take into account how original and central this idea is to the Buddha's teachings and practice.

11) There are only a few instances in the Canon where the Buddha equates meditative states to realms in his cosmology; perhaps these ideas were added later

It is a mistake based on a limited reading of the Canon to think that the Buddha only rarely describes how different meditative states lead to different cosmological destinations. There are a large number of instances of such instruction by the Buddha, covering the full range of meditative states and almost the entire 31 realms of existence.

12) The three characteristics of existence (*lakshanas*) are the Buddha's answer to the Brahminical triad of being-consciousness-bliss

Gombrich's idea that there is a parallel between the three *lakshanas* and the Brahminical triad of being-consciousness-bliss stands up to no scrutiny. No account of the *lakshanas* by the Buddha is explained or contextualised by such a parallel.

13) The Buddha only pretended to believe in gods and ghosts because those around him did

A systematic reading of the Canon would thoroughly dispel Gombrich's opinion that the Buddha only pretended to believe in gods and ghosts, or any entity described by the terms *deva*, *devata*, *brahma*, *naga*, *peta* and so on.

14) The Buddha saw love and compassion as a path to enlightenment (*nirvana*)

Gombrich's assertion that the Buddha saw love and compassion as a path to enlightenment is an exaggeration. Generally the practice of loving-kindness, compassion, appreciative joy and equanimity are described as leading to 'liberation of mind' but only in that moment, and not as full enlightenment. Other factors are required. Nevertheless, if seen as *part* of the path to enlightenment, Gombrich has a point.

15) It is regrettable that people believe that the Buddha's teachings are about personal salvation

The idea that it is regrettable that the Buddha's teachings are seen to be about personal salvation is merely one of Gombrich's opinions, and is no help in understanding what the Buddha thought. It is clear from the Canon that this is precisely what the Buddha teaches.

16) The Buddha's teachings on the three knowledges is his answer to the triple knowledge of the Vedas

The idea that the Buddha's teachings of the 'three knowledges' became a triad to mimic the triple knowledge of the Vedas is clearly mistaken. In the countless suttas where the Buddha describes his enlightenment in three stages he would have had to be engaging in deceptive speech acts if he did so merely to form a triad reminiscent of the number of the Vedas.

17) The 'way to the brahma-world' is a metaphor for enlightenment

It is quite mistaken for Gombrich to assert that the 'way to the brahma-world' is a metaphor for enlightenment. The Buddha's definition of enlightenment entails the end of birth in any world.

18) Buddhism 'missed the boat' by misunderstanding the *Tevijja Sutta*

Gombrich's view that Buddhism 'missed the boat' by misunderstanding the *Tevijja Sutta* is merely opinion, and is no help in understanding what the Buddha thought.

19) Fire is the Buddha's central metaphor, therefore he was drawing on traditions of the fire-sacrifice

Gombrich's assertion that fire is the Buddha's central metaphor is completely without support in the Canon. There is almost no object or process in the world of his time

that the Buddha does not press into use as a metaphor at some point. It is also absurd to take a small uncertainty over the word 'this' in a sutta to claim that the Buddha had therefore lit a fire and was pointing to it.

20) By having consciousness as the fifth aggregate the Buddha undermines the ethics he introduced in his fourth aggregate

Gombrich declares that the presence of 'volitions' in the fourth of the Buddha's aggregates is where he introduces ethics and that having 'consciousness' as the fifth aggregate then undermines it. He seems to think that when the Buddha, in his many descriptions of the fifth aggregate – and the exhortation to see the absence of 'I', 'me', or 'mine' in it – is talking about becoming unconscious in the medical sense and therefore becoming incapable of any action.

21) The Buddha's mind was divided over elimination and purification of consciousness

Gombrich says that the Buddha's mind is 'divided' over the elimination and the purification of consciousness in the fifth aggregate. He appears to be saying that the Buddha is conflicted between his own views and that of his teachers, but this is unsupported from the Canon.

22) The Buddha's teaching of 'right view' and on abandoning views is contradictory (but can be understood using the Christian theological terms of apophatic and cataphatic)

Gombrich points out the apparent contradiction between 'right view' in the Noble Eightfold Path and the continued exhortation by the Buddha to abandon views. However the former is the commitment to the Four Noble Truths, without which the path to enlightenment cannot commence, whereas those views that need to be abandoned are strongly held speculative views irrelevant to the goal.

23) The Buddha's claims to supernatural powers cannot be the words of the Buddha

Gombrich's assertion that the Buddha's claim to supernatural powers 'are not his words' is not borne out by the Canon. The Buddha repeats them in a great many suttas in different contexts and declares that a monk through suitable effort can attain them too.

24) The Buddha's couching of ethics in the negative had an 'unfortunate' effect on Buddhism, and is 'bloodless'

Gombrich may share with many the opinion that the Buddha's couching of ethics in the negative is unfortunate. However there are many suttas in the Canon where the Buddha praises generosity, giving alms, helping the sick, supporting one's parents and so on. What Gombrich sees as 'unfortunate' may be the clear fact that the Buddha's path is one of personal salvation. This and the term 'bloodless' are merely opinion however and do not advance our understanding of the Buddha's thinking.

25) The Buddha uses spoof, irony, making fun of, parody and satire in his discourses, particularly when referring to Brahminical ideas

Gombrich's assertion that the Buddha uses spoof, irony, making fun of, parody and satire in his discourses is clearly mistaken, because all such verbal strategies would

not count for the Buddha as 'right speech'. They all in some way mock their target or trivialise the subject matter. It seems that Gombrich's evidence for his assertion generally derives from the deva-world elements of the Buddha's teachings which Gombrich does not like and would prefer the Buddha not to have said.

26) When the Buddha uses the compound term 'the brahma Sahampati' he means 'Brahma the supreme creator-god of brahminism'

Gombrich makes a mistake over the divine entity that pleads with the Buddha to teach. He mixes up 'Brahma', the supreme god of Brahminism, with 'the brahma Sahampati' perhaps down to popular texts on Buddhism that do the same. However it is hard to understand why he ignores the word 'Sahampati' when it appears after 'brahma' in the Canon in at least sixteen suttas. A systematic reading of the Canon would show that the brahma Sahampati is a particular deva of the brahma class and is not *the* 'Brahma' or the 'Great Brahma'.

27) The Buddha's account of the brahma-world is a spoof of a Upanishadic creation myth

It is a mistake to think that the Buddha's account of the first denizen of the brahma-world is a spoof on a Upanishadic passage. The accounts are too different, while the Buddha's clear intent in his account is to show that there is no being not subject to death and rebirth.

28) When the Buddha makes reference to loving-kindness, compassion, appreciative joy and equanimity as routes to rebirth in higher planes it is always to the brahma-world

The idea that when the Buddha makes reference to loving-kindness, compassion, appreciative joy and equanimity as routes solely to rebirth to the brahma-world is mistaken. The Canon shows that these four meditative states can lead to a higher birth in many different deva-worlds.

29) When the Buddha contradicted Brahminical beliefs it was received as sacrilege and so he required powerful protectors

The idea that the Buddha's interlocutors understood the Buddha's teachings as contradicting Brahminical beliefs wrongly assumes that Brahminical beliefs were monolithic or dominant among the Buddha's interlocutors. Even if the Buddha's views were different to those of some brahmins they were not received as sacrilege in any of the accounts in the Canon (though possibly disagreeable). Hence it is equally mistaken to deduce that the Buddha needed powerful protectors from offended brahmins; no evidence for that exists in the Canon.

Chapter by Chapter

I now expand on the above claims by working through Gombrich's book chapter by chapter. In the following the page numbers in brackets refer to the edition published in 2009 by Equinox. It may be useful to have a copy at hand while reading on.

Chapter 1

We can quickly spot a problem with Gombrich's approach to the Buddha when he says that he belongs in the same class as Plato and Aristotle (p. 1). Gombrich is partly approaching the Buddha as a philosopher instead of as an enlightened teacher of enlightenment. These categories of person imply rather different mind-sets, though there can be some small overlap in their preoccupations. The Buddha's project is not at all philosophical in the modern sense but better seen as purely emancipatory, in the spiritual sense. Hence it is with other teachers of enlightenment that the Buddha would be better compared.

Given that Gombrich sees the Buddha as a philosopher it is not surprising that he says, '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,' (p. 2). It is certainly true that the Buddha used the language of his day when describing more abstract concepts, and that he extensively modified and adapted the meaning of existing words to serve his explanations or metaphors, but that does not mean that he 'formulated' his ideas as refutation or attacked those of differing views, as philosophers do. Gombrich says of the Buddha: 'He did not always follow the unspoken rules of what philosophy, or systematic thought, was supposed to be about.' This may well be true, but again, such a criticism is based on the assumption that a teacher of enlightenment should follow the rules of philosophy (p. 2).

Gombrich, while aware of mysticism as a tradition of thought that might inform our understanding of the Buddha, says: '...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,' (p.3). He adds that '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.' This entirely contradicts what the Buddha repeatedly says, which, is that his teachings are 'profound, hard to see and hard to understand, peaceful and sublime, unattainable by mere reasoning, subtle, to be experienced by the wise', or variants on that theme (MN 26).

Gombrich now turns to the term 'karma' and uses it to claim that the Buddha repurposed religious terms common to his culture. He says, 'So when the Buddha said, "It is intention that I call karma," he was doing something logically analogous to saying that he chose to call black "white", or to call left "right",' (p. 7).

Firstly, the Buddha is a flexible user of language. He does emphasise intention over action, as he repeatedly argues with Jain followers. However his emphasis on intention is firstly to show action's antecedent condition, and secondly to show that a harmful intention is as much a wrong-doing as a harmful act, because it brings bad karma. Intending to step on and kill a beetle in the forest is worse, in karmic terms,

than stepping on one by accident, because the mind is tainted by evil intention. Hence it is not a black-white or left-right kind of verbal inversion at all, more like using 'dawn' as antecedent to 'light' or 'dusk' as antecedent to 'dark'.

More importantly, there are countless passages in the four major Nikayas which show the Buddha using the term 'karma' in the widely-understood sense of a bad deed bringing a bad rebirth; indeed in the ordinary sense now used in the West, as in the common sentiment, 'what goes round comes round'. Here is just one example:

Bhikkhus, there are these three causes for the origination of karma. What three? Greed is a cause for the origination of karma; hatred is a cause for the origination of karma; delusion is a cause for the origination of karma. Any karma, bhikkhus, fashioned through greed, born of greed, caused by greed, originated by greed, ripens wherever the individual is reborn. Wherever that karma ripens, it is there that one experiences its result, either in this very life, or in the [next] rebirth, or on some subsequent occasion. (AN 34.4)

Gombrich now examines the Buddha's teachings of 'no-self'. He believes that the solution to this particularly difficult part of the Buddha's teachings is at hand: '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".' (p. 9)

Are the countless suttas in the Pali Canon which expound on no-self better understood by rephrasing as 'no unchanging self'? Gombrich argues that people in that period understood 'self' to mean 'unchanging self', an assertion not supported by the Pali Canon as a record of the thinking of the time. The Canon shows a wide range of contemporary views about self, from eternalism (a permanent self) to annihilationism (end of self with death of the body). The Buddha spoke about these extremes of view and so was careful, detailed and varied in his descriptions of self. At no point does he qualify self with 'unchanging', so it would be a gross intrusion on his thought to presume that is what he meant. Given that his goal, stated many times in the Canon, was the abandonment of the conceit 'I am', he would hardly have wanted to provide such a get-out clause. It would make no sense to talk about ending the conceit 'the unchanging I am' (if anyone really holds such a view) because one could then retain the conceit 'the changing I am'.

An example of the Buddha's standard teachings on no-self is found in the *Culasaccaka Sutta* (MN 35). The Buddha is in debate with the guru Saccaka who has declared the Buddha's teachings on no-self to be disagreeable. The Buddha presses Saccaka whether he can exercise power in each of the five aspects of self (known as the 'aggregates') such as to change their nature, as a king has power over his

subjects to execute, fine or ban them. Saccaka, in opposition to the Buddha, holds that 'material form is my self', but has to reluctantly concede that he has no kingly power to shape his material form at will, and so is wrong. The same is conceded for feeling, perception, formations (volitions) and consciousness. The Buddha then pursues a second line of questioning, also often used to convey his thinking on no-self: if none of the aggregates are permanent, then they constitute suffering and are not fit to be regarded, 'This is mine, this I am, this is my self'. If we kept qualifying 'self' (and also 'mine' and 'I') here with 'permanent', does this clarify anything? In the first part of the argument it would be absurd for Sakkaca to hold that 'material form is my permanent self', and in the second part the qualifier 'permanent' would result in a tautology.

In other formulations the Buddha insists that his meditators destroy without residue 'identity view', 'personality view', the 'conceit of "I am"', 'I-making tendencies', etc. He never qualifies the term 'self' in the way that Gombrich suggests, because that would undermine the purpose of meditating with such aim.

Gombrich's next point is this: 'If the doctrine of No Soul means that there is no personal continuity, this suggests the alarming consequence that there is no moral responsibility,' (p. 11). The Buddha is clear however: to attain enlightenment the identification with anything that leads to the arising of a notion of 'self' has to be abandoned without residue. At the same time there is karma. That is what he calls his 'middle way' on the subject. Or to put the conundrum another way: the Buddha teaches a strict ethics of action, speech and thought, while also teaching conditioned arising, i.e. that everything, including our volitions, arises from prior conditions, in all of which the idea of self is a delusion. Gombrich wonders: 'How did such an illogical religion ever survive, let alone appeal to millions?' (p. 11). It is certainly a problematic contradiction, but Gombrich's solution tells us more about what he thinks than what the Buddha thinks.

Gombrich wants to cement his point by mentioning the Buddha's past lives. Here he shows alarming lack of discrimination when it comes to the Pali Canon, citing the *Jataka Tales* as evidence of these past lives (p. 12). In the serious part of the Canon the Buddha does give details of seven to eight previous lives, in sparse detail, and without mythical embellishment. The *Jataka Tales* – of over 500 'birth stories' – are on the other hand are a mishmash based on those few examples mixed up with countless folk tales; these are clearly fairy-stories invented after the Buddha's death to impress those the he called 'the uninstructed worldling'.

But back to volitions, moral acts. Volitions for Gombrich are described 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. (p. 13)

No thinking person encountering the Buddha's teachings has not been left wondering about this, in probably similar terms. In the sutta *The Greater Discourse on the Full-moon Night* (MN 109) the Buddha teaches the absence of self in each of the five aggregates, to which a monk responds by the thought: 'So – form is not-self, feeling is not-self, perception is not-self, volitions are not-self, consciousness is not-self. Then what self will be touched by the actions done by what is not-self?'

What is the Buddha's answer? His first response is that any attentive monk who has heard his discourses and comes up with this question is a 'senseless person, immersed in ignorance, overcome with craving.' Secondly that only such a person 'could think to outsmart the Teacher'. Thirdly, the Buddha simply repeats his teachings. There is nothing, including volitions, in any of human experience fit to be regarded as: 'This is mine. This is my self. This is what I am.' Or in short, there is no self that will be touched by the actions done by what is not-self. The consequences of actions arise, that is all. There is nothing unjust in this. One may balk at this, but any sustained reading of the Pali Canon will confirm that these are the Buddha's teachings.

Chapter 2

The Buddha, Gombrich likes to say in his lectures, invites us to take none of his teachings on trust, but adds: 'One soon has to qualify this, however, by saying that there was one belief which he held himself and relied on in his teaching, the belief in the law of karma; and if that was not to be obviously falsified by every cot death, it had to entail belief in rebirth. One tends to add, perhaps in an apologetic tone, that these were beliefs that the Buddha inherited and simply could not shake off.' (p.28)

To suggest that rebirth was nothing more for the Buddha than a culturally inherited belief is to ignore what the Buddha actually said. If we examine all his statements regarding his progress up to the point of enlightenment we certainly find a belief in karma and rebirth that would have been merely culturally inherited. He tells us it is only when he is enlightened that that gained the power to direct his mind to his own previous lives and see the previous lives of others. At that point it is no longer belief. To accept Gombrich's argument we would have to think that the wealth of detail then emerging from what the Buddha describes as personal revelation was culturally conditioned. How could it be? Either the Buddha was fabricating them on a massive scale in order to impress his audience, or – perhaps Gombrich's preferred theory – they were inserted by editors of the Canon. However there is no proof of either and Gombrich does not offer it. It would also have been a dishonest didactic device to declare on countless occasions that for a person who has be-

come an arahant, 'the holy life has been lived, the work has been done, (re)birth is ended'.

Also, to speak of the Buddha's ideas on rebirth and karma in apologetic tones is merely to express personal opinion.

Chapter 3

Gombrich now sets out to show the 'antecedents' of the Buddha's karma doctrine within the Brahminical tradition. It is unlikely however that at the time of the Buddha either Brahminism or Jainism were coalesced around the kind of doctrines typical of major 'religions' as the term is now understood in the West, or that those doctrines were held dogmatically. Given that the Buddha was born into the Noble (warrior) class, it is significant that Walshe writes, 'It appears that while further west the Brahmins had already established their supremacy, this was not yet the case in the Ganges valley' (DN p. 21). This would suggest that the Buddha's education may not have been dominated by Brahminical thought, but rather he was more versed in the general knowledge required for ruling a kingdom (which he amply demonstrates through the Canon). His first major encounter with serious religious thought may have been with his two teachers Alara Kalama and Uddaka Ramaputta, whose teachings are not presented in the Canon in either Jain or Brahminical terms. It is the heterodox teachings of fellow-gurus Purana Kassapa, Makkhali Gosala, Ajita Kesakambalin, Pakudha Kaccayana, Sanjaya Belatthiputta, and the Nigantha Nataputta which the Buddha encountered on a daily basis through their followers. Of these, only Pakudha Kaccayana appears to have been of Brahmin birth. Makkhali Gosala led a sect that survived perhaps a thousand years, while the Nigantha Nataputta was possibly the founder of the Jains, though their tradition describes him as the last, not first, of their founding teachers. Each of these gurus is described in the Canon as 'the head of an order, the head of a group, the teacher of a group, a well-known and famous founder of a sect regarded by many as a saint,' (MN 30). It is *their* teachings that the Buddha compares to his personal revelations and with which he often strongly disagrees. What we know of them largely comes from the account given to the Buddha by King Ajatasattu (DN 2). Out of the six the Buddha objects strongly to the teachings of Ajita Kesakambalin, an annihilationist who taught that at death the self is destroyed, and Makkhali Gosala who the Buddha declares the worst of them, for his view 'there is no karma, no deed, no energy' (AN 3.137). Another king, Pasanedi, who often converses with the Buddha, also declares the same six as the holy men of the day. Why is it, Pasanedi wants to know, that the emerging young guru Master Gotama declares himself superior to these established teachers? (SN 3.1).

What is clear from the Pali Canon however is that, while the Buddha may have accepted the common view on karma and rebirth prior to enlightenment, his enlightenment changed everything. As a guru he then often questions brahmins as to whether they remember their past lives; without exception they answer 'no'. It is

just theory to them. We know that the Buddha's first act upon enlightenment was to direct his mind to his previous lives, which then became revealed to him going back aeons. Up to then rebirth was mere hearsay to him. This is true for all experience: horse-riding for example. It doesn't matter what people in an equestrian culture tell you about horse-riding, until you mount the animal you are merely imagining the experience. So it is with the Buddha. How could his views on karma and rebirth be not vastly more influenced by his own experience than by his culture, the received assumptions of which (e.g. caste) he was largely indifferent to?

Gombrich finds that the Buddha's teachings are different to what went before because of the multiplicity of rebirth destinations rather than a binary heaven and hell (commentators on the Pali Canon generally discern 31 of these from the varied utterances of the Buddha) (p. 35). This may be true, but if the difference came out of some theoretical consideration rather than personal revelation, why is that we have no record of the process of that theoretical development at the time of enlightenment but do have a record of personal revelation?

Chapter 4

We now return to Gombrich's key assertion that the Buddha turned Jain doctrine on its head by declaring 'By karma I mean intention,' (p. 49). Certainly, the Buddha does declare that but in conversation with Jains it is clear that this is merely a matter of emphasis. In the *Upali Sutta* (MN 56) the Buddha is in conversation with a Jain who tells him that his teacher the Nigantha Nataputta declares that there are three sources of evil action: body, speech and thought, just as the Buddha declares. Where they differ is that the Jains regard evil bodily acts to be most reprehensible, where the Buddha regards evil mental acts as the most reprehensible. This is reported to the Nigantha Nataputta and overheard by one of his followers called Upali who brags that he will return to the Buddha and prove him wrong. That Upali is roundly defeated in the discussion is not the point here; what matters is that this is a matter of emphasis, not a black-white-style inversion of teaching. Gombrich takes it as a crucial doctrinal move however. He insists: 'I suggest that the positive influence of Jainism on the Buddha was massive,' (p. 51). Gombrich also says: 'On the other hand, the Buddha also reacted against Jainism.'

I would suggest that Gombrich is mistaken both to suggest that the Buddha was much positively influenced by Jainism or that he taught doctrines that were a reaction to Jainism (the same going for Brahminism). We have to imagine the Buddha, freshly enlightened and having overcome his initial distaste for the idea of teaching it. Most of us have never even had a glimpse of enlightenment, never mind the full-blown experience. How could such an experience not be the major shaper of one's thought? When he then became Master to his first disciples, his five former companions, it was not a presentation of his doctrinal refinements of existing ideas that changed their initial reluctance to take him as teacher, but rather the new-found and indisputable confidence the Buddha had in himself as the Tathagata, fully

enlightened, liberated without clinging, and for whom birth had ended. It was *he* who was profoundly transformed so it is perhaps more likely that this transformation led to his specific teachings rather than a process of ratiocinative refinement.

What the texts do support is that elements of the Buddha's teachings evolve and emerge over his 45 years of ministry. No doubt some of his ideas relate to received ideas, or are in opposition to received ideas, but does any such impugned lineage make them any clearer than is already stated in the Canon? Gombrich cites the *patimokkha*, the rules of the Sangha, as evidence of Jain influence, (p. 55). According to the *Vinaya Pitaka* (Defeat I) the Buddha was reluctant to introduce them, but the senior arahant Sariputta insisted, saying that other sects have such rules, and the Buddha gives in after a while. But we can see this as a purely practical matter. He was not persuaded because he wanted to copy the Jains but because he felt that the Sangha had become corrupt. The rules that then evolved arose one by one from infractions within the Sangha of what the Buddha taught as right action or right speech. Likewise, Gombrich suggests that the term for enlightened one, 'arahant', comes from the Jain tradition. That may be true, but that is no reason to suppose that adoption of this term hauls in the specific Jain doctrine of enlightenment.

Pressing on, we find that Gombrich objects to one of the Buddha's unique teachings, that 'mind' is a sense organ equivalent to the normally accepted five senses, its 'objects' appropriate to it not being sight, sound, smell, taste or touch, but thoughts. Gombrich writes:

The Buddhist handling of abstraction was still sometimes crude. To the normal gamut of five senses, our organs of perception, the Buddha added a sixth, the mind, which we use for perceiving abstractions (dhamma); and its perception of those abstractions was held to be on a par with the workings of the other five faculties (indriya). It is not surprising that the results of failing to make the mind somehow superordinate to the senses were clumsy and unsatisfactory. (p. 59)

It may be rank heresy for a philosopher/scholar in the Western tradition to *not* consider mind superordinate to the other senses. Yet, as a key teaching of the Buddha, it is crucial to the discovery of no-self in not only the five aggregates, but also in the six sense bases. If I am simply the perceiver of thoughts, as one is of sights, sounds and so on, then thoughts are not I, me or mine, and one has to be admit that one has no more dominion over thoughts than one has over what kind of body one has, as Saccaka was forced to accept.

Chapter 5

Gombrich now returns to no-self, or rather no-soul. He insists again that the Buddha was forced to use terms that his audience were familiar with, mostly Brahminical (p.

60). These, he suggests, include the idea of the 'ghost', which is needed to explain rebirth. He says: 'If the function of a ghost is to act as a vehicle for the characteristics of someone who no longer exists, being dead, it needs to be at the same time material and immaterial.' Alternatively 'soul' is that vehicle. (p. 60) As a digression Gombrich states:

The Buddha also has no interest whatsoever in equivalences between microcosm and macrocosm, though a few such equivalences occur when Buddhist cosmology is modelled on meditative states; however, whether this is to be attributed to the Buddha himself is moot. (p. 66)

Gombrich, steeped in Western philosophy, has brought in the idea of microcosm and macrocosm, a uniquely Western idea emerging in the Renaissance period. There is no equivalent in the Buddha's thought, but Gombrich is right to say that Buddhist cosmological levels, i.e. the 31 states of being, have some correspondence to meditative states. This is part of the Buddha's teachings and regularly crops up in the Nikayas, but this 'equivalence' is nothing like the microcosm-macrocosm idea of thinkers such as Pico della Mirandola. Rather the Buddha teaches that accomplishment in a particular meditation state *might* lead to a rebirth in a particular deva-world. A complete reading of the Pali Canon makes it impossible to think that these 'equivalences' can be attributed to anyone but the Buddha.

We now turn to what Gombrich thinks lies behind the three characteristics (*lakshanas*) of existence in the Buddha's teachings: impermanence, suffering and no-self. Gombrich thinks they are the Buddha's answer to the Brahminical triad: being-consciousness-bliss (p. 69). Apparently the order that the Buddha chose for his triad 'betrays Upanishadic reasoning.' Gombrich clarifies: 'Things are impermanent, i.e., ever-changing, and *by that token* they are not satisfactory, and *by that token* they cannot be the *atman*.' The reasoning is clear enough, but Gombrich does not explain whether the parallel he draws helps us better understand the Buddha's repeated expositions on the *lakshanas*. The triads are so different in intent as to leave only the number three as a common factor. Gombrich's move is akin to finding proof for the theory that the Buddha anticipated the motor car in his Four Noble Truths because an automobile has four wheels.

These are however detours from Gombrich's intended arguments about 'ghosts', known as *peta* in Pali, meaning 'departed' (p. 71). We come now to a crucial question, one that perhaps underpins all of Gombrich's unease with the teachings of the Buddha:

What did the Buddha himself think about *petas*? Probably the same as he thought about gods. And what was that? He spoke about these categories of beings and did not demur when others spoke about them, even about interacting with them. The question of whether such beings exist is not among 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, in line with his general pragmatic policy of concerning himself only with matters directly relevant to attaining *nirvana*. (p. 72/3)

I would say that this demonstrates a complete misreading of the Pali Canon. When it came to gods and *petas* (more usefully ‘devas’) the Buddha did not ‘let it go at that,’ and it was not a question of those around him ‘experiencing gods and *petas*.’ Most of them did not, including most of his arahants. It was he who was ‘experiencing gods and *petas*,’ as endless suttas show. Gombrich states: ‘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 that would so flagrantly contradict his deprecating any concern with such matters.’ I know of no sutta where the Buddha deprecates concern with ‘gods and *petas*.’ The Buddha does not deprecate experience of any kind, merely useless speculation on it. One can conclude however that only those with the gift of what the Buddha calls the ‘divine eye’ can ‘experience gods and *petas*,’ and foremost amongst his arahants that have this gift is Mahamoggallāna (AN 1.188). The Buddha teases Sariputta for not having this gift in the *Mahāparanibbāna Sutta* (DN 16). If this was all a pretence the same would apply as before: it would be dishonest speech.

The source for the hierarchy of deva-worlds that the Buddha teaches piecemeal must logically lie firstly in recollection of his own past lives, given that he says he has dwelled in all of those worlds except the Pure Abodes (MN 12), and secondly in his ‘divine eye’ by which he could survey them and their denizens, travel to them at will, and converse with them.

Gombrich says:

So did the Buddha privately, in his heart of hearts, ‘believe in’ gods or ghosts? I doubt that we can ever know. Maybe he was so true to his own principles that he thought it pointless to ask himself the question (p. 73).

Such a conclusion is not possible after reading, for example, the Sagatha-vagga of the *Samyutta Nikaya*. The sheer volume of conversations that the Buddha has with devas of various rank would show to any open-minded reader that it was not a question of whether the Buddha believed in the entities he conversed with but merely whether the reader believes what the Buddha says.

Chapter 6

In Chapter 6 Gombrich writes:

This chapter will argue that the Buddha saw love and compassion as means to salvation – in his terms, to the attainment of nirvana. This is no minor claim. For the past two thousand years or so, it has been spread about that the Pali texts present the Buddha as teaching a religion which is selfish. This religion, on this widespread view, provides a guide how to attain one's own salvation, but the path it teaches is essentially a solitary one. (p. 76/7)

Gombrich appears to dislike the idea that the Buddha was teaching personal salvation, i.e. that the aim for each of the Buddha's monks and nuns was to gain personal enlightenment and that this is of the greatest service to the world. This is in fact what we find in the Pali Canon, but Gombrich wishes perhaps to conform the Buddha to Western, materialist, post-Christian humanism. He also bemoans, as many have done, that the Buddha presents his ethics, indeed almost all of his system, in negative terms. Gombrich asserts:

My claim is that, so far from teaching a path to salvation which did not include kindness and compassion – what Christians call 'love' or 'charity' – he actually preached that such positive feelings were themselves direct and effective means to the attainment of nirvana. (p. 78)

In his footnote to this extract Gombrich complains that his earlier publications along these themes have had little impact. I cannot comment on that, but the assertion above is open to considerable challenge. Firstly, no reading of the Pali Canon could lead one to say that the Buddha's path to nirvana *excludes* kindness and compassion. Secondly, the teachings that Gombrich is focussing is known as the brahmviharas (though the Buddha rarely used that term), and have four elements: loving-kindness, compassion, empathetic joy and equanimity. They appear in many suttas in the Pali Canon, but this is clear on a careful reading: they no more lead to nirvana than any of the eight jhanas (higher states of concentration). They are meditation states, or, in the Buddha's terminology, 'pleasant abidings', and mastery of them on their own, while they do not automatically lead to nirvana, may lead to rebirth in one of the many higher realms, including possibly the brahma-worlds. The Buddha states this in AN 5.192, and Bikkhu Bodhi, in his footnote 1186 to the sutta, says: 'This is one of the few places in the Nikayas where the word *brahmavihara* is used to designate these four meditations collectively. Wherever the word is used in the Nikayas, it immediately precedes the practitioner's rebirth in the brahma world.'

Another of Gombrich's digressions now deals with the 'three knowledges': knowledge of one's former births, knowledge of the rebirths of others, and knowledge that one's corruptions have been eliminated (p. 81). He insists that these three knowledges were formulated in response to the three knowledges of the brahmins, i.e. the three Vedas. He says: 'There is nothing inherently triple about these accomplishments; that he formulated them as "three knowledges" was surely no accident.' Well, that might be an interesting speculation, but would imply that the Buddha had

his enlightenment experience in some kind of unstructured way, after which he chose to describe three stages corresponding to three watches of the night rather than four stages – or one or nine – because he wanted a numerical parallel with the Vedic tradition. Gombrich may not have been aware of suttas 58 and 59 in the Book of the Threes in the *Anguttara Nikaya* where the brahmins Tikanna and Jannssoni respectively debate the differences between the three knowledges of the brahmins and the three knowledges of the Buddha. In both cases the brahmins describe their three knowledges in the form of a list, which includes that a brahmin knows his birth going back seven generations, and then the following:

He is a reciter and preserver of the hymns, a master of the three Vedas with their vocabularies, ritual, phonology, and etymology, and the histories as a fifth; skilled in philology and grammar, he is fully versed in natural philosophy and in the marks of a great man. It is in this way that the brahmins describe a brahmin who is a master of the threefold knowledge.

The Buddha then explains his three knowledges in the way that one of his monks would experience it, culminating in knowledge of his own past lives, knowledge of the past lives of others, and thirdly the destruction of his own taints. These are nothing like the above list. He adds that one who achieves this is ‘a sage consummate in direct knowledge’. For the Buddha ‘direct knowledge’ is revelatory, entirely personal, unmediated, and arises at enlightenment. It is not the kind of knowledge that a brahmin tutor could impart to a class of students, as in the above. It is no surprise then that the brahmins respond like this:

Master Gotama, a master of the threefold knowledge in the Noble One’s discipline is quite different from a master of the threefold knowledge according to the brahmins. And a master of the threefold knowledge according to the brahmins is not worth a sixteenth part of a master of the threefold knowledge in the Noble One’s discipline.

The brahmins clearly see no common ground between their threefold knowledge and the Buddha’s. It is a knowledge that neither draws on that of the brahmins nor reacts against it. It merely happens to be threefold. More importantly the comparison does not help us understand the Buddha’s thinking because we already know – from countless other suttas not involving brahmins – his exposition on the threefold knowledge.

Pressing on, Gombrich is exercised over the *Tevijja Sutta* (DN 13) where two young brahmins ask the Buddha how they can find union with Brahma. The Buddha first shows that the brahmins they know are merely the blind leading the blind because none of them have met Brahma. He then teaches them the four brahma-viharas and says that at death the monk who has ‘by this liberation of the heart’ abandoned all

attachments to the sensuous sphere 'should attain union with Brahma – that is possible.' After some discussion of Vedic texts Gombrich concludes:

If one thus understands the context, one will see that joining brahman at death is not to be taken any more literally than is the Buddha's introductory teasing promise to show the way to the brahma-world. The way to the brahma-world is just Upanishadic language, borrowed from the interlocutor, for the way to nirvana in this life; and by the same token joining brahma at death is a metaphor for the nirvana which follows the death of an arahant. (p. 83)

Gombrich finds it hard to see that the Buddha is flexible in his use of language. What the Buddha does quite sincerely offer is the way to the brahma-world; we know this because of many other references to it. It is not teasing. However it is not 'union' with Brahma, granted. It is worth noting what Maurice Walshe, translator of the DN, has to say on 'union':

There is no certain or even probable trace of the neuter Brahman in Pali scriptures. In Sutta 13 [the *Tevijja Sutta*] two young Brahmins consult the Buddha on how to attain to 'union with Brahma' or more correctly 'fellowship with Brahma'. Rhys Davids has been accused of mistranslating *sahavyatī* here as 'union', thus implying a mystical union rather than merely belonging to the company of Brahma. (DN p. 43)

Regardless of discussion between translators, the Buddha is not using Upanishadic language at all, however, because if one compiles all his discourses on the brahma-world we see that he regards it as three worlds; that his monks may be born there through various practices, including but not necessarily the brahma-viharas, that the 'way to the brahma-world' is *not* Upanishadic language for the way to nirvana in this life; and that 'joining Brahma at death' is *not* a metaphor for the nirvana that follows the death of an arahant. *None* of those assertions are supported by suttas in the major Nikayas or elsewhere. Two suttas in the *Anguttara Nikaya* contradict all of Gombrich's claims here, nos. 125 and 126 in the Book of Fours. In both suttas the Buddha is telling his monks that there are four kinds of person, corresponding to the mind imbued respectively with the four brahma-viharas. In sutta 125 he tells us that a person firm in the first will be born 'with the devas of Brahma's company' and spend an aeon there unenlightened. The 'worldling' will then fall to hell, the animal realm or the sphere of afflicted spirits. A disciple of the Buddha on the other hand will become enlightened at the end of the aeon. For those persons firm in the second, their destination after death will be with the 'devas of streaming radiance', where the same distinction applies, this time after two aeons. For the third practice the destination is with the 'devas of refulgent glory', and for the fourth, equanimity, the destination is with the 'devas of great fruit' for five hundred aeons.

In sutta 126 the Buddha follows a similar pattern, though in each case here the person has the following further attainments: 'He contemplates whatever phenomena there pertains to form, feeling, perception, volitional activities, and consciousness as impermanent, as suffering, as a disease, as a boil, as a dart, as misery, as an affliction, as alien, as disintegrating, as empty, as non-self.' For such a practitioner the destination in each case is the highest of the Buddha's 31 worlds: companionship with the devas of the Pure Abodes. He adds: 'This is a rebirth not shared with worldlings.'

The four brahma-viharas, as 'good practice,' may lead to birth in the brahma-world, but the Buddha's opinion is clear: 'But that kind of good practice does not lead to disenchantment, to dispassion, to cessation, to peace, to direct knowledge, to enlightenment, to Nibbana, but only to reappearance in the brahma-world,' (MN 83).

In other suttas the Buddha further varies his description of the rebirth destination of those practicing the brahma viharas. The point is, however many variations we find in the Pali Canon, *none* of them support Gombrich's assertions in the passage above. The Buddha is clearly willing and able to show brahmins the way to the brahma-world. Also, it is particularly muddled to claim 'joining Brahma at death' as a metaphor for the 'nirvana which follows the death of an arahant'. Why would a brahmin who has become an arahant by the Buddha's definition land up in a brahma-world, or want to? The point of the Buddha's teachings is that an arahant suffers no rebirth anywhere after death.

Where Gombrich is quite right in the following sections is that loving-kindness is highly regarded by the Buddha. This then is not the problem with Gombrich's reading, but rather lies in a statement like this (p. 88): 'I am by no means sure that the Buddha believed in the existence of a brahma-world in any literal sense at all; but it was by this literalism of his interpreters that Buddhist cosmology was given its final shape.' This is simply unsupportable from the evidence. This statement too is equally insupportable: 'I think that the brahma-worlds, and the functions they perform, rose from the Buddha's dialogue with brahmins in which he took their cosmology literally – but only for his own didactic purposes,' (p. 89).

Gombrich goes on to say that early Buddhists 'missed the boat' by misunderstanding the *Tevijja Sutta* (p. 90). Gombrich insists that 'the Buddha declared love, compassion, empathetic joy and equanimity to be direct routes to nirvana, the supreme bliss and the escape from rebirth.' We have just seen that the Buddha sees them only as leading to rebirth in a more pleasant realm for, admittedly, a long time, but after which nirvana is not guaranteed unless accompanied by other attainments. Without the training he gives his monks, the 'worldling' could even land up in hell after one, two, four or five hundred aeons.

Chapter 7

This chapter deals with questions of methodology in academic scholarship and so does not directly deal with what the Buddha thought. However I return to the question of methodology in the Summary.

Chapter 8

This chapter presents the idea that fire is the central metaphor in the Buddha's teachings of enlightenment. Gombrich's idea is that fire as a religious trope is borrowed from the brahmins, so yet again we see how much the Buddha was influenced by Brahminism. Given that the Buddha is extraordinarily inventive with metaphor and simile, it is hard to grant Gombrich that fire is a *central* metaphor. To claim that he would have to at least examine the 34 suttas in the Long Discourses, the 152 suttas in the Middle Length Discourses, the 2,094 suttas in the Connected Discourses (in the Bodhi translation) and the 9,557 suttas in the Numerical Discourses in order to weigh up the preponderance of one metaphor over another. Nirvana is at times presented as a 'snuffing out' as with a fire, true, but the Buddha uses countless other metaphors for cessation to make the point, and just as often 'cessation' without metaphor.

However, the real problem with Gombrich's presentation is his certainty that he knows what the Buddha is saying in contradiction to the translators and early commentators. In DN 38 the Buddha has used the metaphor of fire extensively to describe how different types of consciousness depend on different types of fuel; we can certainly grant Gombrich this example. The Buddha then questions his monks, switching metaphor from 'fire' to 'nutriment':

'Bhikkhus, do you see: "This has come to be"?'

'Yes, venerable sir.'

'Bhikkhus, do you see: "Its origination occurs with that as nutriment"?'

'Yes, venerable sir.'

'Bhikkhus, do you see: "With the cessation of that nutriment, what has come to be is subject to cessation"?'

'Yes, venerable sir.'

The question here is what does the word 'this' refer to? In the commentary by Buddhaghosa it is assumed to refer to the five aggregates, which Gombrich rejects as an explanation. But another explanation might be that 'this' simply refers to anything, and is the counterpart to 'that' which also remains indeterminate. Hence the Buddha is asking, rhetorically, if the monks really see that everything in their experience has conditions, i.e. is asking whether they truly see conditioned origination. Such an interpretation is supported by the many times that the Buddha uses the formulation along these lines, for example in MN 115: 'with the arising of this, that arises ... with the cessation of this, that ceases.' In another example picked at random we have: 'When this exists, that comes to be; with the arising of this, that

arises. When this does not exist, that does not come to be; with the cessation of this, that ceases,' (AN 12.41).

Such terse formulations of conditioned origination are widely known in the Buddhist world but Gombrich is certain that 'this' refers to fire here. Based on reference to a passage in the *Upanishads* he says: 'I think, therefore, that at this point the Buddha either lit a fire or had one in front of him.' (p. 121) Gombrich's attack on this particular sutta is based on his idea that the fourth aggregate with its inclusion of volitions is the only ethical one, and had to contain ethics because the other four do not. He goes on to say that because the consciousness of the fifth aggregate had no ethical charge *per se*, the sutta is garbled and that its structure arose because the editor panicked when becoming aware of this (p. 124). If one declares a sutta one does not understand as 'garbled', or so structured because the editor panicked, then a great deal of the Canon could be disposed of in this way. Gombrich may also not be aware of what the Buddha says in the *Anguttara Nikaya* (5.219):

Bhikkhus, there are these five dangers in fire. What five? It is not good for the eyes; it causes a bad complexion; it causes weakness; it promotes fondness of company; and it conduces to pointless talk. These are the five dangers in fire.

Moving on, Gombrich has further difficulties with the Buddha's five aggregates. Having proposed that including volitions in the Buddha's fourth aggregate is an 'ethicization', Gombrich sees a contradiction between that and the aim of ending the 'consciousnesses' of the fifth. As he says, '...if liberation involved loss of consciousness, would this not undermine the moral character of the whole teaching?' (p. 126). The problem with that is the phrase 'loss of consciousness' perhaps. The Buddha is certainly not teaching that enlightenment requires 'loss of consciousness' as medical science defines it, otherwise all arahants including himself would fall down and stay down, unresponsive. The cessation of consciousness is something more subtle, as indicated by the Buddha's insistence that there are six of types of consciousness corresponding to his six sense bases.

Gombrich is effectively saying that the Buddha is confused. Although he does not use the word 'confused' he uses a lesser term, 'divided' to convey much the same thing:

I propose that the two views, that liberation requires elimination of consciousness and, against that, that it is a purification of consciousness and character, mirror a great divide in the Buddha's teaching on the mind between what he learnt from his teachers and his own original ideas. (p. 126)

A more extensive study of suttas on the aggregates, such as found in the Khandha-vagga section of the *Samyutta Nikaya*, would show no confusion in the Buddha's mind on this. It is also not clear from the Canon that the Buddha's two teachers, Alara Kalama and Uddaka Ramaputta, taught him 'elimination' or 'purification' of consciousness, or anything that contradicts the Buddha's system (MN 26). All we know is that the first taught him the 'base of nothingness' and the second the 'base of neither-perception-nor-non-perception', the highest two of the eight jhanas.

Chapter 9

Gombrich takes us further into what he sees as the Buddha's contradictions. The next element in the Dharma that puzzles him is the teachings on what is known as the 'Nidana chain', an oft-repeated sequence, either forward or in reverse, regarding the steps to or away from enlightenment. He is exercised that the Buddha reproves Ananda for considering this teaching easy in the *Maha-nidana Sutta* (DN 15), saying: 'The Buddha normally is shown in the Pali Canon as doing his very best to make himself clear, and I know of no parallel to his statement here that this teaching of his is profound and difficult to understand.' (p. 133) This is odd because such a statement additionally appears five times in the Middle Length Verses, twelve times in the Long Verses (MN 26, MN 72, MN 95 (x3), DN 1 (x11), DN 14) and also in the Vinaya Pitaka. The most famous of these occurrences is made by the Buddha just after his enlightenment: 'This Dhamma that I have attained is profound, hard to see and hard to understand, peaceful and sublime, unattainable by mere reasoning, subtle, to be experienced by the wise,' (MN 26). So when Gombrich adds, 'I interpret it to mean that those who first formulated the text and recorded the teaching felt unsure whether they understood it themselves,' we must conclude that his reading of the Canon is significantly incomplete.

Gombrich appears to believe that the apparent contradictions in the Buddha's teachings are down to irony, and that 'irony does not weather well' (p. 137). We return to the question of irony shortly.

Chapter 10

In this chapter Gombrich revisits the criticism over the Buddha's choice of mind as a sixth sense instead of a superordinate function; however we discover no new argument here. Gombrich now turns to another oft-remarked contradiction: the first element of the Buddha's eightfold path, 'right view', and his teachings on have no views (p. 154). Gombrich draws on the distinction in Christian mystical theology between apophatic and cataphatic descriptions of God, the former negating all his qualities, and the latter elaborating on them. I am not sure that this well-understood Christian idea – drawn upon with considerable clarity even by postmodern thinkers such as Jacques Derrida – transposes well to the thinking of the Buddha.

The apparent contradiction is easily resolved however when 'right view' is understood in the various ways that the Buddha describes it, firstly as the Four Noble Truths, adhering to which is fundamental in the Buddhist training. Secondly 'right view' is the opposite of 'wrong view', which contradicts the Four Noble Truths or constitutes claims that the Buddha regards as false. These wrong views often originate in the teachings of the six contemporaneous gurus; mitigate against following the Noble Eightfold Path; and lead to bad rebirth. Thirdly, and in contrast to 'wrong views', 'right views' lead to wholesome intentions which lead to wholesome speech and action and hence good karma.

The point about the views to be abandoned is that they are speculative and are harmful when the personality invests in them; are more of the nature of constructs; are often termed 'conceivings' or 'excogitations' by the Buddha, and are the product of an unquiet mind. The Buddha describes them to a wanderer called Vacchagotta as 'a thicket of views, a wilderness of views, a contortion of views, a vacillation of views, a fetter of views,' (MN 72). Liberation comes from the abandonment of such views while retaining clear sight of the Four Noble Truths.

Chapter 11

Gombrich now turns to the question of whether the Buddha was omniscient, a question settled with some clarity by the Buddha himself, when he explains that with the divine eye he can obtain knowledge about anything but only if he applies himself to the specific in question. He states this in contradistinction to the claim of the Nigantha Nataputta, who is cited as saying, 'Whether I am walking or standing or asleep or awake, knowledge and vision are continuously and uninterruptedly present to me,' (MN 14). More generally the Buddha, as we have seen, has the three knowledges (MN 71). However, as Gombrich clearly disbelieves in the first two of them, the Buddha's statements on omniscience perhaps remain contradictory for him.

Gombrich also cannot accept that the Buddha repeatedly makes claims to supernatural powers (citing MN 12 as an example) and that this must be 'later Buddhology' (p. 164). To support his view Gombrich would need to prove later interpolations regarding a dozen or more instances of the Buddha's claim to supernatural powers and countless references to the first two knowledges throughout the Nikayas, in different contexts and spoken to different interlocutors.

A possible solution lies in the occult literature outside of the Pali Canon in which we find many claims to such supernatural powers as belonging only to the 'subtle body', a concept admittedly difficult to define and not explicit in the Buddha's teachings. However, when the Buddha tells us that he visits this or that deva-world, including the brahma-worlds, he clearly is not travelling there in his physical body, and so the concept of 'subtle body' would be a legitimate reading. This is not proof of anything of course, but offers us a way to reconcile two different elements of

his discourse without recourse to the easy way out of denying that the Buddha spoke in this way.

Gombrich now mostly deals with the Buddha's *style* of teaching, which does not tell us much about his thinking. He then turns to meditation, and promptly abandons it to the rules of the Sangha, as found in the *Vinaya*. Once again the parts of the rules and their origination that Gombrich does not like are put down to later interpolations.

We now jump back to the Buddha's ethics. The theme here is their negative quality as prohibitions on doing evil rather than exhortations to do good (p. 179). Gombrich thinks that this had an 'unfortunate' effect on Buddhist tradition; presumably he must think the same about the effect of the Ten Commandments on Judaism. According to Gombrich it is too 'bloodless', which I take to mean perhaps not charitably active enough. This is a criticism of what the Buddha taught but not an illumination of it.

Chapter 12

In this chapter Gombrich sets out to prove that the Buddha was a satirist. His starting point is the moment after enlightenment (as described in the Khandhaka section of the *Vinaya*), where the Buddha rather firmly states that what he has to teach is 'deep, hard to see, hard to understand, peaceful, excellent, beyond the sphere of logic, profound, understandable (only) to the wise' and hence would be wearisome for him to teach (which rather inexplicably Gombrich has not noticed). Gombrich now makes a serious error: he claims, 'Brahma, the supreme creator god of brahminism, reads his mind and takes alarm. He appears before the Buddha, kneels before him on his right knee, and three times begs him to preach, promising that some will understand,' (p. 183). Neither in the Khandhaka nor in the version of these events in MN 26 is the term 'Brahma' used to describe the deity, but 'Brahma Sahampati'. For some reason Gombrich ignores 'Sahampati' which is the personal name of this particular deva. This deity is not 'Brahma, the supreme creator god of brahminism,' who does appear in other discourses by the Buddha, but even then only as the chief of the brahmas. The brahma Sahampati is an individual of the brahma class of deva, who, it turns out, has a prior link to the Buddha. According to the Buddha both of them in their previous lives were human students of the previous Buddha, the Buddha Kassapa (SN 48.57).

Gombrich, seemingly confused about Sahampati, then claims: 'If one is quite unaware of the Buddha's historical context, it is not obvious that Brahma's begging the Buddha to preach presents the god in a satirical light.' Clearly, Gombrich is mistaken here. There is no support to be found in the text he refers to, or its versions in other parts of the Canon, for the idea that the Buddha is being satirical. Of course, we may not believe in rebirth, so may take the Buddha's account of being the brahmin student Jotipala who goes for refuge to the Buddha Kassapa as fiction.

We may not believe in devas of the brahma class, or any class, and so do not believe that the brahma Sahampati was a human at the time when the Buddha was Jotipala and also went for refuge to the Buddha Kassapa. But such disbelief does not allow us to claim that the Buddha was a satirist for saying such things.

Gombrich goes on to describe the Buddha's account of the brahma-world (and also the nature of the Great Brahma) as an origin myth, a 'spoof' on an Upanishadic passage (p. 185). Gombrich fails to notice the difference between the two accounts: in the Buddha's there are always multiple migratory beings, while in the Upanishadic account there is only one supreme being in the beginning of the world who divides into male and female, and who then have intercourse and so produce other beings. The significance of the Buddha's story is one of false notions of permanence, and is his answer to the question of why 'some ascetics and Brahmins are partly Eternalists and partly Non-Eternalists' (DN 1). We can call his explanation far-fetched if we wish, but that does not change what is clearly the Buddha's thinking and purpose in this discourse. Behind it all is his clear position: there is *no* 'Ultimate Being' in the universe, no being not subject to death and rebirth with all its attendant sufferings.

For the Buddha there are far higher beings than the Great Brahma (chief of the Brahmas) who in one account, on being pressed by a monk, confesses that he does not know the answer as to where the elements 'cease without remainder'; that the monk has acted incorrectly in asking him; and that he should ask the Buddha instead (DN 11).

Gombrich now claims that the *Agganna Sutta* (DN 27) is parody (p. 189). Certainly as Gombrich says, the Buddha in this sutta is setting out to demonstrate the falsity of many brahmin claims, particularly over caste. But Gombrich thinks the Buddha is 'making fun' of those claims. The Buddha tells his audience that his monks are 'sons of the Sakyan' (meaning himself) which Gombrich takes to be parody of the Brahminical metaphor that brahmins are 'sons' of Brahma's mouth (where in reality they are 'womb-born'). However, elsewhere the Buddha uses the 'son' metaphor to describe Sariputta as both 'son' of the Buddha's Dharma and 'son' of the Buddha's breast (MN 111); and Ananda, the Buddha's assistant, describes himself as 'son' of the Buddha (MN 90). It is a common metaphor in the spiritual life of India down to this day. For the Buddha to use an existing metaphor and press it into service in order to argue that his path is superior to that of the brahmins is hardly parody.

Not content with attributing 'spoof', 'irony', 'making fun', 'parody' and 'satire' to the Buddha's words, Gombrich now add 'playful' to characterise his approach to the Jains, though under a section heading 'Satirizing the Jains' (p. 190). Gombrich cites a sutta in which the Buddha points out to the Jains that if suffering results from evil actions in a past life, then that must include the self-inflicted sufferings of their extreme asceticism in this life (MN 14). This is simple logic, thrown back at the Jains as

a criticism of their doctrines. Interpreting criticism as playfulness or satire is speculation in the absence of other evidence. Did the Buddha say this with a serious expression or a glint in his eye or a smile? We do not know.

In the next section we may find no difficulty in agreeing with Gombrich that in the *Venaga Sutta* (AN 3, 63), the Buddha probably *is* in playful mood. A brahmin comments on the bright complexion and obvious good health of the Buddha and says that he must sleep in a luxurious bed. The Buddha points out that such beds are not allowed to the monks, and then makes a metaphor of them. He says that he can gain at will three kinds of 'high and luxurious bed', that is the celestial, the divine, and the noble. Now, 'celestial, the divine, and the noble' are the terms chosen by Bikkhu Bodhi in his translation, where Gombrich has them as 'the divine (*dibba*), the *brahmic* (brahma) ... and the noble (*ariya*).' (p. 191) A translation by F.L. Woodward has them as 'celestial, sublime and Aryan'. The Buddha then explains each one in terms of the meditative practices he teaches, and in the second case they are the four brahma-viharas. However, as we have seen, there is no necessary connection between those four states and the brahma-worlds (as Gombrich assumes). They are simply four states or meditation practices, or 'abidings' as the Buddha often calls them. So Gombrich is rather exaggerating when he says:

The Buddha's appropriation of brahmin terms must in their eyes have come very close to what Christians call sacrilege. He did it under the guise of telling them that he was a reformer, recalling them to their ancient ideals. Nevertheless, many of them must have found it irritating, to say the least, and it indicates that the Buddha had powerful protectors and supporters. (p. 192)

As we have seen, Gombrich has not at all proved that the Buddha is using brahmin terms in the *Venaga Sutta*. He is no doubt a learned Indologist and skilled linguist, but a translator like Bikkhu Bodhi has the advantage of a more extensive knowledge of the suttas and saw no reason to use Gombrich's choice of 'brahmic' where he used 'divine' and Woodward used 'sublime'. In addition Gombrich's assumption that Indian religious life at the time of the Buddha had the same concept of 'sacrilege' as unfortunately was the history under Judaism, Christianity and Islam is not born out in the Canon. There was it seems little orthodoxy in the Buddha's world in the Western sense (or even perhaps orthopraxy) and that is probably still true today despite the rise of Hindu nationalism in India. The impression gained from the Buddha's six contemporaneous gurus introduced earlier is less of the monolithic absolutism that Gombrich (perhaps more familiar with monotheism) assumes, than something reminiscent of the heterodox spiritual teachers of ancient Greece, where the Orphics and Pythagoreans believed in reincarnation while the materialists and atomists did not. In the many encounters with brahmins there are a range of reactions to the Buddha's teachings from a simple rejection, to something like 'that's interesting', to being so impressed as to take ordination from him. So the reactions we could say were irritation *at most*, and do not suggest the need for powerful

protectors and supporters. An extensive reading of the Canon would convey that the Buddha's counter-parties in discussion are better described as 'interlocutors' than 'opponents'. In general the exchanges are simply too amiable.

So why agree with Gombrich that the Buddha's interactions in the *Venaga Sutta* are playful, while denying him 'spoof', 'irony', 'making fun of', 'parody' and 'satire' here or in other suttas? Because, as Gombrich is keen to find in the case of the brahma-viharas, the Buddha is a man of loving-kindness, compassion, appreciative joy and equanimity. The Buddha teaches many times that speech acts should be devoid of malice, ill-will and denigration. It is simply not the Buddha's style to use a manner of speaking that suggests the mockery inherent in 'spoof', 'irony', 'making fun of', 'parody' or 'satire'. To use such verbal devices is at the very least to suggest that their target is stupid, and that, for the Buddha, would be unskilful speech, unless the occasion really demanded it. Only in exceptional circumstances, as Gombrich notes, is the Buddha prepared to speak what is unpleasant to hear. When the occasion demands it he does so directly and without verbal devices such as irony.

A good example of the Buddha's kindly debating manner is found in the sutta introduced earlier, the *Culasaccaka Sutta* (MN 35). The learned Saccaka has boasted that he will defeat the Buddha in debate, causing him to 'shake, shiver, and tremble, and sweat under the armpits,' but finds in their courteous exchange of views that he is the one utterly defeated, such that he 'sat silent, dismayed, with shoulders drooping and head down, glum, and without response.' The Buddha, in what is possibly an unnecessary move, then removes his outer robe to show that his body is dry, saying, 'Now there are drops of sweat on your forehead and they have soaked through your upper robe and fallen to the ground. But there is no sweat on my body now.' Saccaka, who has experienced this defeat in front of his own followers, can say nothing. The Buddha's reputation probably grew out of such exchanges, but what happens next shows his warmth and generosity of spirit. A monk volunteers to share a simile that occurs to him, to which the Buddha consents. However the simile, while not without humour, is both cruel and denigratory. The Buddha ignores it, while Saccaka seems energised by the insulting nature of the simile and dismisses the debate up to that point as 'mere prattle' (despite it being a masterful presentation of the Buddha's doctrine of no-self). Far from the Buddha objecting to that, he seems to welcome Saccaka's recovery from abject silence and their debate now continues in a constructive manner. While we might want to see the Buddha's disrobing as playful, he clearly will have no part in speech acts that are mockery, and is not disturbed to have his carefully-crafted argument dismissed as 'prattle'. Because of this he makes a friend out of Saccaka, not an enemy, and is, I suggest, why the Buddha did not need powerful protectors and supporters (though wealthy patrons did emerge who gave generously to the Sangha).

Chapter 13

Gombrich rather recapitulates his ideas in this, the last chapter, but also makes an admission that should not surprise us by now: 'I have tried in the pages above to show that the Buddha's main ideas are powerful and coherent. If I had a more thorough knowledge of the Pali Canon than, alas, I can claim, I would have made a better job of it ...' (p. 194) Despite this he exhorts his critics to read the Pali Canon (presumably in full). 'Then,' he adds, 'if they think the evidence is against me, they should say so publicly, and we shall all be the wiser.'

Summary

Does Gombrich's book help us understand, or better understand, what the Buddha thought? Do we better understand the mind of the Buddha by understanding the Brahminical and Jain context in which he lived? I think the verdict on both questions must be no. The problem with Gombrich's approach is methodological: clearly he has insufficient reading in the Canon to address the goals of his book. In attempting to elucidate the Buddha's thought Gombrich therefore fills the gaps with his preferences and assumptions.

Gombrich would like the Buddha's thinking to conform to the rules of Western philosophy. He would like the Buddha's thought to be easy to grasp. He would like to remove countless of the Buddha's statements in the Canon on the basis of 'he couldn't possibly have said that,' mostly because they require belief in the supernatural, which he, Gombrich, is too rational to entertain. He would like the Buddha to have foregrounded love and compassion where the Buddha clearly foregrounded a path of withdrawal and detachment. He does not like it that the Buddha fails to make mind superordinate to the five bodily senses. He thinks the Buddha 'divided' because of the apparent contradiction between his teachings on consciousness and his teachings on morality. He would like to correct the Buddha's teachings on no-self by qualifying 'self' with 'unchanging'.

Gombrich wishes to prove the origin of the Buddha's thinking in Brahminical and Jain ideas, ignoring the clear picture in the Canon of personal revelation. Clutching at straws, Gombrich wishes to make fire the Buddha's central metaphor, because then he can claim it derives from Upanishadic fire rituals, going so far as to imagine evidence for this in the form of the Buddha lighting a fire. (It is generally considered a methodological failing to merely imagine the evidence for one's thesis rather than finding it in the sources.)

Gombrich is apologetic about elements of the Buddha's teachings; thinks Buddhists have 'missed the boat' in failing to understand a particular sutta in the way that he does; thinks that the Buddha's couching of ethics in the negative had an unfortunate effect on Buddhism and that it is regrettable that people believe the Buddha's

teachings to be about personal salvation (where any longer acquaintance with the Canon shows that the Buddha's teachings are precisely about personal salvation).

Gombrich, as an Englishman, fails to note that spoof, irony, making fun of, parody and satire are not universal speech acts in all cultures through history, and that they would be considered unskilful by the Buddha. These forms of humour are strategies endearingly used by the English to seemingly avoid the unpleasantness of disagreement, where the Buddha, if he disagreed on something, took no such detours. Gombrich projects such strategies on statements of the Buddha that he does not like, or thinks are directed at Brahminical or Jain tradition.

It is fair to say, then, that on the whole Gombrich's book does not address its title but is more what Gombrich would like the Buddha to have said (or not said).

The Buddha thought that without reverence for the gurus who teach the holy life a society is lost. When he became enlightened there were no gurus more advanced than he, so rather than live without reverence he directed it at the Dharma. One may not expect reverence from modern scholars, but respect is a good substitute. To read the Pali Canon with respect – or reverence if that is possible – means to read it thoroughly and without prejudice. This is the key methodological requirement for the task of discovering what the Buddha thought. However I do have sympathy for Gombrich when he balks at the countless suttas in which the Buddha refers to past lives or speaks with devas of different class. This is no doubt the first major hurdle in reading the Canon. The second is the repetitive and formulaic nature of the suttas, and of course their sheer volume: 11,837 in the four major Nikayas alone. Finally, for anyone hoping to understand the Buddha's thought an entirely non-academic methodology is, if not essential, then at least helpful: meditation. Gombrich says that this topic is outside the scope of his book and makes no mention of personal meditation practice.

As the Buddha makes clear, his Dharma is to be tested through practice. However even without such testing a thorough reading of the Canon at least makes his Dharma comprehensible, where Gombrich's approach just muddies it.

The topics of karma, rebirth and devas within the Dharma do present an obstacle, but I have suggested that if we read the Buddha's statements on the supernatural as a discourse of the 'subtle body', then there is no conflict with physics, and so no conflict with modernity. However an essay the length of this one would be required to make that case.

To conclude, I regret that the tone of my essay might appear *ad hominem*. However I could not find a way round it, and I hope Gombrich forgives me for it. As a speaker I find him engaging and amiable. He makes the honest admission that he would have made a better job of his book if he had a more thorough knowledge of

the Canon and even compares his work to that of blindfolded monkeys at typewriters. However he does place himself in the ranks of the honourable academic by inviting criticism by which 'we shall all be the wiser.' By the same token I also welcome criticism that might show I have been inattentive to either his book or the Canon.

If my points – made in the negative – stand, then what is the positive? I would suggest it lies in *reverence*, or if that is not possible for moderns, then at least a profound respect for the Buddha, his thought and his teachings. That means abandoning haste, the cavalier approach. It means dismounting our warhorse and walking on foot through at least the four major Nikayas, granting perhaps that the original compilers – in the afterglow of the Buddha's presence – had good reasons for laying out the Canon as they did. Peering through the mists of time and the fog of interpretation, can we also grant perhaps that the Buddha is his own best interpreter? What is obscure in one discourse slowly comes into focus across others. His many interlocutors shared all the doubts we have today, but his invincible energy carried them; why not us? With time, effort and patience the Canon reveals the extraordinary and kindly brilliance of the Buddha, a mind that lights up the dark corners of our own, a thinking that can turn ours to liberation, and a path of practice to take us there.