



The Life of Buddha

Edward J. Thomas

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Originally published between 1920-70, The History of Civilization was a landmark in early twentieth century publishing. It was published at a formative time within the social sciences, and during a period of decisive historical discovery. The aim of the general editor, C.K. Ogden, was to summarize the most up to date findings and theories of historians, anthropologists, archaeologists and sociologists. This reprinted material is available as a set or in the following groupings:

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The Life of Buddha Details

Date : Published May 22nd 2013 by Routledge (first published December 1st 1969)

ISBN : 9780415845656

Author : Edward J. Thomas

Format : Paperback 328 pages

Genre : Religion, Gnosticism, Buddhism, Historical

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Craig Shoemake says

Edward J. Thomas (also published under E. J. Thomas 1869-1958) was a Briton who lived as a scholar and librarian in India, where he pursued what were at the time cutting edge researches into the roots of Buddhist thought and history. His other noted work in this field--still showing up in bibliographies on account of its lucidity and comprehensiveness--is The History of Buddhist Thought. A review of that one from yours truly is in the offing, sometime down the road. The present work--undeservedly--has unfortunately fallen into obscurity. I am its first reviewer on Amazon, and at present it's not even available through Amazon's US site. I recommend Amazon's UK website or Pariyatti for a copy. Anyway...on to my review.

The book was first published in 1927; the third edition (the one presently available) was revised through 1948. As a work of scholarship it is definitely dated, and yet the extraordinarily wide range of its author's knowledge is on display on every page. At the time it was undoubtedly the best the field had to offer. Moreover, it is--as far as I am aware--still the most complete scholarly attempt to fit together the facts of the Buddha's life and ministry. This in itself is an amazing (and depressing) fact, but also speaks volumes for the author's ambitions. Whatever faults the text may possess, they aren't there for a lack of effort on Mr. Thomas' part.

He begins the book before the Buddha's birth, looking at the origins and ancestry of the Sakyan clan. This is quite interesting material, for it sheds light on what kind of environment, both cultural and familial, the Bodhisatta grew up in. Thomas draws on a wide range of materials from different canons (Pali, Mahayana and Tibetan) and non-canonical sources. Moreover, he brings a steady, skeptical eye to his weighing of the

evidence, and I think many of his judgments in regard to what are useful, believable data as opposed to later, more fanciful legends, are reasonable and on the mark. For example, he notes that in the lists of Sakyan rulers before Sudodhana (the Buddha's father), there are often names of the Bodhisatta himself inserted from the Jatakas, and that the lists differ considerably depending on which source you go to: the Pali, the Tibetan or the Mahavastu. This is but one example of traditions being created after the fact, to fill the gaps of knowledge that, even if at one time the truth was really known, had been lost by the time of the text's recension. One of the most interesting revelations that Thomas uncovers was that the tradition is not even in agreement on the name of the Buddha's wife. You would think his biographers would have gotten at least that much straight, but in fact she is variously referred to--depending on which strand of texts and traditions you consult--as Bhaddakacca, Yasodhara, Subhaddaka, Rahulamatta ("Rahula's mother") or Bhada Kaccana. In other words, when looked at through the eyes of keen scholarship--eyes that Edward J. Thomas plainly possessed--the Buddha's life story becomes decidedly messy, even if the very basic facts are agreed upon--i.e. birth, renunciation, enlightenment, teaching, death.

And herein lies the drawback of the book. Thomas calls upon so many texts, and pursues so many different lines of inquiry, it can be hard to keep them all straight. This is especially so in the beginning, when he looks at Sakyan origins and the Buddha's birth stories, but things get easier after the enlightenment, when the author is forced to rely upon the obviously heavily revised, standard chronology of the Buddha's career. This is the only part of the book where things seem to move along breezily, and then suddenly we come to the Buddha's last days. Thomas looks beyond the Buddha's passing, though, even venturing into the archaeological remains of the Teacher, and for people who find this material interesting I particularly recommend Charles Allen's *The Search for the Buddha: The Men Who Discovered India's Lost Religion*. Allen, another Englishman in India, does a much better job than Thomas on this front.

For me the book's interest pretty much ended there, though the author goes on to explore some of the basics of Buddhism as a religion. The early search for "primitive Buddhism" is much in evidence here, as is the typical rationalist perspective that the Buddha simply "borrowed" or "took over" the beliefs in reincarnation and karma without question. For me, this is where Thomas really stumbles, and I actually gasped out loud when I read the following (on page 199): "Although the [dependent arising] formula as such has only a historic interest, it has an importance in its being an early attempt to formulate a rational law of causation" (emphasis added). Never mind the fact that the Buddha was quoted as saying "He who sees dependent arising sees the Dhamma," this authorial gaff clearly indicates the limits of the scholar's view when it comes to the Buddha's Teaching. Inevitably, the most important ideas get rationalistically boiled down to mere historical curiosities, and the significance for it all to real human beings is completely lost. Great scholar that he was, Thomas was plainly no seeker after enlightenment.

As a final note: the last chapter, entitled "Buddhism and Christianity," where the oft-noted parallels between the life stories of Jesus and the Buddha are considered, is a throw away. First, the comparisons add nothing to our understanding of the Buddha and Buddhism (or to Jesus and Christianity, for that matter). Second, the comparisons are highly speculative, arbitrary, even forced, at best, and, third, they're trite and trivial. Together with the constant search for "primitive Buddhism," this section perhaps most poignantly illustrates the datedness of the book.

These criticisms aside, I think the book is a worthwhile read. In a way, it illustrates the attempt of the Western, scientific mind to come to grips with a truly alien way of thinking. Failures and successes are revealed. And, as noted, the effort has not been substantively duplicated since--where oh where is another such biography bringing intelligent, learned scrutiny to the life of this very important historical figure? And please don't mention Karen Armstrong!