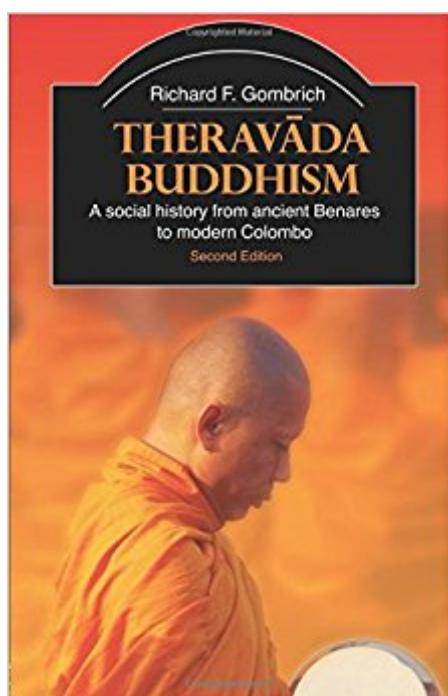


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# Theravada Buddhism: A Social History From Ancient Benares To Modern Colombo (The Library Of Religious Beliefs And Practices)



## **Synopsis**

Written by the leading authority on Theravada Buddhism, this up-dated edition takes into account recent research to include the controversies over the date of the Buddha and current social and political developments in Sri Lanka. Gombrich explores the legacy of the Buddha's predecessors and the social and religious contexts against which Buddhism has developed and changed throughout history, demonstrating above all, how it has always influenced and been influenced by its social surroundings in a way which continues to this day.

## **Book Information**

Series: The Library of Religious Beliefs and Practices

Paperback: 256 pages

Publisher: Routledge; 2 edition (July 26, 2006)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0415365090

ISBN-13: 978-0415365093

Product Dimensions: 5.4 x 0.6 x 8.5 inches

Shipping Weight: 11.4 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.5 out of 5 stars 6 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #246,248 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #43 in Books > Textbooks > Humanities > Religious Studies > Buddhism #65 in Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Philosophy > Eastern > Buddhism > History #76 in Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Philosophy > Eastern > Buddhism > Theravada

## **Customer Reviews**

"An excellent and exciting introduction to the social history of Buddhism . . . This book will be useful to scholars and students in both Buddhist studies and the social sciences." -- Choice --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Richard F. Gombrich is Academic Director of the Oxford Centre for Buddhist Studies, and one of the most renowned Buddhist scholars in the world. From 1976 to 2004 he was Boden Professor of Sanskrit, University of Oxford. He has been President of the Pali Text Society and was awarded the Sri Lanka Ranjana decoration by the President of Sri Lanka in 1994 and the SC Chakraborty medal by the Asiatic Society of Calcutta the previous year. He has written extensively on Buddhism, including *How Buddhism Began: the Conditioned Genesis of the Early Teachings* (Routledge 2005);

and with Gananath Obeyesekere, *Buddhism transformed: Religious change in Sri Lanka* (1988).

Gombrich is an excellent writer, his prose clear and precise. In this book, he does a great job of explaining how Buddhism grew out of the Buddha's responses to the various religious and spiritual options available in 500-400 b.c. India, including Brahmanism and various types of renouncers and ascetics. Fascinating! Gombrich also does an excellent job of explaining the specific spiritual problems Gotama attempted to address with his philosophy and practice. Very highly recommended.

Overall pleased!

Crowley, Vivianne. *Review: 'Theravada Buddhism: A social history from Ancient Benares to Modern Colombo'*, by Richard Gombrich.

The Middle Way: Journal of the Buddhist Society 81, no. 4 (February 2007): 250-251.

This welcome re-issue of Professor Gombrich's classic Theravada Buddhism has been updated to take account of recent research, and provides a scholarly but very readable introduction to the history of Buddhism in India and Sri Lanka from the fifth century BCE to the present day. The importance of the work lies not only in its historical value in helping Buddhists and to understand early developments, but also in educating contemporary Buddhists about the influence of Western ideas on the development of Buddhism in Sri Lanka in the nineteenth century. Theravada Buddhism was first published 20 years ago, since when there have been scholarly advances in our understanding of the development of early Buddhism, including Professor Gombrich's contribution to the dating of the historical Buddha's life and Professor Joanna Jurewicz's work on references to rebirth in the Rig Veda. On a more tragic note, there has also been, of course, the civil war in Sri Lanka, as well as population growth and economic developments that have changed the lives and therefore the religious practices and needs of its inhabitants. Theravada Buddhism's final chapter explores these late twentieth-century changes and their meaning for Buddhism in the twenty-first century.

If you're interested in the origins of Buddhism, with a thorough exposition of its social parameters, this is the book for you. From the Buddha's relation to Brahminism and the evolution of the religious order founded by him, this book covers it all, including the arrival of Europeans and how Theravada Buddhism reacted to it. Personally, I started reading this book to know about Theravada Buddhism

per se, not so much its social history, but even then I found much to be interesting and helpful for an understanding of Buddhism in general. The writing is excellent, precise, to the point, and informative.

The first half (5 chapters) is a very good and concise introduction to the origin of Buddhism, its conceptual framework, contrast with Hinduism, and monastic system (Sangha). The second half (3 chapters) is relatively uneven, covering Buddhism's spread to Ceylon (by Asoka's son) as the conservative Theravada, its decline and corruption, and modern renewal and transformation in the last one and a half century.

The author's choices are a little strange to me. Why spend so much time on the pre-Buddhist vedic tradition and then say absolutely nothing about Buddhism in India post-Ashoka? Granted, he mentions that there isn't much information to be had about Theravada in India, but there is some. He cuts right to Sri Lanka though. Otherwise it's a decent overview. If it was titled "A Social History from 430-300 BCE and 1100-present CE" it would be much more accurate.

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