



## **Suttas: Background and Study**

Robert Hodge

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### **Talk I Introduction and Overview of the Pali Canon**

Robert Hodge 2/24/2021

The purpose of this series of talks is to give an broad understanding of the Buddha’s teaching talks (discourses): their style, preservation, access, and how to study them. This can serve as reference for those who wish to study his teachings directly. This document contains many embedded links and end notes to various suttas and other resources.

The Buddha (Siddhartha Gautama) was born 2600 years ago in eastern India. He was a prince whose father kept him within the palace confines so as to provide him with every luxury in life and to shield him from experiencing suffering. However, once when travelling outside of the palace, the Buddha saw suffering in the forms of birth, aging, disease and death. Struck by this, he left his wife and son to explore the way to end suffering. Having been exposed to luxury, the Buddha tried the opposite, asceticism, and discovered that this did not end suffering either. The Buddha then discovered the “middle way,” a way of ending suffering that does not go to extremes. In this regard, he became awakened to what life is. He devoted the rest of this life traveling through India teaching the practice of what he had discovered. The Buddha said, *“What I teach now as before, O monks, is suffering and the cessation of suffering.”*<sup>1</sup>

The Buddha gave many thousands of talks (discourses) over his 45 years of teaching after he was awakened. The pali word for these talks is sutta (sutra in Sanskrit). In this talk, the pali words will be included where appropriate.

According to the Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism, Pali is the term used to designate a dialect of Middle Indo-Aryan, which serves as the canonical language of the Theravada school of mainstream Buddhism. According to the tradition, the Buddha spoke Māgadhī, the dialect of the Indian state of Magadha. Although no specimens of this dialect survive from the period before Asoka, linguists have determined that it differed from Pāli. It is assumed that, after his death, his various teachings were gathered and then regularized into an ecclesiastical language that could be comprehended and recited by monastic

groups across a wide region. It appears that, after the reign of King Aśoka, some Buddhist schools translated the Buddha's teachings into Sanskrit while others used Pāli, but later scholastic Pāli was also influenced by Sanskrit. According to Theravāda tradition, the Buddha's teachings were first recorded in writing in Pāli, in Sri Lanka rather than India, at the end of the first century BCE. Although these texts do not survive, scholars speculate that the Pāli used in those recensions was generally equivalent to what is used in the canon as it is preserved today.<sup>2</sup>

According to tradition, the suttas were first arranged together when Ananda, the Buddha's attendant, who had extraordinary powers of memory, recited them at the first Buddhist Council shortly after the Buddha's death. As noted above, the suttas were maintained in the oral tradition and were first written down in the Pali language at the fourth Buddhist Council in 25 BCE, over 500 years after the Buddha's demise.

### **The Pali Canon<sup>3</sup>**

The Pali Canon of the Theravada tradition is the collection of the Buddha's teachings and it is a vast body of literature. In English translation, the texts add up to thousands of printed pages. Most (but not all) of the Canon has been published in English over the years.<sup>4</sup>

### **The Baskets**

In the standard threefold division of the Buddha's teachings, the texts are grouped in the three baskets (pitakas in Pali) called the Tipitaka. These baskets are:

The Vinaya Pitaka

The Sutta Pitaka

The Abhidhamma Pitaka

**The Vinaya Pitaka** is a collection of texts concerning the rules of conduct governing the daily affairs within the Sangha — the community of bhikkhus (ordained monks) and bhikkhunis (ordained nuns). Far more than merely a list of rules, the Vinaya Pitaka also includes the stories behind the origin of each rule, providing a detailed account of the Buddha's solution to the question of how to maintain communal harmony within a large and diverse spiritual community.

**The Sutta Pitaka** is a "disparate collection of thousands of texts attributed to the Buddha (or said to be spoken with his sanction), varying in length from extended narrative accounts to short epigrams."<sup>5</sup> It consists of more than 10,000 suttas. The suttas in the Sutta Pitaka are divided into five collections (nikayas in Pali).

**The Abhidhamma Pitaka** is a collection of texts in which the underlying doctrinal principles presented in the Sutta Pitaka are reworked and reorganized into a systematic framework that can be applied to an investigation into the nature of mind and matter.

### **The Five Collections of the Sutta Pitaka**

The organization of these collections is not straightforward as it appears to be based on the length of the sutta.

**Digha Nikaya** — the "long collection"

This consists of 34 suttas, including the longest ones in the Canon. The subject matter of these suttas ranges widely, from colorful folkloric accounts of the beings inhabiting the deva worlds ([DN 20](#)) to down-to-earth practical meditation instructions ([DN 22](#)), and everything in between. Recent scholarship suggests that a distinguishing trait of the Digha Nikaya may be that it was "intended for the purpose of propaganda, to attract converts to the new religion."

**Majjhima Nikaya** — the "middle-length collection"

This consists of 152 suttas of varying length. These range from some of the most profound and difficult suttas in the Canon (e.g., [MN 1](#)) to engaging stories full of human pathos and drama that illustrate important principles of the law of kamma

**Samyutta Nikaya** — the "grouped collection"

**Anguttara Nikaya** — the "further-factored collection"

**Khuddaka Nikaya** — the "collection of little texts"

This contains the classical teaching called the Dhammapada (In Pāli, "Verses of Dharma") The Dhammapada is an anthology of verses, arranged topically, many of which are also found in other books of the Pāli canon, although it is unclear whether the Dhammapada was compiled from them. The current Pāli text contains 423 verses divided into twenty-six chapters; the verses are broadly associated with the topic of each particular chapter, which have predominantly ethical themes. The Dhammapada has long been one of the most beloved of Buddhist texts in the West. Since its first translation into a Western language (Latin) in 1855 by the Danish scholar Victor Fausbøll (1821–1908), it has been rendered numerous times into English (well over fifty translations have been made) and other languages.<sup>6</sup>

The first two verses from the Dhammapada:

*Phenomena are*

*preceded by the heart,  
ruled by the heart,  
made of the heart.*

*If you speak or act  
with a corrupted heart,  
then suffering follows you –  
as the wheel of the cart,  
the track of the ox that pulls it.*

*Phenomena are*

*preceded by the heart,  
ruled by the heart,  
made of the heart.*

*If you speak or act  
with a calm, bright heart,  
then happiness follows you  
like a shadow that never leaves.<sup>7</sup>*

### **How suttas are referenced (catalogued)**

The suttas are catalogued in different ways depending on the basket (Pitaka). In the Sutta Pitaka, the suttas are grouped according to the collection (nikaya) which is then divided into sections (vaggas) which is then divided into chapters (samyuttas) which contains individual suttas.

For example, the reference for the Ani Sutta cited below is SN 20:7. This means that it is located in the Samyutta Nikaya (SN), Chapter 20, Sutta 7. In general, when searching online, entering SN 20:7 or SN 20.7 will locate the sutta.

### **The Suttas**

Most of the suttas for study are contained in the Sutta Pitaka. As noted above, there are many English translations, and it is important to keep in mind that the translations vary depending on the translator. Some of my favorite translations are by Thanissaro Bhikkhu and Bhikkhu Bodhi,

According to Daigaku Rummé, a Soto Zen monk: “Along with these suttas, a great many Mahayana suttas have also been preserved. Originally composed in Sanskrit, they now mostly exist in Tibetan, Chinese, Korean, and Japanese translations and are thought to have been composed between the first century BCE and the sixth century CE. Many of the Mahayana suttas, as well as the Theravada suttas, are now available in Western languages. Adopting the same format as the Pali Canon, the Mahayana suttas also begin with the words “Thus have I heard.” This collection of suttas is more extensive and includes many lengthy works that can be divided into two currents of tradition: suttas based on faith or devotion and philosophically oriented suttas on teachings such as emptiness and buddhanature. While these suttas are clearly not the direct oral teachings of Shakyamuni Buddha, they are regarded by followers of the Mahayana as being no less, and perhaps more, important than the Pali texts. Many of the Mahayana suttas, such as the Lotus Sutra, the Lankavatara Sutra, and the Sukhavati-vyuba Sutra, became the foundations for new schools of Buddhism.

The tradition of composing new expressions of the Buddha’s teaching continued with the spread of Buddhism, and many other texts, including the Platform Sutra from seventh-century China, as well as works by Dogen Zenji and Daito Kokushi written in thirteenth-century Japan and so on, are also considered by many Buddhists to be suttas.”<sup>8</sup>

## Talk II The Suttas: Conventions, The Buddha's Teaching Style, Why Study?

Robert Hodge 3/3/2021

### What is a Sutta?

A sutta (Pali) or sutra (Sanskrit) in the Buddhist context is a discourse or sermon said to be delivered by the Buddha or delivered with his sanction. The sutta developed into its own genre of Buddhist literature, with a certain style and a fairly standard set of literary conventions:

### Beginning

The most famous of these conventions is the phrase to begin a sutta, "Thus I have heard" or "I have heard," certifying that the discourse was a first-person report by the Buddha's attendant, Ananda.

Also standard is the **nidana**, which describes the setting of the sutta, noting where the Buddha was residing at the time, who was in the audience, who else took part in the dialogue or conversation, etc.<sup>9</sup>

For example, the Satipatthana Sutta begins: *"I have heard that on one occasion the Blessed One was staying among the Kurus. Now there is a town of the Kurus called Kammāsadhamma. There the Blessed One addressed the monks, "Monks."*

*"Lord," the monks responded to him.*<sup>10</sup>

### Repetition

In many of the suttas, the Buddha would repeat descriptions to emphasize his points. The repetitive style can seem laborious to the contemporary reader.

For example, in an excerpt from the Khandha Sutta:

*The Blessed One said, "Now what, monks, are the five aggregates?"*

*"Any form whatsoever that is past, future, or present; internal or external; blatant or subtle; common or sublime; far or near: That is called the form aggregate.*

*"Any feeling whatsoever that is past, future, or present; internal or external; blatant or subtle; common or sublime; far or near: That is called the feeling aggregate.*

*"Any perception whatsoever that is past, future, or present; internal or external; blatant or subtle; common or sublime; far or near: That is called the perception aggregate.*

*"Any fabrications whatsoever that are past, future, or present; internal or external; blatant or subtle; common or sublime; far or near: Those are called the fabrication aggregate.*

*"Any consciousness whatsoever that is past, future, or present; internal or external; blatant or subtle; common or sublime; far or near: That is called the consciousness aggregate.*

*"These are called the five aggregates.*<sup>11</sup>

In contemporary terms, this could have been shortened to “Any form, feeling, perception, fabrication or consciousness that are that are past, future, or present; internal or external; blatant or subtle; common or sublime; far or near.” This, however, would have less of an impact when given orally. As noted, nothing the Buddha said was in writing at that time and he had no AV support or PowerPoint!

### **Asking and Answering Questions**

The Buddha also employed what we call the [Socratic method](#), a form of cooperative argumentative dialogue between individuals, based on asking and answering questions to stimulate critical thinking and to draw out ideas and underlying presuppositions.

Norman Fischer, a noted Zen teacher and poet states: The “Buddha spent his life talking to people. In fact, he was one of the greatest masters of talking to people in recorded history. One gets the sense in the suttas that the Buddha talked not because he was particularly loquacious, or because he was given to elaborate explanations, but in order to help people see through the smoke screen of their own language and views. Once someone asked him for his secret in answering questions as effectively as he did. He said that he had four ways of answering questions.”<sup>12</sup>

In the Pañha Sutta (AN 4:42), the Buddha explains:

*“There are these four ways of answering questions. Which four? There are questions that should be answered categorically [straightforwardly yes, no, this, that]. There are questions that should be answered with an analytical answer [defining or redefining the terms]. There are questions that should be answered with a counter-question. There are questions that should be put aside. These are the four ways of answering questions.”<sup>13</sup>*

Here is an example of the Buddha using questions in the Loṇaphala Sutta:

*“Suppose that a man were to drop a salt crystal into a small amount of water in a cup. What do you think? Would the water in the cup become salty because of the salt crystal, and unfit to drink?”*

*“Yes, lord. Why is that? There being only a small amount of water in the cup, it would become salty because of the salt crystal, and unfit to drink.”*

*“Now suppose that a man were to drop a salt crystal into the River Ganges. What do you think? Would the water in the River Ganges become salty because of the salt crystal, and unfit to drink?”*

*“No, lord. Why is that? There being a great mass of water in the River Ganges, it would not become salty because of the salt crystal or unfit to drink.”*

*“In the same way, there is the case where a trifling evil deed done by one individual (the first) takes him to hell; and there is the case where the very same sort of trifling deed done by the other individual is experienced in the here & now, and for the most part barely appears for a moment.”<sup>14</sup>*

## Using Metaphors

As noted, the Buddha gave many talks over his lifetime, traveling all over India and speaking to many culturally different communities. In order to improve understanding, he not only tried to speak in their dialect but also relate some of their customs in his talks so that they could better understand.

For example, the Buddha was in one part of India, Gaya, and was reflecting on what to teach to 1,000 monks in that area. Dhivan Thomas Jones notes: “The later Theravādin commentary adds that the Buddha thought, ‘What might be an appropriate dharma talk for these people, who tend the sacred fire in the mornings?’ And he came to the conclusion, ‘I will teach them about the six senses and their objects, comparing them to what is burning and blazing, and in this way they will be able to obtain arahantship (become awakened).’ Then he spoke this formulation of the Dharma in order to teach the Dharma to these people. This was the Āditta-pariyāya Sutta or Fire Sermon.”<sup>15</sup>

The (Theravadin) commentary can be a bit dry and literal in its interpretations of early Buddhism, but in this case it is very helpful. It points out that this particular discourse was delivered to a particular group of people, fire-worshippers, so that the Buddha tailored what he said to meet their interests and preoccupations.

This is an example of what the later tradition called the Buddha’s ‘skillful means’ (upaya-kausalya), his ability to teach people appropriately. The fire-worshipping ascetics believed that tending the sacred fire, performing fire-rituals every morning, pouring ghee into the flames to feed the gods, was the way to salvation. The Buddha gets their attention by saying, everything is burning, everything is on fire. One might imagine that they would have responded by saying, or at least thinking, no it isn’t. But nevertheless, he has their attention.”<sup>16</sup>

Here is the beginning of the [Fire Sermon](#):

*“I have heard that on one occasion the Blessed One was staying near Gayā at Gayā Head with 1,000 monks. There he addressed the monks:*

*“Monks, the All is aflame. Which All is aflame? The eye is aflame. Forms are aflame. Eye-consciousness is aflame. Eye-contact is aflame. And whatever there is that arises in dependence on eye-contact—experienced as pleasure, pain or neither-pleasure-nor-pain—that too is aflame. Aflame with what? Aflame with the fire of passion, the fire of aversion, the fire of delusion. Aflame, I tell you, with birth, aging & death, with sorrows, lamentations, pains, distresses, & despairs.”*

## The Buddha’s Teaching Style

The Buddha’s basic method of teaching was threefold. He wanted his listeners to:

1. hear his discourse,
2. reflect on it to understand,
3. experience it to know if it is beneficial for them.

Regarding the Buddha’s third teaching point, asking his listeners to experience the teaching in order to know if it is beneficial for them, the Buddha said to the Kalamas: *“When you know for yourselves that, ‘These qualities are skillful; these qualities are blameless; these qualities are praised by the observant;*

*these qualities, when adopted & carried out, lead to welfare & to happiness’—then you should enter & remain in them.*

*When you know for yourselves that, ‘These qualities are unskillful; these qualities are blameworthy; these qualities are criticized by the observant; these qualities, when adopted & carried out, lead to harm & to suffering’—then you should abandon them.”<sup>17</sup>*

### **Why Study the Suttas?**

In an article, *Befriending the Suttas: Tips on Reading the Pali Discourses*<sup>18</sup>, an anonymous author quotes the Buddha:

*"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 & mastering.' That's how you should train yourselves."<sup>19</sup>*

The author goes on to list reasons to read and study the suttas in the Pali Canon:

- They are the primary source of Theravada Buddhist teachings.
- They present a complete body of teachings.
- They present a self-consistent body of teachings.
- They offer lots of practical advice. For example:
  - How to meditate [[MN 118](#)] [[DN 22](#)]
  - How to cope with grief [[AN 5.49](#)]
  - How to train your mind [[SN 22:1](#)]
  - What to talk about [[AN 10:69](#)]
- They can bolster your confidence in the Buddha's teachings.
- They can support and energize your meditation practice.
- Reading them is just plain good for you.

Diagaku Rumme notes: “As the Buddha was about to die, Ananda asked him what he should rely on after his death, and the Buddha said, “Be a lamp onto yourself; make the dharma into a lamp rather than simply believing in my teachings.” The reality that has come to be called the buddhadharma didn’t belong to the Buddha, but rather belongs to all people who realize the dharma for themselves. It is only when we in the West realize this that we can begin to compose original suttas in our own languages, encouraging an ever-growing number of people to seek and realize the dharma.”<sup>20</sup>



### Talk III Suttas: Study Points

Robert Hodge 3/10/2021

In studying a sutta, we can follow the Buddha's method of teaching by reading his discourse as if he were speaking to us, reflecting on it to understand, and then experiencing it for ourselves to discern if it is beneficial for us.

#### Some study points from [Befriending the Suttas](#):

##### **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.

For example, here are two translations

[Alagaddupama Sutta](#): The Snake Simile translated from the Pali by Nyanaponika Thera  
"What I teach now as before, O monks, is suffering and the cessation of suffering.

[Alagaddupama Sutta](#): The Water-Snake Simile translated from the Pali by Thanissaro Bhikkhu  
"Both formerly and now, monks, I declare only stress and the cessation of stress.

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.

I keep a list of sutta links in a Word document for future reference. One of my favorites is the [Bahiya Sutta](#).<sup>21</sup>

**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.

## Talk IV Suttas: Questions to bear in Mind, Reference Resources

Robert Hodge 3/17/2021

### Questions to bear in mind during study of suttas

The following is from [Befriending the Suttas](#). About 35 links are embedded for your reference.

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 [\[Ditthi Sutta AN 10.93\]](#), 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.

### 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.

### 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?

### 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 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?

### **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?

## Some Recommended Suttas

In the above section, Questions to bear in mind during study, there are a number of sutta links to explore. Below are four suttas that are worth exploring:

Setting the Wheel of Dhamma in Motion: [Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta](#)

This was the first discourse of the Buddha. He presents the Four Noble Truths to five monks

The Four Foundations of Mindfulness [Satipatthana Sutta](#)

This is probably the most well-known sutta. There are a number of commentaries including those by Joseph Goldstein<sup>22</sup>, Bhante Gunaratana<sup>23</sup>, Analayo<sup>24</sup> and Venerable U Silananda<sup>25</sup>

Mindfulness of Breathing [Anapanasati Sutta](#)

A critical teaching on the awareness of breathing. Excellent commentary by Thich Nhat Hanh.<sup>26</sup>

Perception [Girimananda Sutta](#)

A less well-known teaching on the Commentary by Bhante Gunaratana.<sup>27</sup>

## Online Resources

Online resources include:

[Accesstoinsight.org](#)

Dedicated to providing accurate, reliable, and useful information concerning the practice and study of Theravada Buddhism, as it has been handed down to us through both the written word of the Pali canon and the living example of the Sangha. The domain name is owned and maintained by the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies.

[Dhammatalks.org](#)

This site offers an extensive collection of English translations of suttas from the Pāli Canon, as well as a multitude of free downloads of Dhamma from the Kammaṭṭhāna (or Thai Forest) Tradition of Buddhism. Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu of Metta Forest Monastery is the speaker, author or translator unless otherwise noted.

[SuttaCentral](#)

SuttaCentral is specially focused on the scriptures of the earliest period of Buddhism, and hosts texts in over thirty languages. This may be the largest collection of early Buddhist texts ever made.

SuttaCentral is managed in Australia. This site can be challenging to navigate.

## eBook and Hardcopy Resources

There are many books available in English. Here are a select few:

Bhikkhu Bodhi In the Buddha's Words: An Anthology of Discourses from the Pali Canon

Maurice Walshe, Bhikkhu Bodhi, the Dalai Lama and 6 more The Teachings of the Buddha (8 books) also available in the Kindle Edition by Maurice Walshe (Author) , Bhikkhu Bodhi (Author) , The Dalai Lama (Author) and 6 more

From Book 1: This book offers a complete translation of the Majjhima Nikaya, or Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha, one of the major collections of texts in the Pali Canon, the authorized scriptures of Theravada Buddhism. This collection--among the oldest records of the historical Buddha's original teachings--consists of 152 suttas or discourses of middle length, distinguished as such from the longer and shorter suttas of the other collections. The Majjhima Nikaya might

be concisely described as the Buddhist scripture that combines the richest variety of contextual settings with the deepest and most comprehensive assortment of teachings. These teachings, which range from basic ethics to instructions in meditation and liberating insight, unfold in a fascinating procession of scenarios that show the Buddha in living dialogue with people from many different strata of ancient Indian society: with kings and princes, priests and ascetics, simple villagers and erudite philosophers. Replete with drama, reasoned argument, and illuminating parable and simile, these discourses exhibit the Buddha in the full glory of his resplendent wisdom, majestic sublimity, and compassionate humanity.

The translation is based on an original draft translation left by the English scholar-monk Bhikkhu Nanamoli, which has been edited and revised by the American monk Bhikkhu Bodhi, who provides a long introduction and helpful explanatory notes. Combining lucidity of expression with accuracy, this translation enables the Buddha to speak across twenty-five centuries in language that addresses the most pressing concerns of the contemporary reader seeking clarification of the timeless issues of truth, value, and the proper conduct of life.

Thanissaro Bhikkhu Handful of Leaves an Anthology from the Sutta Piṭaka, (revised Oct. 31, 2020)

This all-in-one eBook bundles all of the sutta collections: the Dīgha, Majjhima, Saṃyutta, and Aṅguttara Nikāyas, as well as six books from the Khuddaka Nikāya—the Khuddakapāṭha, Dhammapada, Udāna, Itivuttaka, Sutta Nipāta, Theragāthā & Therīgāthā.<sup>28</sup>

Others

[Buddhist Publication Society](#)

[Abhayagiri Monastery books](#)

### **Commentaries**

Ever since the suttas were written down, there have been many explanatory series of notes (commentaries) published. These interpretations of what the Buddha meant in the opinion of the author can be very valuable in terms of providing new insights and viewpoints to the reader of the sutta. As with the differences in translation over time, the more recent commentaries may offer a more contemporary explanation that may be easier to understand. However, it is up to the reader to discern their benefits for themselves.

For example, as noted previously, the Satipatthana Sutta, The Four Foundations of Mindfulness, has spawned many commentaries. I have studied several: The Four Foundations of Mindfulness in Plain English by Bhante Gunaratana<sup>29</sup>, The Four Foundations of Mindfulness by Venerable U Silananda<sup>30</sup>, Satipatthana: The Direct Path to Realization by Analayo<sup>31</sup>, and Mindfulness: A Practical Guide to Awakening by Joseph Goldstein<sup>32</sup> and have found each of them to impart unique insights on the sutta.

Within the Buddhist literature, there are some commentator and teachers who either directly comment on specific suttas or who directly reference the suttas in their teachings. Some of these commentators and teachers whom I recommend are Ajahn Chah, Jack Kornfield, Thich Nhat Hanh, Bhikkhu Bodhi, Thanissaro Bhikkhu, Joseph Goldstein, Gil Fronsdal, Analayo, Stephen Batchelor, Martine Bat chelor, Bhante Gunaratana, Ajahn Passaro, and Ajahn Amaro



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- <sup>2</sup> Buswell Jr., Robert E.; Donald S., Jr. Lopez. The Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism . Princeton University Press. Kindle Edition.
- <sup>3</sup> The section is adapted from information on [accesstoinsight.org](https://www.accesstoinsight.org). For a more detailed explanation, see Bhikkhu Bodhi, In the Buddha's Words: An Anthology of Discourses from the Pali Canon, Wisdom 2005
- <sup>4</sup> <https://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/sn/sn22/sn22.059.nymo.html>
- <sup>5</sup> Buswell Princeton Dictionary
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- <sup>7</sup> Thanissaro Bhikkhu. [Dhammapada: A Translation](#) Metta Forest Monastery (eBook also [available](#) suttas, Khuddaka Nikaya, Dhammapada)
- <sup>8</sup> Rumme,Diagaku What is a Sutra? <https://www.lionsroar.com/what-is-a-sutra/>
- <sup>9</sup> Buswell Princeton Dictionary
- <sup>10</sup> The Great Establishing of Mindfulness Discourse [Mahā Satipatthāna Sutta](#) (DN 22)
- <sup>11</sup> Aggregates [Khandha Sutta](#) (SN 22:48)
- <sup>12</sup> Fischer, Norman [Beyond Language Finding freedom through thoughts and words](#)
- <sup>13</sup> Questions [Pañha Sutta](#) (AN 4:42)
- <sup>14</sup> The Salt Crystal [Lonaphala Sutta](#) (AN 3:101)
- <sup>15</sup> Aflame [Āditta-pariyāya Sutta](#) (SN 35:28)
- <sup>16</sup> The Fire Sermon <https://dhivanthomasjones.wordpress.com/2017/11/15/the-fire-sermon/>
- <sup>17</sup> To the Kālāmas [Kālāma Sutta](#) (AN 3:66)
- <sup>18</sup> [Befriending the Suttas: Tips on Reading the Pali Discourses](#)
- <sup>19</sup> The Peg [Āni Sutta](#) (SN 20:7)
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