

Reviews

Gotama Buddha. Mein Weg zum Erwachen. Eine Autobiographie. Auf der Grundlage des Pâli-Kanons herausgegeben und gestaltet von Detlef Kantowsky und Ekkehard Saß. Zürich/Düsseldorf: Benziger, 1996. 111 pages, DM 39,80. ISBN 3-545-34141-0

This "autobiography" of the Buddha is the latest volume in a series of portraits of major historical figures (the previous volumes being two on Mahatma Gandhi and one on Rabindranath Tagore), combining selections of their own sayings or writings with numerous photographic illustrations that provide a relevant visual context. Both joint authors have a long-standing involvement with Buddhism. Detlef Kantowsky, Professor of Sociology at the University of Constance in Germany, specializes in intercultural studies, with particular reference to India (where he has done much field research) and Sri Lanka. He is the author of numerous publications on Buddhism, and general editor of "Buddhistischer Modernismus", a series of monographs on various aspects of Buddhism in Germany, published by the University of Constance. Ekkehard Saß, a broadcasting professional, is a Pali scholar with a number of publications to his name. In the present work, Saß is responsible for the new translations from Pali into German of the texts jointly selected by the authors, and Kantowsky has supplied the original photographs taken by him in India at various times over a period of some 25 years.

With its large format, glossy paper and many striking full-page sepia photographs, this attractively produced volume might at first sight appear to fall into the coffee-table book category. It is, however, much more than that. Its aim is to provide the modern reader unfamiliar with the subject with a concise and clear account of the Buddha's life, and an outline of essential teachings, in his own words as found in the Pali canon, recast in comprehensible contemporary language. The photographs facing almost every page of text are not intended, we are told, simply to provide local colour, nor as specific illustrations of the text, but to bring home to the reader some of the still strikingly unchanged aspects of the lands where the Buddha preached and of the way of life of the people he addressed some 2500 years ago, thus adding a living visual dimension to the written word.

Mein Weg zum Erwachen is remarkably successful within its own terms of reference, and can be well recommended (with one reservation to which I shall come in a moment) as a sound introduction to Buddha the man and

his teachings, mercifully untainted by the woolly mysticism and exotic longings that tend all too often, these days, to obscure the clarity of the Dhamma.

The structure of the book is as straightforward as the language. The stages of the Buddha's life, cast in autobiographical language and stripped of supernatural embellishments, are related in seven main chapters whose titles clearly signpost the progression of life and insight: "Growing up and living well", "Going forth and learning", "Seeking and practising on one's own", "Awakening and seeing anew", "Going into the world and teaching", "Grasping the teaching correctly", "Letting go".

The essentials of the teaching are set forth clearly and soberly in a modern version of the words of the Pali canon. The level of presentation is simple but well balanced, as is consistent with the non-specialized nature of the book. The one aspect about which I have reservations is the tendency of the authors to use, in a few instances, language identifying the experience of non-self (*anattā*) and of the compassion and loving-kindness characteristic of enlightenment with a 'Oneness-with-the-All' conception which is typical of traditional Hinduism (and of certain contemporary indiscriminating syncretistic trends in the West today), but certainly not part of what the Buddha taught. Thus on page 15, in a passage from sutta 14 of the *Dīgha Nikāya*, the simple statement: "compassion for all beings is good" (*sādhu bhūtaṅkampā*) becomes: "it is good to feel oneself ONE with all beings" (gut ist es, sich mit allen Wesen EINS zu fühlen", with "One" capitalized for emphasis. Other examples of this tendency can be found on pages 24 and 30. It is a pity that the authors (like many others before them in the long history of Buddhism) have allowed themselves to be carried away in trying to spell out what the Buddha, for good reasons, left specifically unsaid.

This being said, the authors must be congratulated on their discerning selection of material and on the entirely successful translation of it into easy-flowing current language which (completed by the splendid photographs) conveys a convincing picture of the Buddha's human warmth and sound common sense as well as of his unique gifts and achievements against the background of his native land.

Many who might otherwise not do so may, through this attractive presentation, be enabled to perceive the relevance and soundness of the Compassionate One's message. It would be good if it were to be made more generally accessible in an equally well-crafted English version.

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