

Study Guide questions for *Monkey* by Wu Ch'êng-ên, trans. Arthur Waley

For any of the questions below, try to find several good examples and passages to discuss together. Please make sure that you give everyone in your peer group a chance to speak to at least a part of a question or topic. This work does count toward your participation grade! (4 people maximum per group)

1. Given that all religions have some validity, provided that the believer is sincere and devoted in his belief, what characters show sincerity and devotion, and why do they do it? When do they show piety in any of its forms, including filial piety? When do characters show a lack of piety or sincerity or devotion?
2. If one can grasp the meaning of life only through great struggles, endurance, much suffering, and the life-long pursuit of learning, in what ways does Monkey show endurance through struggle and suffering? Is he forever learning, and if so, what is he learning?
3. Human nature can be seen not only seriously but also comically. What episodes show the comic aspects of humans or other beings or creatures? When is Monkey a comic character? When does Monkey show human frailties and failings? Is anyone else a comic character? If so, when and how?
4. Given that poetic justice means that characters get what they deserve in the end, what are some of the examples where characters face consequences for crimes and broken promises etc? Does the universe of *Monkey* seem to function in a way that is fair, ultimately?
5. Bureaucracy and government officials are parodied or satirized in Heaven and in the land of the dead (the World of Darkness) in *Monkey*, often for comic effect. Find examples of characters encountering bureaucrats in otherworldly places, and discuss the points being made. For example, do you think the author is sometimes making points about government officials?
6. Monkey as a king of the monkeys has some things in common with Gilgamesh as a king, e.g. a desire for immortality. When they are good kings, what virtues do they show? Is one of them better than the other? When they are not good kings, what failings do they share? Who has the greatest flaws as a king?
7. Given that situational irony means that things are not as they should be, in what episodes do you see examples of situational irony? Given that cosmic irony means that the universe is rigged in a way that goes against what sentient beings would wish for, are there examples of cosmic irony in the novel so far?

Further study questions for *Monkey*.

7. Redemption and “salvation” are important themes in *Monkey*. Piety is shown in many ways in this story, and pious acts seem to add up to the benefit of the character. What are some of the examples of pious action resulting in redemption or “salvation”?

8. Compare the character development of Monkey to that of some of the others in the novel, e.g. Pigsy and Tripitaka. In what ways are they becoming more enlightened, and in what ways are they clearly not becoming more enlightened? Try to find examples of actions that reveal their characters’ flaws as well as virtues as they change. Where do you see Monkey acting or feeling self-important and/or egotistical?

9. Compare the character developments of Monkey, Pigsy and Tripitaka to the character developments of the heroes in *Gilgamesh*. Though the novel is primarily comic and the epic is more serious and even tragic (possibly), how do the characters’ traits, flaws, and/or virtues compare? Which characters do you care about more, and what episodes or scenes make you care?

10. Kuan-yin, a.k.a. Guanyin or Guanshiyin, is a Bodhisattva and not a deity although she (originally he) is treated as a deity in Chinese popular practice, and is one of the most popular “gods” in East Asia. How is she depicted in *Journey to the West*, and how does she compare to other gods and Buddhist figures?

11. If Tripitaka is our only pure and good character, how effective is he? What does each character on the quest bring to the group? In what ways do they play off against each other, and how do their interactions contribute the story? Why is it that Tripitaka and Monkey attain Buddhahood but Pigsy does not?

12. How are Taoists depicted in the novel? In what ways are they shown to be engaged in questionable or bad activities? How do the Buddhists and Taoists stand in comparison with each other? How do you reconcile these episodes and scenes with the idea that all religions should be revered?

Final *Monkey* questions

13. Go back to our definition of the novel and consider what makes this story exemplify the novel genre. Why is Monkey a good novel hero? Why would he not make a good epic hero? How about Tripitaka? Is he a good novel hero, or would he be a better epic hero?

14. Look in the novel for acts of generosity (in any of its forms), discipline and patience. Then look for examples of their opposites, i.e. the nonvirtues of greed (selfishness), a lack of discipline, and anger. How are acts that shows the virtues rewarded, and how are their opposites rewarded?

15. Look in the novel for evidence of exertion, meditation, and wisdom (in any of its forms). Then look for examples of their opposites, i.e. the nonvirtues of laziness (sloth), mindlessness (lack of awareness), and foolishness. How are acts that shows the virtues rewarded, and how are their opposites rewarded?

16. The last paragraph of the novel is a dedication to the Buddha. In what ways does this novel “mitigate the sufferings of the lost and damned”? Do you think it turns the hearts of its readers toward a greater kind of truth? If so, what of value do you take away from *Monkey*?

Background information for *Monkey* {<http://www.religionfacts.com/buddhism/sects/theravada.htm>}

The Theravada form of Buddhism is dominant in southern Asia, especially in Sri Lanka, Myanmar (Burma), Thailand, Cambodia and Laos. It is sometimes known as "Southern Buddhism." Theravada means "The Way of the Elders" in Pali, reflecting the Theravadins' belief that they most closely follow the original beliefs and practices of the Buddha and the early monastic Elders. The authoritative text for Theravadas is the Pali Canon, an early Indian collection of the Buddha's teachings. The later Mahayana sutras are not recognized.

The purpose of life for Theravadins is to become an arhat, a perfected saint who has achieved nirvana and will not be reborn again. Southern Buddhism tends to be more monastic, strict and world-renouncing than its Northern counterpart, and its approach is more philosophical than religious. There are four stages to becoming an arhat:

Sotapanna ("stream-enterer") - a convert, attained by overcoming false beliefs

Sakadagamin ("once-returner") - one who will only be reborn once more, attained by diminishing lust, hatred and illusion

Anagamin ("never-returner") - one who will be reborn in heaven, where he or she will become an arahant

Arhat ("worthy one") - one who has attained perfect enlightenment and will never be reborn

Because of this focus on personal attainment and its requirement that one must renounce the world to achieve salvation, Mahayana Buddhists refer to Theravada Buddhism as the "Lesser Vehicle" (Hinayana). In Theravada, it is thought to be highly unlikely, even impossible, that a layperson can achieve liberation. Because Mahayana disagrees, it regards itself as providing a "Greater Vehicle" to liberation, in which more people can participate.

<http://www.religionfacts.com/buddhism/sects/mahayana.htm>

Mahayana Buddhism emerged in the first century CE as a more liberal, accessible interpretation of Buddhism. As the "Greater Vehicle" (literally, the "Greater Ox-Cart"), Mahayana is a path available to people from all walks of life—not just monks and ascetics.

Mahayana Buddhism is the primary form of Buddhism in North Asia and the Far East, including China, Japan, Korea, Tibet and Mongolia, and is thus sometimes known as Northern Buddhism. Mahayana Buddhists accept the Pali Canon as sacred scripture with the Theravadans, but also many other works, the Sutras, which were written later and in Sanskrit.

Theravada and Mahayana Buddhists differ in their perspective on the ultimate purpose of life and the way in which it can be attained. As discussed on the last page, Theravada Buddhists strive to become arhats, or perfected saints who have attained enlightenment and nirvana. This is considered to only be possible for monks and nuns, who devote their entire lives to the task. The best outcome the laity can hope for is to be reborn in the monastic life.

Mahayana Buddhists, on the other hand, hope to become not arhats but bodhisattvas, saints who have become enlightened but who unselfishly delay nirvana to help others attain it as well, as the Buddha did. Perhaps more significantly for one who would choose between the paths, Mahayana Buddhists teach that enlightenment can be attained in a single lifetime, and this can be accomplished even by a layperson. The various subdivisions within the Mahayana tradition, such as Zen, Nichiren, and Pure Land, promote different ways of attaining this goal, but all are agreed that it can be attained in a single lifetime by anyone.

The Mahayana form of Buddhism tends to be more religious in nature than its Theravadan counterpart. It often includes veneration of celestial beings, Buddhas and bodhisattvas, ceremonies, religious rituals, magical rites, and the use of icons, images, and other sacred objects. The role of such religious elements varies, however: it is central to Tibetan/Tantric Buddhism, but is highly discouraged by Zen practitioners, who have been known to burn statues of the Buddha to demonstrate their unimportance.