

# Book Review – The Historical Buddha

*The Historical Buddha*, by Hans Wolfgang (H.W.) Schumann, is a useful biography of one of the greatest religious leaders in human history. The book is written using tools of historical criticism and therefore is informative in a way that a hagiography would not be. Schumann was an Indologist and expert in comparative religions who served in the German foreign service and taught at universities in India and Germany. This experience made him most qualified to pen this book.

*The Historical Buddha* is based heavily on the *Pali Canon*, which was compiled in writing over 500 years after the Buddha's death. This long interval between the Buddha and these earliest written records make any definitive history of the Buddha problematic, or perhaps even impossible. Despite the difficulties, the Siddharta Gautama is an important enough historical character to make the attempt. With these caveats, Schumann does a good job unraveling the Buddha's life.

Schumann begins by discussing the landscape and politics in north India, from the Ganges River basin to the Himalayas, in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC. The largest and most powerful empires were the Kosala under King Pasenadi (6<sup>th</sup> century BC) and the Magadha under King Bimbisara (558-491 BC). Vamsa and Avanti were neighboring kingdoms. Three republics, Malla, Licchavi, and Sakiyas, rounded out the political landscape. Siddharta Gautama (563-483 BC), the future Buddha, was born a Kshatriya (warrior caste) prince of the Sakiya clan in Kapilavastu. His father was Suddhodana, the elected chief (raja), who had two wives, the sisters Maya and Pajapati. Gautama's mother Maya died a week after childbirth, so he was raised by her sister.

Schumann then covers the date and place of the Buddha's birth. Using Indian, Chinese, and even Greek sources, and combining the data with archaeological findings, he concludes that the traditional dates of 563-483 are probably correct. He locates Kapilavastu in Nepal (modern Tilaurakot) but states that after Kosala destroyed it at the end of Gautama's life, it was probably relocated south to Piprava, India. Schumann spends a great deal of time on the geographic, economic, and cultural factors of the region. He focuses on the dry rituals of contemporary Brahmanism and explains why splinter faiths like Buddhism and Jainism found room to grow in that milieu.

The description of Siddharta Gautama's choice to leave his home, his early asceticism, and his enlightenment largely follow the standard narrative, but the author downplays the miraculous. He clearly explains the noble truths and contrasts the Buddha's teaching with that of the surrounding Vedic community. Gautama navigated the earliest days of the Buddhist Order with skill, building his doctrine and cultivating confidence and enthusiasm. He acquired followers, usually from other mendicant schools, with a minimum of conflict.

Schumann speaks of the early community, and especially the Buddha's efforts to bring the rich and powerful into the fold. The importance of the conversion of Kings Bimbisara and Pasenadi to Buddhist faith cannot be overestimated. Royal power gave the Buddha greater legitimacy than his competitors and encouraged the populace to follow the new religion. Gautama was a shrewd political operator, able to obtain space and other resources for monasteries while maintaining a minimalist Order and preserving support from local rulers. The relationship between the Buddha and the kings was symbiotic. He influenced the populace and provided spiritual legitimacy to the kings, while they provided money and protection for him and his Order.

The author gives a fair explanation of some of the most problematic of Buddhist views. For example, the Buddha taught that individual souls, or even souls in the Hindu sense of atman, do not exist. If souls do not exist, how does a person move through the samsara cycle of rebirths? The Hindu answer is that samsara is like a string of beads, where the beads represent the body and the string represents the eternal soul. The Buddhist answer is that samsara is like a stack of blocks. Each body (a block) touches the blocks below and above it, thereby influencing those blocks, but no part of any block is present in any other block. No part of a dead man moves forward into another life, but the influence from his life does affect the new creature that arises.

Schumann describes the Order of Buddhist monks, how they join, live, and leave, including administrative rules and structures of the monastery. Eventually, the Buddha allowed women to be ordained, thus becoming nuns. The

function of Buddhist laity was to provide alms to the monks daily, pass the dhamma (teachings) on to those not acquainted with Buddhism, and to support monks financially. Wealthy laymen donated land, built Buddhist monasteries, and maintaining them. Everyone's primary duty was to seek enlightenment, whether monk, nun, or layman, and a few laymen attained enlightenment without ever becoming monks.

The author's discussion of the demographics of the early community, based on qualitative data in the *Pali Canon*, was fascinating, as was his psychological profile of the Buddha himself. Analyses such as these occur throughout the book and are generally fair in their approach. Schumann certainly is no enemy of Buddhism, but he tries to approach things rationally and using reasonable modern methods.

The Buddha's later years saw many troubles including the deaths of his leading monks, the deaths of his royal patrons, rival philosophies, controversies, and even assassination attempts. The author adds a smattering of medical information about the Buddha's final days which I find intriguing. He handles the death of the Buddha sensitively and discusses the Buddhist councils and subsequent canon well.

Overall, I found Schumann's *The Historical Buddha* to be well worth reading, and even rereading. Keeping in mind the caveats mentioned at the beginning of this review, Schumann's book seems as reliable a guide as possible to discover the life of this important religious leader.

## Questions

1. How does the historical approach differ from more religious approaches in biographies?
2. How do leaders of new religious movements differentiate themselves from the pack? Conquering enemies (Mohammad), getting royal support (Buddha), writing books (Joseph Smith), something else?
3. How does this critical treatment of the Buddha differ from the kind of treatment that the "historical Jesus" receives?