

Chapter 21

Missing the Key Concepts of Buddhism

The author has explained the two core principles of Buddhism in Chapter 2:

1. To know the truth of the universe and human life by eliminating delusion, discrimination, and attachment.
2. To deeply believe in the rule of cause and consequence.

In Hong Kong, where the majority of the population is Chinese, people enjoy religious freedom. Many like to consider themselves Buddhists. Most of them may have never participated in any admitting ceremony, which would be similar to Catholic baptism. If asked what Buddhism is, most people would give their honest answer: “I don’t know.” Some people would say something like: “I would like to receive the Heaven’s blessing.” Or others would respond with “you reap what you sow.” Although the last answer points to the correct direction, it is hardly satisfying. The fact is that offering a simple answer is not easy at all.

Where is Buddhism taking us? What is our destination? What should we do in order to reach the goal? Without answering these questions, we cannot clearly explain what Buddhism is. Without finding the central theme of Buddhism, people will still misunderstand the value of Buddhism. In such occasions, even if we understand a few Buddhist theories, we would not see the true fascination of Buddhism.

Those who are unfamiliar with Buddhist concepts would likely have a lot of questions in their minds. Below I am listing some of the key questions that might arise in helping readers to understand the framework of Buddhism and offer my answers.

1) What is the fundamental principle of Buddhism? (What is the most important element in Buddhist teachings?) What is the implication of enlightenment? Is believing in cyclic rebirth significant?

Chapter 2 has already provided answers to these questions. Principally speaking, Buddhist disciples believe in cyclic rebirth and unavoidable causes and consequences.

Another fundamental concept is for one to achieve Buddhahood, which is to restore one's "intrinsic nature." These are the fundamental aspects of Buddhism. If one does not recognize them, one can hardly claim that he understands Buddhism. Some writer once wrote that "Buddhists themselves can hardly reach any consensus over basic religious theories." I cannot agree with this author.

For those can have an appreciation of Chinese culture from reading Chinese texts, it can be easily observed that there are common themes running through Buddhism and Daoism, another Chinese religion. Not only are there voluminous texts on Buddhism, the same is true for Taoism. For example, a book on Taoism states that two aspects of Buddhism - "causation and consequence" and "enlightening one's mind to see one's (buddha-) nature" are incorporated

into formulating Daoism concepts. (These two concepts have been discussed in Chapter 2). The significance of this is that these two concepts are acknowledged by both Buddhist and Taoist believers.

2) What is Hinayana Buddhism comprised of? What about Mahayana Buddhism? What are the differences between these two traditions?

We need to know the two Buddhist themes addressed in Chapter 2, in order to recognize the differences and similarities between Mahayana and Hinayana Buddhism (see Chapter 19). As has been pointed above, the *Buddha Thesaurus Sutra* provides a lucid explanation of this point.

3) Why are there various schools in Buddhism? Why can they coexist?

A basic teaching of Buddhism is to be tolerant of different views. This attitude allows practitioners to adopt different interpretations towards Buddhism. The up side of this view is to avoid conflicts and to maintain peaceful relations among Buddhists. The down side is that practitioners must always keep in mind the major focuses of Buddhism, otherwise they would be in danger of going onto a road that deviates from the original path built by the founders of Buddhism. Chapter 20 has examined the reasons behind the origins of a variety of schools.

4) When we are not clear about the fundamental principles of Buddhism, can we say that there are several different kinds of Buddhism, and focus on their cultivating methods instead of searching for a universal prerequisite?

Actually the basic principles of Buddhism are quite clear. Those are the keynotes that should be recognized by disciples. We could see that all the schools respect these key aspects.

If any scholar of religious studies claims to propose some new concepts and expects to build a new religion, he has the right to do so. However, if he does not embrace any fundamental theory of Buddhism, what he does is not relevant to Buddhism. But if he would like to establish a new school within Buddhism, then his theory must be in accordance with the central themes of Buddhism, which have been articulated in Chapter 2. The basic Buddhist principles are so intelligible that we have no reason to think that there are multiple versions of Buddhism.

When it comes to cultivating methods, each school has its own way. No school can claim that its route is the single right answer. Such a claim would be against the principles of Buddhism.

- 5) Some analysts say that Buddhist disciples are not primarily concerned about the concepts of “faith” and “liberation,” for they are more interested in questions such as “what am I?”, “How is this done correctly?”. Is this true?**

The principles of Buddhism are indeed practical. And yet, faith is another necessary factor. Buddhists must believe in “intrinsic nature,” which is identical to Buddha-nature. They should also believe in the unavoidable relation between causes and consequences. It is worth noting that one does not have to comprehend the “four noble truths” and “eight correct paths” in order to claim one’s familiarity with Buddhism, even though many books written in foreign languages emphasize on the point.

- 6) Since the establishment of Buddhism by Śākyamuni, what changes have been made?**

From its inauguration to this day, the core principles of Buddhism have never altered, irrespective of whether it is Mahayana or Hinayana Buddhism, both of which have been referred to in the early scriptures.

We now know that earth formed about 4.54 billion years ago, whereas the earliest humans did not exist until 3.50 million years ago. If a religious principle is accepted as having universal Truth, then its authenticity must hold for all times. The concept of cyclic rebirth is applicable to all humans and other sentient beings, and it has constantly governed the universe during the 4.54 billion years.

According to Buddhist principles, cyclic rebirth has always been effective.

7) What prerequisites are needed to become a Buddhist disciple? How can one be qualified as a Buddhist disciple?

Anyone who comprehends and accepts the basic principles of Buddhism can be called a Buddhist. This does not require one to attend any formal ceremony, although participating in the ritual of formally joining Buddhism (see Chapter 6 for details) could be a choice. If one changes his mind, a person could claim not to be a Buddhist. There would not be any punishment or obstacle, but absolute freedom. Renouncing one's belief in Buddhism will not put one under pressure.

People who do not believe in Buddhism will not receive any discrimination in Buddhist communities. For those who marry Buddhists, they have complete freedom to decide whether or not to follow their spouses' belief. From the Buddhist point of view, it looks perfectly normal to have a family that consists of individuals with different religious beliefs.

8) What should Buddhist disciples bear in mind in their speech and behavior?

This book has made earlier reference to this point. First of all, Buddhist followers should understand the gist of Buddhism. Maybe they have had some vague impressions of

Buddhism, but as long as their thoughts are in line with the general gist, they are walking on the correct path. Moreover, they should take a right attitude towards their behaviour. Some scholars, especially followers of Hinayana Buddhism, accentuate the “four noble truths” and “eight correct paths” as the key to the right attitude. The right attitude could be also referred to truthfulness, purity, equality, the right understanding, and compassion.

Moreover, it is important that we could see through the essence of things, give up our rights, and enjoy the bliss that comes with the process of casting off attachment. We must not desire unattainable things. We must remember the teachings of Buddha. Detailed explanations of these ideas are provided in Chapter 6.

9) Should Buddhist disciples apply what they learn to daily life?

To practice what we have learned is very important. Buddhist principles could perfectly guide our daily behaviours. In this regard, we have tried to offer some concrete advice for readers through examples (see Chapter 13 and the second half of Chapter 6).

10) What is the meaning of Buddhism? How could Buddhism change our way of life?

This is a very important issue. Buddhist learners will not miss this after studying the gist of Buddhism. If you still feel confused after reading this book, I suggest you read it again.

11) What are the differences between Buddhism and Christianity?

According to Buddhism, one should “enlighten one’s mind to see one’s (buddha-) nature.” Christianity says we ought to “know the lord.” Both are eternal. It is impossible to judge who is right and who is wrong with a discriminating mind, as such effort will prove to be futile.