



Key concepts

- Buddhism rejects any form of blind faith – what is required is akaravati saddha (confidence based on reason and experience).
- Blindly clinging to views rather than fully grasping the dhamma is likened to the wrong grasping of the water-snake which will lead it to bite a person; wrong grasping of the dhamma can only be countered through close questioning of the Buddha and of experienced monks.
- In the Kalama Sutta, the Buddha teaches the Kalamas that in trying to find out the truth as to what to believe they should not follow second-hand knowledge but instead through investigation, observation and experience they should know for themselves.
- Asian Buddhist worldviews recognise the five realms of existence: hell realm, ghost realm, animal realm, human realm and God realm.
- The realms and beings within them are described in detail in various traditions e.g. Hot Ashes Hell, 31 planes of existence in the universe divided into three realms, Mount Meru, the King of the devas, Sakra who lives on the summit of Mount Meru in Tavatimsa one of the Buddhist heavens.
- HH the Dalai Lama has assessed science to be of great importance in Tibetan Buddhism: viewing the moon through a telescope as young boy made him begin to doubt Buddhist cosmology as found in the Abhidhamma Pitaka.
- In 2000, he introduced modern science education – psychology, physics and astronomy – into the Tibetan monastic curriculum; he endorsed the use of modern medicine, rather than reliance on Buddha Bhaishajya as the Medicine Buddha.
- He taught that modern science is ‘very precise and accurate’ in its analysis of ‘the material world, evolution of universe, and nature of chemical substances’ and that this would complement Buddhist understanding of these topics.
- He helped to found the Mind and Life Institute which studies neuroscience and cognitive science both of which, along neuroplasticity, are all to be found in Buddhist understanding of the mind and the importance of meditation.
- From one perspective, Buddhism is closely aligned with science: the Japanese Buddhist philosopher Inoue Enryo stated that Buddhism was scientific and based on fact; Huxley in the 19th century argued that the law of karma was an observable law of the universe because it was entirely based on causation.
- The Dalai Lama argues Buddhism does not reify – make what is abstract such as God ‘material’ – and is thus more aligned with science than many religions.
- Sunyata, anicca, and anatta are compatible with modern science such as quantum physics and new discoveries about how the mind works.
- From another perspective, Buddhism and a scientific world view are incompatible: it is only a modern and narrow Western perspective of Buddhism which removes anything supernatural from Buddhism.
- Tibetan meditation involves the mystical use of the Vajra, bell, elaborate mudras, mandalas, visualisation of Buddhas, bodhisattvas, devas, devaputras and the realms in which they exist.
- Dukkha has no scientific basis and neither does samsara and rebirth; the Buddha himself declared that a number of scientific questions regarding the universe would be ‘undeclared, set aside and discarded’.

Key quotes

The Buddha emphasised self-reliance and the experiential testing-out of all teachings, including his own.’ (Harvey)

‘If science proves some belief of Buddhism wrong, then Buddhism will have to change.’ (The Dalai Lama)

‘Which Buddhist doctrines can be eliminated while allowing Buddhism to remain Buddhism? Can there be Buddhism without Mount Meru?’ (Lopez)

Key words

Bhaishajya **Kalama**
deva **saddha**
Sutta **Jambudvipa**
Mount Meru
Neuroplasticity
avyakata

Key arguments/debates

Some focus on the difference understanding of faith and belief in Buddhism.

Others focus on Buddhism as requiring faith and belief in supernatural concepts.

Key questions

To what extent is it only a western convert understanding of Buddhism which is compatible with science rather than an eastern heritage understanding?

Are concepts such as anicca, anatta and karma based on science and empirical observation rather than on faith and belief in the supernatural?

Issues for analysis and evaluation