

Reading the Suttas

Befriending the Suttas: Tips on Reading the Pali Discourses

"Thus you should train yourselves: 'We will listen when discourses that are words of the Tathagata — deep, deep in their meaning, transcendent, connected with emptiness — are being recited. We will lend ear, will set our hearts on knowing them, will regard these teachings as worth grasping and mastering.' That's how you should train yourselves."

— Samyutta Nikaya, 20.7

The Pali canon contains many thousands of suttas (discourses), of which more than one thousand are now available in English translation here at Access to Insight. When faced with such a vast store of riches, three questions naturally spring to mind: Why should I read the suttas? Which ones should I read? How should I read them?

There are no simple cookie-cutter answers to these questions; the best answers will be the ones you discover on your own. Nevertheless, I offer here a few ideas, suggestions, and tips that I've found to be helpful over the years in my own exploration of the suttas. Perhaps you'll find some of them helpful, too.

Why should I read the suttas?

They are the primary source of Theravada Buddhist teachings.

If you're interested in exploring the teachings of Theravada Buddhism, then the Pali canon — and the suttas it contains — is the place to turn for authoritative advice and support. You needn't worry about whether or not the words in the suttas were actually uttered by the historical Buddha (no one can ever prove this either way). Just keep in mind that the teachings in the suttas have been practiced — with apparent success — by countless followers for some 2,600 years. If you want to know whether or not the teachings really work, then study the suttas and put their teachings into practice and find out firsthand, for yourself.

They present a complete body of teachings.

The teachings in the suttas, taken in their entirety, present a complete roadmap guiding the follower from his or her current state of spiritual maturity onwards toward the final goal. No matter what your current state may be (skeptical outsider, dabbler, devout lay practitioner, or celibate monk or nun), there is something in the suttas to help you progress another step further along the path towards the goal.

As you read more and more widely in the Pali canon, you may find less of a need to borrow teachings from other spiritual traditions, as the suttas contain most of what you need to know.

They present a self-consistent body of teachings.

The teachings in the Canon are largely self-consistent, characterized by a single taste [Ud 5.5] — that of liberation. As you wend your way through the suttas, however, from time to time you may encounter some teachings that call into question — or outright contradict — your present understanding of Dhamma. As you reflect deeply on these stumbling blocks, the conflicts often dissolve as a new horizon of understanding opens up. For example, you might conclude from reading one sutta [Sn 4.1] that your practice should be to avoid all desires. But upon reading another [SN 51.15], you learn that desire itself is a necessary factor of the path. Only upon reflection does it become clear that what the Buddha is getting at is that there are different kinds of desire, and that some things are actually *worth* desiring — most notably, the extinction of all desire. At this point your understanding expands into new territory that can easily encompass both suttas, and the apparent contradiction evaporates. Over time you can learn to recognize these apparent "conflicts" not as inconsistencies in the suttas themselves but as an indication that the suttas have carried you to a frontier of your own understanding. It's up to you to cross beyond that boundary.

They offer lots of practical advice.

In the suttas you'll find a wealth of practical advice on a host of relevant real-world topics, such as: how children and parents can live happily together [DN 31], how to safeguard your material possessions [AN 4.255], what sorts of things are and are not worth talking about [AN 10.69], how to cope with grief [AN 5.49], how to train your mind even on your deathbed [SN 22.1], and much, much more. In short, they offer very practical and realistic advice on how to find happiness, no matter what your life-situation may be, no matter whether you call yourself "Buddhist" or not. And, of course, you'll also find ample instructions on how to meditate [e.g., MN 118, DN 22].

They can bolster your confidence in the Buddha's teachings.

As you explore the suttas, you'll come across things that you already know to be true from your own experience. Perhaps you're already well acquainted with the hazards of alcoholism [DN 31], or perhaps you've already tasted the kind of refined pleasure that naturally arises in a concentrated mind [AN 5.28].

Seeing your own experience validated in the suttas — even in small ways — can make it easier to accept the possibility that the more refined or "advanced" experiences that the Buddha describes may not be so farfetched after all, and that some of the more counter-intuitive and difficult teachings may not, in fact, be so strange. This validation can inspire renewed confidence and energy that will help your meditation and your understanding forge ahead into new territory.

They can support and energize your meditation practice.

When you read in the suttas about other people's meditation experiences, you may begin to get a feel for what you have already accomplished in your own practice, and what still remains to be done. This understanding can provide a powerful impetus to apply yourself even more wholeheartedly to the teachings.

Reading them is just plain good for you.

The instructions contained in the suttas are entirely of a wholesome nature, and are all about the development of skillful qualities such as generosity, virtue, patience, concentration, mindfulness, and so on. When you read a sutta you are therefore filling your mind with wholesome things. If you consider all the harmful impressions with which the modern media bombard us day in and day out, a little regular sutta study can become an island of sanity and safety in a dangerous sea. Take good care of your mind — read a sutta today and take it to heart.

Which suttas should I read?

The short answer is: Whichever ones you like.

It can be helpful to think of the Dhamma as a multi-faceted jewel, with each sutta offering a glimpse of one or two of those facets. For example, there are teachings of the four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path; of dana and sila; of mindfulness of breathing and mindfulness of death; of living skillfully as a layperson or as an ordained monk. No single sutta says it all; each one depends upon all the others to paint a complete picture of the Buddha's teachings. The more widely you can read in the suttas, the more complete your picture of this jewel becomes.

As a starting point, every student of Buddhism should study, reflect upon, and put into practice the Five Precepts and the Five Subjects for Daily Contemplation. Furthermore, we should take to heart the Buddha's advice to his young son, Rahula, which concerns our basic responsibilities whenever we perform an intentional act of any kind.

From there, you can follow along with the Buddha's own step-by-step or "graduated" system of teachings that encompasses the topics of generosity, virtue, heaven, drawbacks of sensuality, renunciation, and the four Noble Truths.

If you're interested in a solid grounding on the basics of the Buddha's teachings, three suttas are widely regarded as essential reading: Setting the Wheel of Dhamma in Motion (SN 56.11), The Discourse on the Not-self Characteristic (SN 22.59), and The Fire Sermon (SN 35.28). Together, these suttas — the "Big Three" of the Sutta Pitaka — define the essential themes of the Buddha's teachings that reappear in countless variations throughout the Canon. In these suttas we are introduced to such fundamental notions as: the Four Noble Truths; the nature of *dukkha*; the Eightfold Path; the "middle way"; the "wheel" of the Dhamma; the principle of *anatta* (not-self) and the analysis of one's "self" into the five aggregates; the principle of shedding one's enchantment with sensual gratification; and the many planes of being that characterize the vast range of Buddhist cosmology. These basic principles provide a sturdy framework upon which all the other teachings in the Canon can be placed.

Furthermore, these three suttas demonstrate beautifully the Buddha's remarkable skill as teacher: he organizes his material in clear, logical, and memorable ways by using lists (the Four Noble Truths, the Eightfold Path, the five aggregates, etc.); he engages his listeners in an active dialogue, to help them reveal for themselves the errors in their understanding; he conveys his points by using similes and imagery that his listeners readily understand; and, most significantly, time and again he connects with his listeners so effectively that they are able to realize for themselves the transcendent results that he promises. Seeing the Buddha for the extraordinarily capable teacher that he is encourages us to proceed even deeper into the Canon, confident that his teachings won't lead us astray.

A few other fruitful points of departure:

- The Khuddaka Nikaya offers a rich mine of important suttas in verse form. Consider, in particular, the Dhammapada, the Sutta Nipata, the Therigatha, and the Theragatha.
- For the Buddha's basic instructions on breath meditation, see the Anapanasati Sutta; for his instructions on the practice of mindfulness, see the Maha-satipatthana Sutta.

- To learn how to cultivate a heart of loving kindness, see the Karaniya Metta Sutta.
- In the Devadaha Sutta Ven. Sariputta explains how to introduce the Buddha's teachings to inquisitive, intelligent people — people like you.
- How does one decide which spiritual paths are worth following and which are not? The Kalama Sutta sheds light on this ancient dilemma.
- In the Sigalovada Sutta the Buddha offers a concise "instruction manual" that shows how laypeople can live happy and fulfilling lives.

When you find a sutta that captures your interest, look for others like it.[1] From there, wander at will, picking up whatever gems catch your eye along the way.

How should I read a sutta?

To get the most from your sutta studies, it can be helpful to consider a few general principles before you actually begin reading and, once you've begun reading a sutta, to bear in mind a few questions as you read.

Some general principles

There is no such thing as a "definitive" translation.

Don't forget that the Pali canon was recorded in Pali, not in English. Not once in his career did the Buddha speak of "suffering" or "enlightenment"; he spoke instead of such things as *dukkha* and *nibbana*. Keep in mind, too, that every English translation has been filtered and processed by a translator — someone inextricably embedded within his or her culture at a particular moment in time, and whose experience and understanding inevitably color the translation. British translations of the suttas from the late 19th and early 20th century sound leaden and dreary to us today; a hundred years from now, today's translations will undoubtedly sound equally archaic. Translation, like the cartographer's attempts to project the round Earth onto a flat sheet of paper, is an imperfect art.

It is probably best not to let yourself get too comfortable with any one particular translation, whether of a word or of an entire sutta. Just because, for example, one translator equates "suffering" with *dukkha* or "Unbinding" with *nibbana*, doesn't mean that you should accept those translations as truth.

Try them on for size, and see how they work for you. Allow plenty of room for your understanding to change and mature, and cultivate a willingness to consider alternate translations. Perhaps, over time, your own preferences will change (you may, for example, come to find "stress" and "quenching" more helpful). Remember that any translation is just a convenient — but provisional — crutch that you must use until you can come to your own first-hand understanding of the ideas it describes.

If you're really serious about understanding what the suttas are about, you'll just have to bite the bullet and learn some Pali. But there's an even better way: read the translations and put the teachings they contain into practice until you get the results promised by the Buddha. Mastery of Pali is, thankfully, not a prerequisite for Awakening.

No one sutta contains all the teachings.

To reap the greatest reward from the Canon, explore many different suttas, not just a select few. The teachings on mindfulness, for example, although valuable, represent just a small sliver of the entirety of the Buddha's teachings. Rule of thumb: whenever you think you understand what the Buddha's teachings are all about, take that as a sign that you need to dig a little deeper.

Don't worry about whether or not a sutta contains the actual words uttered by the historical Buddha.

There is no way to prove it one way or other. Just read the suttas, put the teachings into practice as best you can, and see what happens.

If you like a sutta, read it again.

Sometimes you'll come across a sutta that grabs hold of you in some way when you first read it. Trust this reaction and read it again; it means both that the sutta has something valuable to teach you and that you're ripe to receive the teaching it offers. From time to time re-read the suttas you remember having liked months or years ago. You may discover in them some nuances now that you missed earlier.

If you dislike a sutta, read it again.

Sometimes you'll come across a sutta that is just plain irritating. Trust this reaction; it means that the sutta has something valuable to teach you, although you may not be quite ready for it yet. Put a bookmark there and put the sutta aside for now. Pick it up a few weeks, months, or years later, and try again. Perhaps someday you'll connect with it.

If a sutta is boring, confusing, or unhelpful, just put it aside.

Depending on your current interests and depth of practice, you may find that a given sutta just doesn't make sense or seems utterly tedious and boring. Just put that one aside for now and try another one. Keep trying until you find one that makes a direct, personal connection.

A good sutta is one that inspires you to stop reading it.

The whole point of reading suttas is to inspire you to develop right view, live an upright life, and meditate correctly. So if, as you're reading, you feel a growing urge to put down the book, go sit in a quiet spot, close your eyes, and attend to the breath, then *do it!* The sutta will have then fulfilled its purpose. It will still be there when you come back to it later.

Read the sutta aloud, from beginning to end.

This helps in several ways: it encourages you to read every single word of the sutta, it trains your mouth to use right speech, and it teaches your ears how to listen to Dhamma.

Listen for teachings at different levels.

Many suttas offer teachings on several levels simultaneously, and it's good to develop an ear for that. For example, when the Buddha explains to a disciple the finer points of right speech, notice how the Buddha himself uses speech [MN 58]. Does the Buddha "practice what he preaches"? Do you?

Don't ignore the repetitions.

Many suttas contain repetitive passages. Read the sutta as you would a piece of music: when you sing or listen to a song, you don't skip over each chorus; likewise, when you read a sutta, you shouldn't skip over the refrains. As in music, the refrains in the suttas often contain unexpected — and important — variations that you don't want to miss.

Discuss the sutta with a friend or two.

By sharing your observations and reactions with a friend, both of you can deepen your understanding of the sutta. Consider forming an informal sutta study group. If you have lingering questions about a sutta, ask an experienced and trusted teacher for guidance. Consult with elder monks and nuns, as their unique perspective on the teachings can often help you break through your bottlenecks of confusion.

Learn a little Pali.

Once you've read a few suttas or a few different translations of the same sutta, you may find yourself puzzled by particular choices of words. For example, why does this translator use the word "foundations of mindfulness" while that one uses "frames of reference"? What are these phrases really getting at? Turning to a Pali-English dictionary and looking up the word *satipatthana* (and its component elements) can help shed new light on this word, paving the way to an even more rewarding study of the suttas.

Read what others have said about the sutta.

It's always helpful to read what commentators — both contemporary and ancient — have to say about the suttas. Some people find the classical Tipitaka commentaries — particularly those by the medieval writer Buddhaghosa — to be helpful. A few of these are available in English translation from the Pali Text Society and the Buddhist Publication Society. Some people prefer more contemporary commentators, such as those who have written in the Wheel Publications of the Buddhist Publication Society. Many outstanding booklets and articles have been written by authors such as Vens. Bodhi, Khantipalo, Ñanamoli, Narada, Nyanaponika, Soma, and Thanissaro. You may also enjoy reading the excellent introductions and endnotes to Bhikkhu Bodhi's *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1995) and Maurice Walshe's *The Long Discourses of the Buddha* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1987). Also read from the masters in the Thai forest traditions, as they offer refreshing and unique perspectives on the suttas that are based on deep meditative experience.

Give the sutta time to ripen.

Whatever helpful message you found in the sutta, whatever satisfying taste it left behind, let that grow and develop in the course of your meditation practice and in your life.

Over time, the ideas, impressions, and attitudes conveyed by the sutta will gradually percolate into your consciousness, informing the way you view the world. One day you may even find yourself in the middle of an otherwise ordinary everyday experience when suddenly the recollection of a sutta you read long ago will spring to mind, bringing with it a powerful Dhamma teaching that's exactly appropriate for this moment.

To facilitate this slow ripening process, allow yourself plenty of room for the suttas. Don't cram your sutta reading in among all your other activities. Don't read too many suttas all at once. Make sutta study a special, contemplative activity. It should be a pleasant experience. If it becomes dry and irritating, put it all aside and try again in a few days, weeks, or months. Sutta study calls for more than simply reading it once or twice and telling yourself, "There. I've 'done' the Satipatthana Sutta. What's next?" After you finish reading a sutta, take a little time out afterwards for some breath meditation to give the teachings a chance to settle down into the heart.

Questions to bear in mind

As you read a sutta, keep in mind that you are eavesdropping on the Buddha as he teaches someone else. Unlike many of the Buddha's contemporaries from other spiritual traditions, who would often adhere to a fixed doctrine when answering every question [AN 10.93], the Buddha tailored his teachings to meet the particular needs of his audience. It is therefore important to develop a sensitivity to the context of a sutta, to see in what ways the circumstances of the Buddha's audience may be similar to your own, so you can gauge how best to apply the Buddha's words to your own life situation.

As you read, it can be helpful to keep certain questions circulating gently in the back of your mind, both to help you understand the context of the sutta and to help you tune in to the different levels of teaching that are often going on at once. These questions aren't meant to make you into a Buddhist literary scholar; they're simply meant to help each sutta come alive for you.

What is the setting?

The opening paragraph of the sutta (usually beginning, "Thus have I heard...") sets the stage for the sutta. Does it take place in a village, in a monastery, in the forest? What season is it? What events are taking place in the background? Fixing these details in your mind reminds you that this sutta describes *real* events that happened to *real* people — like you and me.

What is the story?

One sutta may offer little in the way of a narrative story [AN 7.6], while another may be filled with pathos and drama, perhaps even resembling a short story [Mv 10.2.3-20]. How does the story line itself reinforce the teachings presented in the sutta?

Who initiates the teaching?

Does the Buddha take the initiative [AN 10.69], or does someone come to him with questions [DN 2]? If the latter, are there any unspoken assumptions or attitudes lying behind the questions? Does someone come to the Buddha with the intention of defeating him in debate [MN 58]? These considerations can give you a sense of the motivation behind the teachings, and of the listener's receptivity to the Buddha's words. With what attitude do *you* approach these teachings?

Who is teaching?

Is the teacher the Buddha [SN 15.3], one of his disciples [SN 22.85], or both [SN 22.1]? Is he or she ordained [SN 35.191] or a layperson [AN 6.16]? What is the teacher's depth of understanding (e.g., is she "merely" a stream-enterer [AN 6.16], or is she an arahant [Thig 5.4])? Having some sense of the teacher's credentials can help you assess the context of the teachings. Many suttas offer little in the way of biographical details about the participants; in such cases consult the commentaries or ask a Buddhist scholar or monastic for help.

To whom are the teachings directed?

Are they addressed to a monk [SN 35.85], nun [AN 4.159], or lay follower [AN 7.49]? Are they addressed to one group of people, while someone else within earshot actually takes the teaching to heart [SN 35.197]? Is the audience a large assembly [MN 118] or an individual [AN 4.184]? Or are the listeners followers of another religion altogether [MN 57]? What is the depth of their understanding? If the audience consists of stream-enterers striving for arahantship, the teachings presented may be considerably more advanced than if the audience has only a limited grasp of the Buddha's teachings [AN 3.65]. These questions can help you assess how appropriate a particular teaching is for you.

What is the method of presentation?

Is it a formal lecture [SN 56.11], a question-and-answer session [Sn 5.6], a retelling of an old story [AN 3.15], or simply an inspired verse [Thig 1.11]? Is the heart of the teaching contained in its *content* [SN 12.2] or is the *way* in which the teacher interacts with his listeners itself part of the message [MN 57]? The great variety of teaching styles employed by the Buddha and his disciples shows that there is no fixed method of teaching Dhamma; the method used depends on the particular demands of the situation and the spiritual maturity of the audience.

What is the essential teaching?

Where does the teaching fit in with the Buddha's threefold progressive system of training: Does it focus primarily on the development of virtue [MN 61], concentration [AN 5.28], or wisdom [MN 140]? Is the presentation consistent with what is given in other suttas (e.g., Sn 2.14 and DN 31)? How does this teaching fit into your own "roadmap" of the Buddha's teachings? Does it fit in nicely with your previous understanding, or does it call into question some of your basic assumptions about the Dhamma?

How does it end?

Does the hearer attain Awakening right then and there [SN 35.28], or does it take a little while after hearing the teachings [MN 57]? Does someone "convert" to the Buddha's way, as evidenced by the stock passage, "Magnificent! Magnificent! Just as if he were to place upright what was overturned..." [AN 4.111]? Sometimes the simple act of snuffing a candle is enough to bring someone to full Awakening [Thig 5.10]; sometimes even the Buddha himself can't help someone overcome their past bad kamma [DN 2]. The various outcomes of the suttas help illustrate the extraordinary power and complexity of the law of kamma.

What does this sutta have to offer me?

This is the most important question of all, as it challenges you to take the sutta to heart. After all, it is the heart that is to be transformed by these teachings, not the intellect. Ask yourself: Do I identify with any of the situations or characters in the sutta? Are the questions asked or teachings presented pertinent to me? What lessons can I learn from the sutta? Does this teaching fill me with doubts about my capacity to achieve Awakening, or does it fill me with even greater faith and confidence in the Dhamma?

Note

1. There are many ways to find related suttas on this website (<http://www.accesstoinsight.org/>). If you click on the "About" link at the top of a sutta page, you will find other suttas that are located nearby in the Canon. Often these "neighbors" concern related topics. To find other suttas, articles, or books on related topics, explore the General Index. If there is a character mentioned in the sutta about whom you'd like to read more, try the Index of Proper Names. If you'd like to find out where else in the Canon a simile appears, try the Index of Similes.

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