

## REVIEW RESPONSE

### Did the Buddha know Sanskrit?: Richard Gombrich's response to a point in the BSR review of his *What the Buddha Thought*

I am extremely grateful to Prof. John Taber for writing a long and generally very complimentary review of my book *What the Buddha Thought*. It has appeared in *Buddhist Studies Review* 30(1), 2013: 129–136.

However, I hope it will not be taken amiss if I point out that there is a passage in the review, more than a page in length, which has gone badly adrift. This passage comments on the theme, central to my book, that the Buddha was reacting to passages in the *Upaniṣads*, particularly the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka*, quite often even to the words used. Prof. Taber considers this highly implausible, because, he says, 'Certainly the Buddha did not formally study the *Veda*, for he was not a Brahmin; he was not qualified' (p. 134). He asks whether the Buddha knew Sanskrit. He says that probably 'the Buddha learned what he knew about the *Veda* and the *Upaniṣads* second or third hand' and the teachings he alluded to were 'simplified and watered down for popular consumption' (p. 134). After much more in this vein, he concludes that the Buddha's thinking was in part determined by the fact that he was 'excluded' from the Vedic tradition (p. 135).

I am afraid that all this is wide of the mark. Prof. Taber asks whether the Buddha had been taught to understand the meaning of certain passages in the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka*, one of which is 4.3.6, and this he correctly identifies as part of a dialogue between Janaka and Yājñavalkya. It may have escaped his notice that at the beginning of the passage (4.3.1), Janaka is identified as the King of Videha. At the end of the passage, King Janaka is so pleased that he says, 'I'll give you the people of Videha, myself included, as your slaves' (4.4.23).

Even more striking, the 'five fire doctrine', which plays an important part in my book, is identified in the *Upaniṣads* as of non-brahmin origin. In the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* it is taught to Śvetaketu Gautama by Pravāhana Jaibali, who prefaces his teaching with the words '... Let me tell you that before you this knowledge had never reached the Brahmins. As a result, in all the worlds government has belonged exclusively to royalty'. Jaibali is repeatedly referred to as a king (5.3.6–7). He is not explicitly so identified in the parallel passage in *Bṛhadāraṇyaka* 6. There, however, the brahmin Śvetaketu formally becomes the non-brahmin's pupil.

It seems to have been the norm in ancient India for royalty to have learnt Sanskrit and to have been expected to have some knowledge of Sanskrit texts and brahminical teachings. In Sanskrit plays the king always speaks Sanskrit. The prose *kāvya*s of Bāṇa refer more than once to Sanskrit as a necessary part of

a king's education. The *Mahābhārata* is full of royals (*kṣatriya*) who have plenty of brahminical knowledge and wisdom; Bhīṣma is an outstanding example.

Some confusion may have arisen through the use of such English terms as king, prince and royal. The Sanskrit term is *kṣatriya*; it denotes someone who rules, but that can cover a wide range of situations. Later ideas of the Buddha as a 'prince' may well have been pious mythical embellishments, but there is little doubt that the Buddha was the son of an oligarch, and the political arrangements of the *Śākya*s were probably very much like those described for the Licchavi (who did not live very far away) in the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta*. In the terms of brahmin ideology, the Buddha was certainly a *kṣatriya*. Besides, the research of Alexander Wynne (*The Origin of Buddhist Meditation*, 2007) shows that the Buddha's teachers during his 6 years of quest for Enlightenment were probably Brahmins.

We cannot know whether in the Buddha's day the texts of the *Upaniṣads* were just the same as have come down to us. But that is not relevant to this argument. Not only is there no reason to doubt that the Buddha was familiar with some of those texts; I have made it virtually certain that he was.