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TIME.COMIX ANDREW D. ARNOLD

Learn from the Master

TIME.comix on Osamu Tezuka's "Buddha"



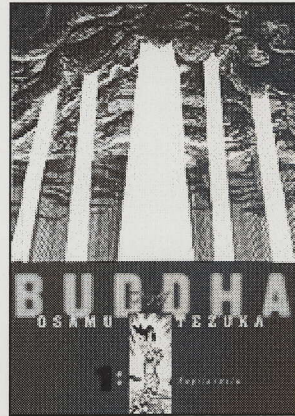
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Friday, Oct. 17, 2003
 Looking in each of the four primary directions a young man faces a choice: an elderly man, a scabrous woman, a corpse or a monk. Rejecting old age, disease and death, the man, Siddhartha, chooses the life of the monk and goes on to enlightenment in one of the key moments in the story of the Buddha. Thoughtful comix readers can relate

to such limited choices. Even among the more ambitious works of graphic literature there have been few explorations of spirituality or attempts at creating a distinct morality. But now a **radical, epic, ambitious, brilliant** option presents itself: Osamu Tezuka's "Buddha" (Vertical, Inc.; 400 pp.; \$24.95).

Osamu Tezuka (1928-1989), a former M.D., more or less invented Japanese comics — AKA manga — during the 1950s. Part D.W. Griffith and part Walt Disney, he is revered in Japan and throughout Asia but only recently has his work been appearing in quantity in the United States. His most famous creation, "Astro Boy," a series about a powerful robot who looks like a boy, has been reprinted by Dark Horse (see the TIME.comix [review](#).) "The Phoenix Saga," a multi-volume series considered his life's work has properly begun to appear here courtesy of Viz. Now Vertical Inc., a two-year-old publisher of translated Japanese literature has begun the first-ever English translation of "Buddha." Originally appearing in serialized form during the 1970s, "Buddha," an imaginative re-telling of the story the 6th-century B.C. teacher and spiritual leader, will be collected in eight stylish hardcover volumes. Two volumes appear at a time in the fall and spring. Volume one, "Kapilavastu," appeared this month. Volume two, "The Four Encounters," is due at the beginning of November. Volumes three and four will hopefully come out in April and June of 2004.



Osamu Tezuka's "Buddha" Vol. 1

It's lucky that practicing Buddhists tend to be liberal-minded. For one thing, the key events in the Buddha story appear in "Buddha" like cornerstones on which Tezuka constructs his own fantastic palace of myth and philosophy. The first volume, during which prince Siddhartha is born, barely concerns itself with this event. Instead the majority of the narrative follows Chapra, a talented slave child who hides his caste to become the adopted son of a general. Along the way he befriends Tatta, a cheeky little boy of the lowliest pariah caste. Tatta has the remarkable ability to take over the minds of animals, making him the target of intense interest by a young monk, Naradatta. With tragic consequences Chapra's secret eventually comes out, setting up the themes of escaping cycles of destiny and the futility of violence. Chapra, Tatta and many other characters too numerous to mention are wholly fictional and original to Tezuka. Besides adding levels of narrative sophistication, this gives Tezuka room to explore the issues he has always been most concerned

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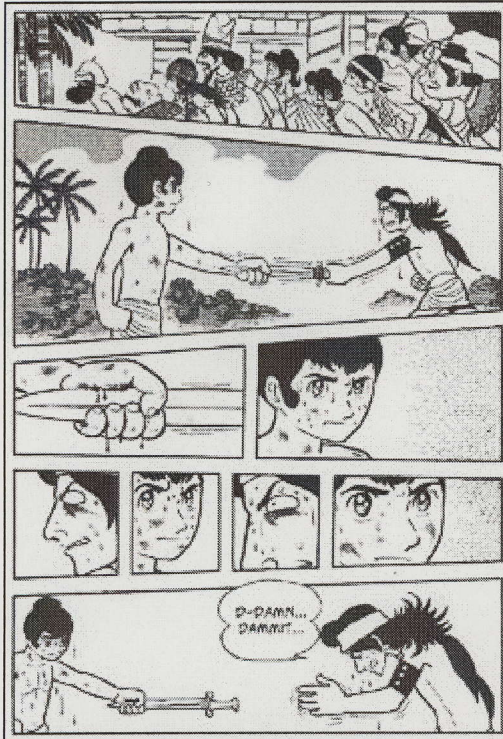
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with: the freedom, equality and sanctity of all life.



Siddhartha non-violently disarms the ruthless Bandaka in "Buddha" Vol. 2

Recalling traditional Japanese landscapes, with careful pen and ink craftsmanship Tezuka depicts mountain vistas and waterfalls. In one remarkable scene a swarm of locusts fills an entire two-page spread.

Cameos by characters from previous works, nonsense doodles, and even Hitchcock-like appearances by the artist himself, are de rigeur to Tezuka. He has an almost Shakespearian desire to mix high drama with low comedy, though Shakespeare rarely had characters doing both. At one point during volume one a powerful general sends away his escorts when he wishes to bathe in a pond. Adopting a silly, girlish pose and sprouting long eyelashes he says, "I don't want you to see me naked. Pray, won't you go?" Some of the oddity may be attributable to the translation, which puts modern vernacular ("It ain't no trick dude!") in the context of ancient India. The references to New York, Paris and beer-drinking "college girls" seems to be authentic to the original, though. Tezuka never lets you forget the essential cartoonishness of the medium or even that you are reading a comicbook. Characters that get really over-excited, for example, will bounce all around the frame or even tear it up.

Filled with beauty, cruelty, drama, comedy, romance and violence, Osamu Tezuka's "Buddha" encompasses the entirety of life in a masterpiece of graphic literature. Deeply moral but never moralistic, "Buddha" merges the delight of cartooning with the epic seriousness of one of the great religions, becoming a thing wholly unto itself. Even if you can't achieve satori with "Buddha," you can open up another world.

"Buddha" can be found at smart bookstores and savvy comic shops.

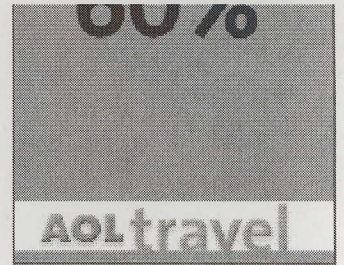
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Andrew Arnold has been writing about comix since 1995. His column appears on TIME.com every other weekend. [\[more\]](#)

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During the first two volumes Tezuka particularly explores the injustice of the caste system, and by implication, all human hierarchies. Thus, the second volume opens with the young Siddhartha being told he cannot play with the toys of the slave children. The sickly child, who frequently dozes off into meditative states, becomes increasingly obsessed with the inevitability of death and the cruel arbitrariness of the caste system. An older Tatta, the mischievous pariah, reappears and takes the prince away from his palace of luxury to experience the real world. There he meets Migaila, a bandit that he falls in love with. Returning home, though, Siddhartha is compelled to marry a princess and struggles with the calling to become king of a defenseless country or a monk.

Neither reverent nor irreverent "Buddha" can best be described as playfully serious. (Tezuka takes the Middle Path!) Much of this comes from a uniquely Tezuka form of comix making. The characters have a simplified, "cute" design but inhabit a highly detailed, realistic environment — a style that became the foundation of the manga look.

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