

what had happened in a community” (157). Indeed, Dunderberg notes that “only a few decades ago, it was not unusual to trace references to social reality in Gnostic myths” (163) and then reports an increasing reticence among scholars of early Christianity to make these sorts of claims due to the shaky methodological ground on which such claims stand. Yet on the other hand, Dunderberg still wants to use these texts (both the Nag Hammadi materials and those of the heresiologists) to make historical claims about social reality. For example, a paragraph in the book’s introduction analyzing Irenaeus’s *Against Heresies* leads to the following conclusion: “Thus, it is clear that, from early on, some Valentinians formed distinctive groups having their own meetings and developing new rituals” (3). Similarly, Dunderberg concludes that the *Interpretation of Knowledge* “offers a unique glimpse of the social reality of its earliest readers” (147) and that in the *Tripartite Tractate*, concern with “Roman officials and their persecution of Christians . . . is the most likely explanation for many details in the text” (171). Thus, I would have appreciated a somewhat fuller explanation of his methodological position (and theoretical debts) with respect to the relationship between literary texts and historical reconstruction.

Overall, however, *Beyond Gnosticism* is a timely and original study that ought to reorient the study of Valentinian Christianity in important ways. Specialists in early Christianity and the Nag Hammadi texts will benefit from Dunderberg’s thoroughgoing knowledge of the history of the field and his careful, detailed readings of primary texts. For more general readers in the study of religion, the book offers a stimulating investigation of religious strategies of differentiation in a particular historical context. Though Jonathan Z. Smith’s work on religious identity and difference is not cited, those familiar with this theoretical trajectory will find much of interest in the specific textual examples that Dunderberg analyzes. Furthermore, given the significant role that the archetypal figure of the Gnostic has played in phenomenological study of the history of religion, Dunderberg’s effective demonstration of how unhelpful this category is for understanding specific Valentinian texts is a significant contribution to the field of religious studies as a whole.

doi:10.1093/jaarel/lfq037

Advance Access publication July 22, 2010

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What the Buddha Thought. By Richard Gombrich. Equinox Publishing, 2009. 240 pages. \$24.95.

We have come to expect in the work of Richard Gombrich insight born of serious reflection grounded in masterful scholarship. We have also come to expect lucid prose that elucidates obscure and difficult issues through transparent, yet dramatic, observations that leave us wondering why nobody saw it, or put it, that way before. In *What the Buddha Thought*, these expectations are once again met. There is much to like about this book, and the neophyte and seasoned

scholar alike will learn from it. Many of us in Buddhist Studies will find ourselves using Gombrich's readings and formulations in our own teaching, and will find that our own thought is deeply influenced by the ideas in this volume, as many of us have been influenced by Gombrich's earlier work throughout our careers. Though I will note some shortcomings in this volume, my critical remarks should be taken in the context of admiration for the work as a whole.

The imperfections of this volume stem from two fundamental problems. First, the book has a hard time deciding whether it is an introductory text meant to explicate the broad outlines of early Buddhist thought for the relatively naive reader (and hence aimed perhaps at both the popular and the first-year textbook markets) or a polemical scholarly text joining ongoing methodological, hermeneutical, and exegetical debates about Buddhist doctrine and Buddhist Studies. Gombrich notes this dual purpose in the first full paragraph of the preface (vii). But to note this tension is not to resolve it. The discussion moves back and forth between these two levels, and the polemical program detracts from the admirable clarity and directness of the larger part of the book, which is an immensely successful introduction to Buddhist doctrine. Moreover, these professional jousts are in general so brief and oblique that they are unsatisfying as scholarship. The book is hence most charitably read as a superb introduction—one worthy of a read even by the specialist—with distracting asides that are no more than offhand remarks aimed at professional disputes. A stronger editorial hand might have fixed this problem.

The second issue is connected with some of that professional jousting. Gombrich has a disturbing tendency to write as though he is transmitting *Buddhavaccana* straight from the mouth or mind of the Buddha himself to the reader. He explains to us, for instance, how *all* early Buddhist commentators simply misunderstood the *Tevijja sutta* (88–91); he argues that canonical commentaries are not to be trusted, but that he is (106–107); he tells us repeatedly what the Buddha *had in mind*, what he *meant*, what he *believed*, not simply what early Buddhist texts *say*.

Now, there is nothing at all wrong with disputing canonical interpretations; after all, *canonical commentators* do that all the time. Nor is there anything wrong with offering one's own interpretation of the message of the Buddha. Modern and canonical scholars do *that* all the time. And the hermeneutics of authorial intent is defensible. But the confidence with which Gombrich attributes intentions to a figure who left no writings, whose talks were committed to writing only long after his death and are, in their written versions often inconsistent with one another, and the confidence with which he disputes the readings of those working in the early Buddhist tradition is startling. In an introductory text, more balance and deference to alternative readings is expected; in polemical professional literature, a less dismissive attitude to one's adversaries is expected.

When Gombrich explicitly addresses methodological issues (94–98), he indeed dismisses critics who doubt the transparency of the *suttas* as windows to the Buddha's thought as "facile" (96). It is he, however, who shirks the

responsibility of serious argument and engagement. Gombrich uncritically adopts a Popperian understanding of scientific method, as a process of conjecture and falsification, a view dubious as an account of the natural sciences, and even less plausible as a theory of textual interpretation. He then takes the moral of this view to be that “the origin of a conjecture has absolutely no bearing on its value” (94) and that induction is never probative in virtue of its fallibility in principle.

This is not the place for an extended discussion of the philosophy of science, but to argue that positive evidence is irrelevant to the status of conjectures and that one should not worry about the basis of one’s views is at best dated hyperbole. The real issue in this discussion, and the one that leads to this methodological excursion, is the probity of reliance on early Buddhist texts as direct evidence for what the Buddha said or thought. (The title of the book, of course, is a conscious echo of Rahula, and Gombrich follows Rahula in his confidence in this dubious epistemology.) To reply to the many critics of this approach to history by arguing that all evidence is fallible, and that only decisive refutation settles hypotheses, is simply shallow. It is best simply to set these methodological ruminations and Gombrich’s own take on his own work aside and to appreciate his reflections on Buddhist philosophy.

When one does, there is much to be learned from Gombrich’s rich reflections. I will mention only a few highlights. Gombrich calls our attention to the philosophical, cultural, and religious context in which Buddhism arose, and to the manifold ways in which early Buddhists responded to their Indian interlocutors. He points out (40–44) the ways in which early Buddhist texts draw on Upaniṣadic ideas and formulations; the complex ways in which early Buddhism engages with the doctrine that Brahman is *sat-cit-ānanda*; and the consequent formulation of *nibbana* in purely negative terms. He also properly emphasizes the seriousness with which the Buddha took the problem of understanding soteriology in a way that responds to Brahminic conceptions (83–84). This is very sensitive and valuable exegesis.

Gombrich also draws our attention to the impact of Vedic cosmogony on the formulation of the doctrine of the twelve links of dependent origination (133 ff). In a detailed and compelling discussion, Gombrich draws Jurewicz’s work together with ideas developed by Frauwallner and Hwang to demonstrate that the formula of the twelve links draws on ideas from the *Rg Veda* and *Bṛhad-āraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, but that the Buddha twists these ideas skillfully to develop an alternative soteriological picture.

Gombrich also calls our attention (50 ff) to the important interaction between early Buddhist and early Jain thought. He properly emphasizes the mutual influence of these two movements as well as the critiques of Jain ideas developed in the Buddhist *suttas*. In all of these cases, one is impressed by Gombrich’s *method*. It *does* matter where his conjectures originate: they originate in the close reading of a large set of related texts; he amasses *inductive* evidence for his readings; he reads *texts* against each other in order to interpret them, instead of guessing at authorial intent. In short, he violates his own

methodological canons in exactly the ways one would hope he does, and the results are impressive and illuminating.

Among the most interesting ideas Gombrich develops in this book is his thesis that the metaphor of fire is more central to early Buddhist thought than many of us have realized and than most commentarial literature has acknowledged. In a number of places (see esp. 12 ff, 103, ff, 111–118), he emphasizes the importance of the *Āditta-pariyāya* discourse and the Vedic metaphors that provide both inspiration and a foil for Buddhist ideas. Gombrich argues that the fire metaphor is in fact the guiding metaphor for the Buddha's analysis of psychology, of phenomenology, and of suffering.

Of course we are accustomed to thinking of *nibbana* in terms of the extinction of a flame, and the *Āditta-pariyāya* does explicitly assert that everything, prominently including the *kandhas*, is on fire. But Gombrich goes further. He proposes that even the term *kandha* is misunderstood if we think of it just as denoting a *heap* or an *aggregate*, but instead that its primary meaning is *a pile of fuel*. The *kandhas* themselves are hence the fuel for the fire of *saṃsāra*. This startling proposal in fact unifies a number of Buddhist metaphors and even provides a more direct understanding of why Nāgārjuna, for instance, is so intent on analyzing the relation between fire and fuel in *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*. This insight also ties Buddhist ideas more closely to Vedic antecedents, reinforcing Gombrich's view that Buddhism can only be understood against that broader Indian context.

There is much more to say about this rich volume. Let me note, however, one reservation regarding interpretation. Gombrich sees the Buddha and early Buddhism as negotiating, among the many middle paths Buddhism seeks, a middle path between determinism and freedom, and so preoccupied with a problem of free will and moral responsibility. I think that this is an error, and an imposition of a post-Augustinian Western framework for thinking about action and its relation to morality on a system to which these ideas are foreign. I see no discourse about freedom or a connection among freedom, moral responsibility, and karma in Buddhism. Whatever my disagreements with Gombrich, however, I learned a lot from this book, and I recommend it with enthusiasm to novice and expert alike. Even in disagreement, one is impressed with the depth of thought on the other side.

doi:10.1093/jaarel/lfq032

Advance Access publication July 8, 2010

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Ritual and Its Consequences: An Essay on the Limits of Sincerity. By Adam B. Seligman, Robert P. Weller, Michael J. Puett, and Bennett Simon. Oxford University Press, 2008. 229 pages. \$19.95.

What do you get when you put an anthropologist, a historian of China, a psychiatrist, and a professor of religious studies in a room together? This may