

## **Hard questions**

One of the greatest tests for Buddhism today is that we, Buddhists and non-Buddhists alike, can freely ask any questions we want about it. Of course, the more useful the questions, the more helpful the answers are likely to be; especially, answers that we can cull from the early Buddhist texts, the suttas.

The discoveries of ancient Buddhist manuscripts continue to support the fact that despite our growing knowledge of various interesting Buddhist texts from Central Asia or Gandhara, we still need the early Buddhist texts (that is, the Pali suttas) as the gold standard for any helpful discussion on the authenticity and usefulness of these ancient manuscripts as reflecting the Buddha's teachings.

Even if we are only interested in ancient manuscripts, we still need to master to some level the ancient Buddhist texts, to really appreciate the value of these recent discoveries. If we are deeply interested in the early Buddhist texts, then we will often find that these ancient manuscripts recently discovered, only confirm the truth and beauty of the suttas, or throw some new light on the truth and value of the Buddha's teaching.

For those of us who are interested in personal practice that brings awakening in this life, the early Buddhist texts are such a rich and vital wellspring of teachings to inspire and guide us. These precious texts also give us the methods, case studies and vocabulary related to the practice for the sake of self-awakening.

The early Buddhist texts are today available in more helpful translations, done by well-qualified Buddhist practitioners themselves. There is also a growing corpus of modern commentaries for a better understanding of the early Buddhist texts. Such understanding helps us to properly practise the Dharma. With the wholesome habit of meditation, cultivating inner calm and insight, we are even better equipped to see the suttas in clearer light and greater depth to enjoy their truth and beauty experienced in our daily lives.

If all this gather momentum, in the coming generations, we will begin to understand and value Buddhism, not as "truths that hold" (that is, as sectarian and imaginative religiosity) but as "the truth the frees." Just as our civilization has emerged from the Dark Ages of our great cultures to become a global and freer society today, we need to emerge from the Dark Age of sectarian narrowness and religious materialism.

The wisdom and compassion that the early Buddhist texts inspire in us, will help us see the later sectarian and imaginative teaching in new light. Instead of being burdened by the fetters of dogmas, superstition, rituals and personalities, we begin to see these teachings as doors and windows, even pathways, to the historical Buddha's teaching of self-awakening. All this makes really good sense if our priority is to learn and live the Dharma so that we are liberated.

For us to take the next step towards returning to the early Buddhist teachings – the liberating Dharma, not imaginative religion – we need to ask some hard questions, and face some hard truths. Here we will examine some of these key questions.

**QUESTION 1. Who wrote the later "sutras"?** Some of these sutras or texts have been attributed to various illustrious Mahayana teachers and philosophers, but mostly we do not know who

their authors were. However, where such texts depict the Buddha as a divine being, some kind of super-God, downgrade the arhats, and speak of the need of external help or agency for awakening, we know at once, these are deviations and misrepresentations of the Buddha's teachings.<sup>1</sup>

**The hard truth** is that the historical Buddha began as a human, awakened through self-effort, and passed away into nirvana: the Buddha's death shows that his teaching of impermanence is true but liberating. The arhats, those who have fully realized the Buddha's teachings, have no need of further "enlightenment."<sup>2</sup> Once the fire is extinguished, there is no more burning: there is coolness.

**QUESTION 2. Where did Buddha images come from?** Throughout the suttas there is not a single mention of the need of creating any images of the Buddha for worship. The idea never came up at all in the suttas. It was the Greeks who first produced beautiful Apollo-like images of the Buddha. People became so excited to be able to "see" the Buddha and other beings (such as Hercules taking role of Buddha protector as Vajrapani). Once such images were produced and accepted – especially with the patronage and support of kings, the powerful and the wealthy – such images became widespread and popular, and no one apparently questioned their authenticity, or those voices of dissent were not recorded, and hence not heard.

**The hard truth** is that the Buddha clearly discourages and forbids such worship. To worship the Buddha is to relegate him to the status and role of a God, still stuck in samsara, this impermanent world of life and death. It is like saying that cabbages and kings exist on the sub-atomic level of matter. In fact, the Buddha clearly states that the "supreme worship" is not to worship the Buddha, but to practise the Dharma "in accordance with the Dharma" so that we self-awaken.<sup>3</sup> We should practice right action and right mindfulness.

**QUESTION 3. Where do the countless Buddhas and Bodhisattvas come from?** An intelligent young Buddhist once posed this question to a well known Taiwanese Mahāyāna scholar during the seminar in Singapore. His answer: From other world systems!

Do we really know this? Again the suttas are totally silent about all these fabulous Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. They are first mentioned in the post-Buddha Sutras written by various imaginative Indian, Central Asian, and East Asian authors. Unlike the proper names found in the suttas, these new invented "beings" have long exotic names.<sup>4</sup> At best, we can say that these are objects of faith, just like the God-idea. We have no empirical proof whatsoever that they actually exist. They definitely do not exist the way we exist; for, then they would be human and impermanent. We should cultivate right speech and right view.

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<sup>1</sup> See eg J Hubbard & P Swanson, *Pruning the Bodhi tree*, Univ of Hawaii Press, 1997, esp "Why they say Zen is not Buddhism" (3-29), "The Lotus Sutra and Japanese culture" (388-406):

[http://www.goodreads.com/book/show/1955007.Pruning\\_the\\_Bodhi\\_Tree](http://www.goodreads.com/book/show/1955007.Pruning_the_Bodhi_Tree),

<sup>2</sup> **Sambuddha Sutta** (S 22.58), SD 49.10.

<sup>3</sup> See **Mahā,parinibbāna Sutta** (D 16) §§5.1-3 @ SD 9. See also Reflection, "[The supreme worship](#)," R378, 2015.

<sup>4</sup> Even some purportedly deep meditative states are given grand long names, such as Sarva,dharma,svabhāva,-samatā-vipañcitā-samādhi, "The samadhi elaborated as the sameness in their essence of all phenomena." In fact, this is not a samadhi at all, but the name of a philosophical idea mentioned in the Samādhi,rāja Sūtra. See Andrew Skilton, "[State or statement? Samādhi](#) in some early Mahāyāna Sutras," *The Eastern Buddhist* ns 34,2 2002:51-93.

One local Mahāyāna teacher even publicly claimed that these Buddhas and Bodhisattvas are very real, “just as you and I are real!” If someone or something is as real as we are, clearly then, they would also be just as impermanent and limited in powers and knowledge as we are.

I’m sure you can think of other hard Buddhist questions like these. It’s good to ask such hard questions, as they work like a strainer to filter away the inessentials, leaving us with the essentials. What are these essentials of the Buddha’s teaching?

The Buddha’s teaching begins with the basics. Firstly, we have a **body**, made up of the physical senses. Since these are our windows into the world, we need to keep them open and clean, so that we get a true and clear vision of reality. This is the basis of Buddhist ethics.

Secondly, how do we know that we have a body? We “know” it with our **mind**. It makes sense of the experiences of the 5 physical senses. So, now we have a total of 6 senses – these are our tools of knowing things. All that we can – and need to know – are the 6 sense-objects: what we see, hear, smell, taste, touch, and think. In fact, this is what we basically mean when we speak of being “objective.”

We are referring to empirical truths, true reality that can be repeated, that others, too, would experience for themselves. However, how we react to these experiences is another matter. This is where the Buddha’s teaching is very helpful, that is, in instructing us how to discern between virtual reality and true reality, and what to do then. This is the basis of Buddhist training that leads on to self-awakening.

R444 Revisioning Buddhism 148

[an occasional re-look at the Buddha’s Example and Teachings]

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