

Osamu Tezuka, *Buda*, translated by Marc Bernabé and Verònica Calafell

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Osamu Tezuka, *Buddha* [translator(s) unacknowledged]

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THE RECENT SURGE in popularity and demand for Japanese animation (*anime*, *manga*) in Europe and the United States has finally led to the translation and publication of Tezuka Osamu's *Buddha* in Spanish and English.

More than ten years ago, my colleague James Heisig and I successfully negotiated with Tezuka's production office in Tokyo to produce an English edition of *Buddha*. The only condition was that we find a Western publishing house willing to produce the full set. Though we knocked on many doors on both the east and west coast of the continental United States, and many publishers expressed a keen interest, none was willing to commit to publishing the entire set. The economic risk was too great; the demand for Japanese *anime* was still a niche market. How times can change! Within the past year we have seen the publication of the full set of Tezuka's *Buda* in a 10-volume paperback edition in Spanish, and the first two volumes of the promised full 8-volume hardcover edition of Tezuka's *Buddha* in English. This is a most welcome development for admirers of Tezuka's work, as well as for religionists seeking an enjoyable educational tool for introducing the life story of the founder of Buddhism.

Though we missed out on the opportunity to produce the English version, James Heisig served as an editorial advisor and I was asked to write the "Introducción" for the Spanish edition of *Buda*. I would like to reproduce that text in English here as a way to introduce Tezuka's work:

* * * * *

Gautama Siddhārtha, the man whose life and teachings inspired the religious tradition we call "Buddhism," was born and lived in what is now Nepal and the northeastern corner of India, four or five hundred years before the birth of Jesus Christ. He came to be known as Śākyamuni, the sage of the Śākya people, and as the Buddha, the enlightened one. The example of his life and the profundity of his teachings have inspired millions of people for over two thousand years, with his insight into the interconnectedness of all things and his call for universal compassion. It is this life that is the inspiration and theme of *Buddha*, a pictorial retelling of the ancient story by Tezuka Osamu, the dean of Japanese cartoonists.

Tezuka Osamu (1928–1989), often referred to as the "Walt Disney" of Japan, is undoubtedly the most influential and beloved of contemporary Japanese cartoonists. In his early work, starting in the late 1940s, he pioneered and popularized the "cinematic" style of modern Japanese cartooning. The drawing style may now look dated and too simple to young people in the early twenty-first century—compared to the flashy computer graphics and expressive styles of current animation—but Tezuka's cartooning techniques were revolutionary for his day, and his works remain classics of modern Japanese popular art. Various editions of Tezuka's prolific work are perennial best sellers in Japan, and are found in any bookstore across the country. Museum displays of his drawings continue to draw large audiences.

Some of Tezuka's best works—many already well known in the West—include *Atom Boy*: a boy-robot hero in a science fiction action series; *Phoenix*: a multi-part dramatic series, with stories from the distant past and future as well as current times, all involving the figure of the eternally reborn phoenix; *Black Jack*: a cynical doctor, ostracized by

the medical community, who performs almost miraculous feats of surgery and often helps the dispossessed; and *The Jungle Emperor*: the adventures of three generations of a family of lions, believed by many to be the model for Disney's *Lion King*.

Buddha, along with *Phoenix*, is considered by many to be Tezuka's pivotal work, reflecting not only the culmination of his style, but also best expressing Tezuka's worldview, moral concerns, and humanistic ideals. The story that unfolds in this lively drama is centered on the Buddha and his life, but is both much more and much less than just that. Tezuka himself has said that his portrayal of the Buddha "is not an accurate illustrated adaptation of the Buddhist scriptures.... There are many different versions of Śakyamuni's life, and much of it is ambiguous.... I expect many criticisms and opinions to be expressed concerning this work, but I consider it similar to Astro Boy; this is 'religious science fiction'."¹

Tezuka is too modest. The portrayal of the basic experiences and highlights of Siddhartha's life—his miraculous conception and birth, regal upbringing, abrupt departure from home, eight years of ascetic practices, various temptations and eventual enlightenment under the Bodhi tree, preaching of the Dharma, and death (*parinirvana*)—is remarkably faithful to the tradition. Tezuka does introduce numerous characters and story lines that are wholly his creation. As he points out, "the main characters that surround Siddhartha are mostly fictional: the young outcaste Chapra, the general Budai, Siddhartha's friend Tatta, the cruel soldier Bandaka, and Siddhartha's first love Mighera/Migaila. These characters were all created to make the story more interesting. Another important character—Naradatta, the disciple of Asita—is also a creation of mine and does not appear in the Buddhist scriptures."² Tezuka interweaves these figures and plots with the story of the Buddha to present a complicated and exciting drama, a fascinating tale of human intrigue and love-hate relationships, with no "happy" endings. As in real life, characters often experience unexpected and cruel fates, with many meaningless deaths, while others carry on with what seem unbearable burdens. There is much heartbreak and tragedy in this tale, with no simplistic pandering to wishful thinking or easy answers, and yet it is suffused with a humanistic hope.

Tezuka's Buddha is very human. Indeed, some may think him too human. To some degree, this portrayal reflects the late-nineteenth and early twentieth century concern for "the quest for the historical Buddha." Tezuka tends to downplay or recast miraculous elements of the Buddha story, perhaps unconsciously, to fit the "rationality" of the modern mind. For example, the traditional legend has the newly-born Siddhartha walking seven steps, pointing to the sky with his right hand and to the earth with his left, and boldly proclaiming "Above and below the heavens, only I am worthy of

1. Afterword to the Kodansha edition of *Buddha*, vol. 14; quoted in the catalog for the "Tezuka Osamu Exhibition," The National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo, 1990, p. 270.

2. From the Afterword of the Japanese Ushio edition of *Buddha* (1988), vol. 8, pp. 364-65. Also, the copyright page of the English edition contains the caveat: "This work of fiction contains characters and episodes that are not part of the historical record."

honor.” Tezuka has the sage Asita speak these words in Siddhartha’s stead when Asita views the baby Siddhartha sleeping in his crib, with his hands pointing up and down in



FIGURE 1.

the traditional fashion (English version, vol. 1, p. 340–43; Spanish version, vol. 2, p. 40–43; see FIGURE 1).

Our post-modern world, however, has fewer scruples about accepting the miraculous and superhuman elements in traditional legends, and Tezuka’s “historical” Buddha can seem forced or even “unnatural.” Again, Tezuka’s Buddha is very human in his weaknesses, going through many stages of doubt, suffering, and further enlightenment even after his “great enlightenment” under the Bodhi tree. Some may welcome this as a “realistic” depiction of human drama; others may find it an

inadequate portrayal of the Buddhist ideal. I am confident, however, that no one will fail to be moved by this story, or swept up in its vast and intricate drama. It is a tale full of sound and fury, yet full of hope.

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The almost simultaneous appearance of both the Spanish and English editions of Tezuka’s classic provides an opportunity to compare the two productions. It should be said at first that the Spanish edition is a mass-market paperback, and the English edition (at twice the price) is designed for long term wear and tear, with a sturdy cover and higher-quality paper. Nevertheless they both share a number of challenges in transferring Japanese animation to a Western format. For one, a Japanese book starts from the right and moves left, whereas a Spanish or English book opens to the left and moves right. The pictures must therefore be reproduced in an mirror image so that the flow from left to right is maintained. Although this results in some anomalies (e.g., everyone becomes left-handed), I found that the flow of the story did not suffer. (Kudos to the producers of the English edition, who restructured single picture frames [vol. 1, p. 229–231] to avoid a mirror image and correctly show a scoreboard and the devanagari script under it, as well as a map of northeastern India [p. 276].) Again, Japanese is rich (especially in *manga*) in the use of onomatopoeia to express unusual sounds or illustrate events “auditorily.” Both the English and Spanish editions struggle to reproduce these effects (see FIGURE 2), and they both handle such matters with care, resulting in a presentation that flows freely and never distracts from the reading.

Another tricky problem is the romanization of proper names. The Spanish

translation attempts to accurately represent Indic spellings, while it seems that the English translation attempts to give a rendering that is easy to pronounce for the reader unfamiliar with Indic names. Thus, for the name of Siddhartha's first love, the Spanish uses "Mighera," and the English uses "Migaila"; for the caste name the Spanish uses "sudra" and the English uses "shudra."

Unrelated to such technical matters is Tezuka's sense of humor—his work is full of clever visual and verbal jokes and puns—and his penchant to throw in "contemporary" jokes, such as references to modern political or entertainment figures. These can be a delight for the reader, and yet a nightmare for the translator; happily they are handled deftly in both the English and Spanish editions. For example, in a solemn panel showing the wedding of Prince Siddhartha with the princess Yashodara, a long, formal speech is followed by a small bubble containing a popular and light-hearted Japanese ditty (*tōshi no hajime no tameshi to te...*), which in English is rendered with the sing-song phrase (reminiscent of Cliff Richard) "con-grat-tul-a-tions, and ce-le-bra-tions" (vol. 2, p. 223) and in the Spanish with the more somber "que así sea, y hasta que la muerte os separe" (vol. 3, p. 57). A good example of a difficult pun is the scene where a warrior (Bandaka) enters a contest for Yashodara's hand, part of the King's scheme to have Bandaka deliberately lose the final round to Siddhartha. In Japanese he is referred to as a *sakura* (lit. "cherry blossom," but also implying "decoy") to which people respond that "he looks more like a *dokudami* (poisonous weed)," after which it is explained that the match is set up (lit. *yaochō*, as in a "fixed" sumo match). In English (vol. 2, p. 186) he is referred to as a "plant," to which people respond that "he's the ugliest plant I've ever seen," and then it is explained that "this contest is a total fix." In Spanish (vol. 3, p. 20) the pun works even better, with Bandaka called "un reclamo," to which people respond "Como no esté reclamando su muerte..." and then it is explained that "Que no, mujer. Quiero decir que todo esto está amañado." Visual and verbal humor is combined in introducing royal visitors for the baby Siddhartha; outrageous Picasso-like drawings of a visiting king ridiculously named "Dodemoii-koku no Kakuda Kemuda ō" is translated into English as "King Fraud of Notalent" (vol. 1, p. 336) and in Spanish (vol. 2, p. 36) as "Toidesmontao del pais de Noimportadónde." Such humor alleviates the possible tedium of the serious subject matter, and rescues the work from appearing too preachy or self-important.

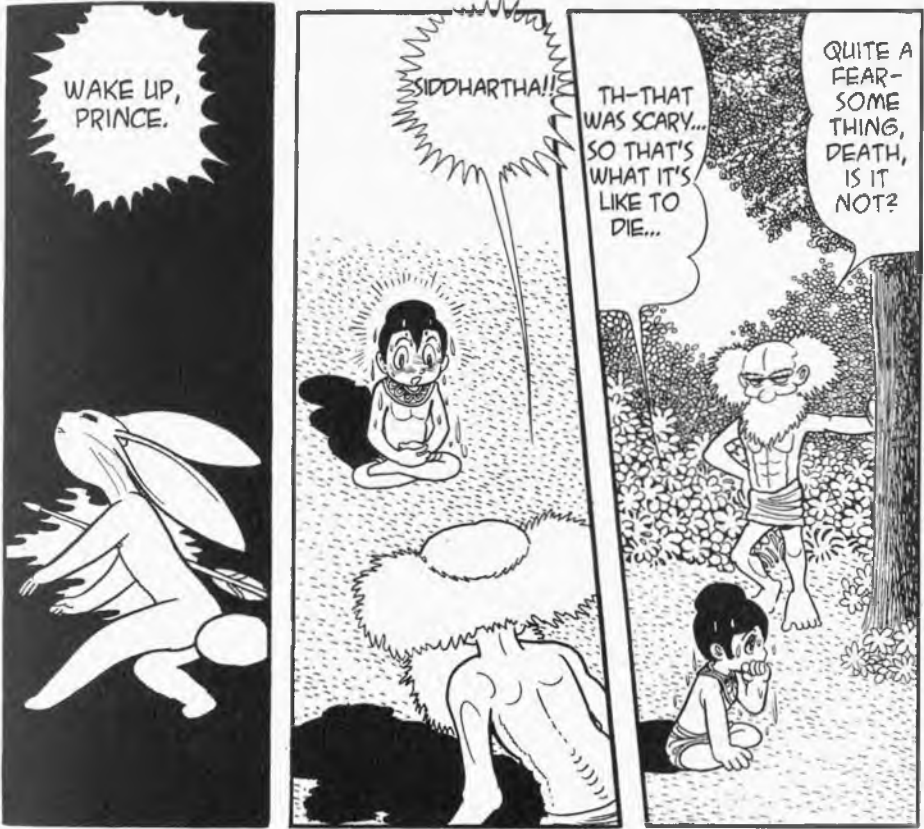
Special mention must be made of the superb covers designed especially for the Spanish edition of *Buda* by Jesús Saiz. The covers of the English edition take examples of Tezuka's drawings and are handsomely and attractively done, but Saiz's illustrations are works of art in themselves, and lend an "adult" air to the mature contents (including tasteful nudity and colorful language) of what might be mistaken as childish cartoons.

The producers of both the Spanish and English editions are to be congratulated for the high quality of these publications, and they deserve our thanks for making this work available to a wide audience. Shame, however, on the producers of the English edition for not giving credit to the translator(s), whose name(s) are nowhere

FIGURE 2-1



FIGURE 2-2



to be found, even though a close reading reveals great care and linguistic and cultural expertise.

In closing, let me add that some readers may be surprised to find a review of a “cartoon” in an academic journal, such as the *JJRS*. But Tezuka’s *Buddha* is not just a cartoon. It is entertaining, certainly, but it is also an informative educational tool that tells the story of the Buddha’s life, and also communicates the spirit of the Buddhist teachings in a creative, thought-provoking, contemporary manner. I recommend it highly, for young readers as well as hard-nosed Buddhologists, and as supplementary reading material for courses on Buddhism.

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