

Week One—Talk 5

## **How to Read the Suttas**

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In the final talk for this week, I want to give you a little bit of advice on how to read the suttas in the Pali Canon. For myself as a dharma practitioner, I practice in the Tibetan tradition and studying the suttas was really my entry point to the dharma. I didn't initially start off reading anything to do with the foundational teachings. I didn't start off reading the suttas. And what I discovered was that there were huge gaps in my knowledge and understanding. It made me want to go back to the beginning to the simple foundational teachings of Buddhism. So I started reading suttas. In the beginning, I didn't really understand them very well. I didn't really know how to read them. So I want to share some of my experience of how I started to approach reading these suttas and how I guide my students in reading them.

My aim in this talk is to help you befriend these suttas, these teachings that are supposedly what the Buddha taught. They cover vast topics and there are a lot of different situations and scenarios in them. Sometimes it will be the Buddha talking to a bikkhu or a student, and those particular suttas have a particular quality to them. Sometimes it will be the Buddha talking to a group of villagers who have showed up to ask him a question. Sometimes it will be young Brahmins who've come to challenge him to debate. So there are a lot of different kinds of people that show up in these suttas, and the Buddha teaches to them in different ways, because as a teacher, he's a really wonderful model of how to approach people and talk to people where they're at.

So when you're reading a sutta, it's important to ask yourself the questions: who's talking, who's asking the question, and what's the situation? Another quality that I really love about these suttas is how earthy they are, how simple and pragmatic they are. The settings themselves are things like the Buddha sitting under a tree or at the edge of a village in a gathering place. There's this quality of the earth. I can almost imagine the fertile earth of Bihar in India between my toes and the cool shade of a tree and escaping from the hot sun. I think it's important to develop a sense of the scene in your mind, to actually imagine the scene that's being described.

I want to emphasize this earthy quality, particularly if you're a practitioner of more esoteric teachings. I really want to encourage you to try and read some of these suttas and bring yourself back into that very simple, earthy scene of a tree and the earth and these teachings. I've found it incredibly helpful. So there are a few questions that I find to be helpful in how to approach reading the suttas. The first one is, are they authentic Buddhism? Is this really what the Buddha said? And the short answer to that is, we're not going to know for sure. What we have received in these written documents were written down several hundred years after the Buddha supposedly lived and were chanted and recited and, in fact, actually the oldest version of the Pali Canon that we currently have is only about 500 years old. So I'm not sure if it's really even helpful to debate whether or not we think this is authentic or not. There's not really any way to prove that. What I will say about that, though, is the teachings that are contained within these suttas have been practiced for two-and-a-half thousand years, and so they seem to have been quite effective and

they've survived the test of time. It might be worth just taking a look and seeing what they have to say, because a lot of people have found them incredibly beneficial.

This leads to the next question. Are they helpful? As I've said, a lot of people have found these teachings to be incredibly helpful and understand the suttas as spiritual roadmaps or guides towards maturing upon a spiritual path. But ultimately it's up to you to see whether or not they're helpful to you. You won't know until you find out. So give it a try and read a few of them and see what you think. Another important point that I want to make, or a question that might come up, is how to navigate reading the suttas. There are so many of them, and they may seem to contradict one another or they might contradict ideas that you have about the dharma. The important thing to remember is that they're aiming to get at a lot of different kinds of difficulties or problems—emotions that come up or problems that come up on your spiritual path.

And they're aiming to get at things from all different angles. They're also aiming for different audiences and for different kinds of people. So it's important to bear this in mind; it's not meant to be a complete linear system. You may remember me talking about that type of thinking that some of us may be conditioned to, that they're presenting some kind of a linear process and that it all has to agree. The suttas aren't like that. There are particular ones that you may read that you find incredibly helpful and then you'll find one that seems to contradict something said somewhere else. So a little bit of patience and perseverance is also recommended.

I sometimes compare this quality of the suttas to books on raising children. You know, if someone could write the definitive book on how to raise a child, I think it would have already been written by now. There are lots of different techniques, but if any of you are parents, you understand that you might be able to read a book on child rearing and some of that information might be helpful and relevant to raising your individual child and some of it may not. So you might find yourself taking some information from one of those texts or one of those books and applying it and seeing how it works. For me it's a little bit like that except in this case the child is your mind.

So another quality of the suttas that I think is important to understand is they don't contain rules or regulations about how you're supposed to explore a path of dharma. But they do offer a lot of very, very practical advice.

There are suttas that talk about how to live in community. There are suttas that talk about the difficulties of alcoholism. There are suttas that talk about how to tend to the sick and the dying. There are suttas about how to live in a family system. There are all sorts of different suttas that give very practical advice from all aspects of being on a spiritual path. It isn't always about monastic advice; it has a lot of advice for how to live as a lay person as well. So as you start to explore the suttas, you may find some that are surprisingly relevant to your own experience. And I want to encourage you not to get deterred by the language or the way that they're written. They can be very repetitive because they were intended initially to be chanted. So you have to understand that it's almost like reading song lyrics. It's like reading a song.

I find it very helpful to actually read the suttas out loud. In my classes here at Naropa with my students, we take time to read them out loud to each other, and I encourage my students even to go sit under a tree and read them out loud either to each other or to themselves. So when we start

to approach the suttas in this way and we can start to recognize even just a little bit of our own experience being described in these suttas, then these teachings don't seem so far fetched. They can actually become something that we can integrate into our own lives. They don't seem so distant if you can start to really open into what these suttas are trying to tell you. They're intended to energize your practice and to encourage you to become a more wholesome person.

You will come across the words wholesome and unwholesome a lot. What do those terms actually mean? Just simply, at least from this beginning point, these terms are talking about moving from being unhappy to being happy. And what does that entail? These wholesome qualities that are encouraged in the suttas are things like generosity, compassion, and non-harm—very simple things that we could all learn from. This is what you'll often see being encouraged in these teachings: developing the qualities of generosity, kindness, compassion, and also contemplating loosening the attachment to the sense of me and mine or I. These suttas will present a situation and oftentimes there'll be a suggestion or encouragement to follow the path towards generosity and kindness and mindfulness and having less of a sense of protecting what's mine.

This is actually just common sense. Everybody can understand this. What we think is going to make us happy, what we attach to, those qualities of greed and of craving and of anger, those don't lead you towards happiness. They lead you to more unhappiness. And in a lot of these suttas, this is the basic message and it is something that we can all understand and experience and try. So the message that these suttas are trying to move us towards is to stop getting ensnared with feelings, of trying to chase some kind of permanent happiness. We get so caught up in chasing that, we forget the really lovely natural qualities that we already have. I would like to also say that reading these kinds of texts that have survived for two-and-a-half thousand years in a world where we're being bombarded with a lot of difficult information and a lot of suffering, that reading something like this is actually a sort of respite; it's the cool shade of a tree in a world of madness and suffering and pain.

So another question is, which suttas should you read? The short answer to that is any ones you like. There are a few that are very key to the foundational view and the first turning teachings, and we'll be looking at some of those in this course, but I would encourage you to just pick some suttas and try reading them. A few things to bear in mind: as I've said, they have a repetitive quality and they have a rhythm to them, which is meant to be spoken. So I would encourage you to speak them out loud or read them to a friend, read them out loud with each other. Also bear in mind different translations and the words that are used. You can explore them and see if you can find translations that are more accessible to you. I'd also encourage you to stop reading and contemplate a particular sentence that resonates with you.

If you find yourself reading a sutta and it makes you kind of stop for a minute, then trust that, sit with whatever that sentence or whatever that thought has brought up for you and just contemplate it. Nobody is suggesting that you need to race through and read them all and understand everything. If something irritates you, notice that, sit with that. If something really speaks to you, notice that and sit with that. If you decide that you might want to read one over and over and over again, you might read it one sentence at a time. All of those ways are very helpful to just start to attune yourself to this material. That's why it's important to just explore. So I really want to encourage you to explore these suttas.

And in doing that, I have a suggestion, which is an enrichment activity for this week of the course. Go to the website, Access to Insight (I've provided a link for you). This site has a [random sutta generator](#). You can just click on that and a sutta will pop up. There is a little magical quality of what pops up. What came up for you, and why did that one come up? Is there something that is very relevant in that randomly generated sutta that popped up for you? Just take a look and see what it says. I'd love to hear your experience with that, and I'm really looking forward to seeing what suttas came up for you.