Week 1, Part 2: Introduction to the Suttas

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 1:01:28

So what I'd like to do now is examine in more detail this outline of the Pali Canon on your second page of the handout, to look at what's here.

We talked about the three baskets of the Vinaya, the Suttas, and the Abhidhamma. The Vinaya is of not much concern to us as laypeople. If you're going to become a monk or a nun, you want to read the Vinaya. If you're not, you don't need to. The Abhidhamma is a very detailed and I would say difficult field of study that not many of us have the kind of inclination to dive deeply into. So for the most part, we don't worry about the Abhidhamma. Where we focus our study is on this central basket, the Sutta Pitaka.

So let's look at that in a little more detail. It's a combination of actual discourses from the Buddha, what are purported to be discourses from the Buddha, and later additions. My study has mostly been the actual words of the Buddha, and that's what I recommend for you also. So let's talk about which pieces of the Sutta Pitaka are actual discourses of the Buddha.

This Sutta Pitaka is broken into five Nikayas or collections. Looking down the list, it's the Digha, the Majjhima, the Samyutta, the Anguttara, and the Khuddaka. Of these, the Digha, the Majjhima, the Samyutta, and the Anguttara are all considered the word of the Buddha. There's this Pali term, Buddhavacana, which means Buddha voice. All these four are considered the word of the Buddha—either spoken by the Buddha or spoken by a disciple with the approval of the Buddha. So sometimes you might hear Sariputta speaking it, but the Buddha approves it. There's a really nice discourse in the Majjhima number 44 that's spoken by a nun, Dhammadinna, who I think was the foremost woman proficient in expounding the Dhamma in the Buddha's day. But generally, they all carry the authentic imprint of the Buddha, Buddhavacana, word of the Buddha.

Then the Khuddaka Nikaya is considered a minor collection or lesser collection, and it's got a mixture of word of the Buddha and other material. So in this one, the words of the Buddha are Dhammapada, Udana, Itivuttaka, and Sutta Nipata. The others are more commentarial.

I want to show you what this adds up to in modern translations. This is the Udana and Itivuttaka. The Dhammapada in a very good translation by our own Gil Fronsdal—highly recommended. Sutta Nipata, which is a really engaging and interesting text, though there's not a great translation out. This is the Anguttara Nikaya in five volumes from the Pali Text Society, but Bhikkhu Bodhi's next effort is going to be a whole new translation of this. Don't bother with this translation; wait for Bhikkhu Bodhi's, which should be out in about a year. Or if you can't wait, there's a selection from the Anguttara in this book called Numerical Discourses of the Buddha—also very good. The Samyutta Nikaya, my version was in two

volumes originally, the blue book, but this has now been reprinted as just one. The Majjhima Nikaya. They're always spoken of in the order that they're listed here. And then finally, the long discourses, the Digha Nikaya, translated by Maurice Walshe.

So this is the stack of Buddhavacana. In the original Pali, the Digha was three volumes, the Majjhima was three volumes, the Samyutta was five, the Anguttara is five, and each of these little ones are one each. So we have close to twenty volumes here of the Buddha's words from 500 years before the birth of Jesus. What do we have of Jesus? Perhaps a hundred pages? All the Gospels? A hundred pages of teaching, most of which are overlapping? How did this survive? How did we get this much?

So there's a lot here. Study could last you for the rest of your life if you want to take it up.

Let me say a little bit about each of the five main Nikayas. The Digha Nikaya is considered kind of an introduction for outsiders. It has a lot of stories and a lot of myths. The meaning of digha is long, so these are long discourses.

The Digha Nikaya contains profound dhamma, yet it presents challenges for beginning students. It appeals to the consciousness of ancient Indians because it connects with their mythology, weaving familiar stories into the teachings.

The Majjhima Nikaya offers a collection of middle-length discourses that strikes a perfect balance between narrative and profound instruction. You'll discover all the central points of the Buddha's teaching here, accompanied by enough stories, conversations, dialogues, and debates to keep the reading engaging. This harmonious blend of entertainment and enlightenment makes the Majjhima the ideal starting point for anyone wanting to read the suttas comprehensively. Our sutta today comes from this collection.

The Samyutta Nikaya serves as the professional meditator's handbook. It contains the most detailed instructions and discriminating analysis of Buddhist doctrines, offering the most in-depth exploration available. If you were sent to a desert island to meditate in solitude, this would be the essential text to accompany you.

The Anguttara Nikaya became the repository for all the remaining discourses that didn't fit neatly elsewhere. They're arranged by numbers, reflecting the Buddha's fondness for lists—the five hindrances, three characteristics, seven factors of enlightenment, and so forth. Anguttara means "many-factored," and the collection is organized numerically from the Book of Ones through the Book of Elevens.

In the Book of Ones, the Buddha declares: "There is one thing, O bhikkhus, which more than anything contributes to the growth of wisdom, and that is association with the wise." The Book of Twos continues: "There are two things, O monks, which one should never forget in one's practice," and so forth.

The Anguttara contains the finest advice for lay practitioners. Though not organized by topic, it holds remarkable suttas about household life and relationships. Here's one intriguing teaching: the Buddha said

that if a couple wishes to remain together in their next lifetime, it is possible. If they are similarly matched in faith, wisdom, generosity, and ethics, and they resolve to stay together, they can indeed be reunited in future lives.

The Anguttara also contains a wonderful discourse on wealth. Sometimes the monastic teachings give the impression that we should feel embarrassed about having money, but this wasn't the Buddha's view. He saw lay people as important, necessary, vital sources of support for monastic communities. He spoke in praise of lay people who gained wealth lawfully and used it wisely—for their own enjoyment, supporting their families, and performing good works by helping others. This kind of practical guidance fills the Anguttara.

The Khuddaka Nikaya contains miscellaneous sections, some extraordinarily beautiful. The Udana and Itivuttaka offer particularly moving passages, while the Sutta Nipata represents one of the oldest texts, least altered over time, making it deeply engaging.

Before we explore why we might want to study these texts, let me pause for questions about this historical overview and the contents of the Pali Canon.

A student asked about the origins of the Mahayana tradition and whether it was one of the original eighteen schools or evolved separately.

The origins of Mahayana remain unclear to scholars. Some suggest it emerged from a group called the Mahasangikas, who split off around the area of Calcutta and developed a different Vinaya. However, no one has definitively pinpointed the Mahayana's source.

Around four hundred years after the Buddha's death, new scriptures began appearing. The first were the Prajnaparamita Sutras—Perfection of Wisdom teachings—which emphasized understanding emptiness and the Bodhisattva path. These texts seemed to appear without clear historical roots, at least as far as current scholarship can determine.

Regarding language, the Mahayana Sutras were composed in Sanskrit, as were the canons of some earlier schools like the Sarvastivadins and possibly the Sautrantikas, though only fragments of these survive today. The Pali Canon remains the only complete early Buddhist collection that has survived intact.

Other schools grew up in China that flowered and developed in different directions. The Huayan school emerged from a later philosophical movement in India called the Chittamatra. They evolved along their own trajectory. Tiantai was another school that originated in China, and the Pure Land School also began there. When Pure Land reached Japan, it became the foundation from which the Nichiren schools developed.

There are numerous other schools, but the predominant ones we encounter in the West are Theravada, Mahayana—mainly Zen—and Vajrayana, the Tibetan tradition. I tend to discuss these three because they

all use meditation as their primary vehicle.

The Mahayana has a distinctly different emphasis because it places emptiness at the philosophical center. As far as I know, it was the Mahayana that developed the description of the paramis or paramitas as the path. Because their emphasis is on the bodhisattva path, the goal itself differs. In Mahayana, the aim is not to become an arahant or simply awakened—the goal is to become a Buddha. This is a much loftier aspiration.

Some scholars suggest that this goal changed when fewer arahants were being produced. It was as if the thinking became: "Well, if we can't reach that attainment, let's create an even more elevated goal that we know we won't achieve in this lifetime. That will explain why we didn't get there, and we can continue over many lives."

The Mahayana tradition has more association with lay practice than Theravada, which has maintained a very monastic focus. Mahayana developed more of a lay flavor, so you'll find greater openness to engaging with sense pleasures.

There was a particularly interesting movement that emerged from Mahayana—the Chittamatra school, also called Yogacara. They presented the goal, the unconditioned, in a way that wasn't so removed from the six senses. In the Theravadan description of the unconditioned, one gets the sense that you must disconnect from material reality to access nirvana. You'll hear this clearly in some schools' descriptions—that the six senses must fall away before one can connect with the unconditioned.

The Yogacara Chittamatra school said no—you can access the unconditioned with all six senses functioning because it's here now anyway. If it's unconditioned, it doesn't arise and pass, so it must be present. Therefore, the six senses can't block it.

This opens up the possibility of ultimate reality and conventional reality coming together. It provides a philosophical avenue where there isn't such separation between the ultimate and the day-to-day. Another way to express this is that it allows for daily experience to be infused with the divine. This understanding emerged from the Yogacara tradition.

You make an excellent point about the Mahayana's open canon. This openness continues even today—someone might discover a hidden treasure text purportedly from a deva or Buddha. This represents another major characteristic of the Mahayana tradition.

Regarding pronunciation, yes—when you see those diacritical marks, they indicate specific sounds. We'll discuss pronunciation more as we delve into the sutta.

So it's a good question. When you have an N with a tilde, it's an NY sound. And if Vinaya had been spelled with a long accent over the A, it would be Vinaya. But it's not, so the A is more of an "uh" sound—Vi-nuh-ya.

Someone asked about how tantra came in—what was the influence on Mahayana and where did it come from? In northern India, around the 7th and 8th centuries, Hindu practitioners had been working with energy currents in the body for many years. They found that a powerful way to activate those energy currents was through sexual union, so they developed spiritual practices that use the energy of sexual intercourse to activate bodily energies that could be devoted to awakening or purification.

Tantra really has several levels of meaning. First, there is simply knowing the bodily energy independent of sexuality. Second, there's figuring out how sexual energies can be integrated and used within that. Then these were furthered by devotional relationships to different deities. The deity brings out a certain quality of energy in the heart and mind, and this is reflected in the body.

These three elements together—the control and manipulation of physical energy, sexual energy, and deity devotionals—came from Hinduism and were appropriated by Buddhist groups around the 7th to 8th centuries in India. In Tibetan Buddhism today, Vajrayana is more or less synonymous with Tantra.

Some schools use Tantra to understand the working of physical energy through pure meditative approaches, using visualization of deities. Some schools practice this and also include sexual union as part of their spiritual practice. So it's a different approach than Theravadan monasticism.

There are many books on Tantra in the West now, most of which focus on the sexual aspect. But underlying it is a rigorous system of understanding bodily energy and how to work with it.

Regarding Dzogchen and Mahamudra—these grew out of the Yogacara Chittamatrin school. Philosophically, they maintain that permeability between the conventional and ultimate. The meditation practices were brought to Tibet by Padmasambhava around the 8th century. Padmasambhava came from the Swat Valley of Pakistan. These tantric practices evolved into highly refined meditative practices that focus on the nature of mind and came into Tibet through India.

Bon was a native Tibetan religion that influenced Tibetan Buddhism, though I don't know many details beyond that. I think it's a shamanistic religion, so it probably fit well with the energy work that Tantra introduced. The idea of tulkus—reincarnated masters who can choose their rebirth and be recognized—was a Tibetan creation, not found in any Indian system.

Yogacara developed around the 4th century in northern India. Vasubandhu is associated with the philosophical foundation of that school.

I wanted to discuss why we bother studying this material. First, very simply, the suttas contain valuable information about how to live, practice, and understand. When you consider the aspects of the Eightfold Path—sila, samadhi, paññā—they cover all of these exhaustively and in detail, sometimes in ways we may not have heard before.

Secondly, as we discussed with the three kinds of wisdom, reading is a powerful way to develop insight.

When you hear about the Buddha's insights, it plants a seed. Through meditation and investigation, the care you bring to those questions waters that seed and makes it flower into insight.

It's like when you first heard the concept of not-self in a dharma talk. Wasn't it perplexing? You might have wondered, "How can that be?" Yet if you got curious—"What do they mean the body isn't the self? What do they mean my thoughts aren't me?"—and began investigating, that inquiry opens up to moments of insight that can be truly freeing. "Oh, this fear—it's not me, I don't own it."

In the same way, the Buddha recorded very deep insights and understanding in his discourses, and all of these offer new ground for us to reflect upon and investigate, fertilizing our own practice. One of the key ways I see the suttas is as incomparable tools for developing the factor of right view.

Right view is the start of the Eightfold Path. It's also the end of the Eightfold Path. Everything starts from there and everything culminates there. Essentially, the whole path is to transform the way we see the world and the way we understand the world. The suttas are telling us again and again how the Buddha saw the world—which is simply a way of saying how a free, awakened, unattached, unhindered mind sees this world of experience. We can use that to check our own understanding.

The Buddha will say things that startle us. That's good, because it leads us to reflect: "What would it be like if I looked at things that way? Where am I blind? Where is there a corner of attachment or delusion that I haven't looked into so fully?" It can really shake us up a little bit and get us to examine our own take on the world, keeping us going straight on the track.

Ajahn Chah used to tell a story in response to students who questioned his seemingly contradictory advice. One meditator would come in and receive one piece of guidance, then the next meditator would receive completely opposite advice. When asked about this apparent inconsistency, he said, "Look, I see people going down a path I know really well. Some people I see wandering off to the right, so I shout, 'Go left, go left!' Other people I see wandering off to the left, so I shout, 'Go right, go right!' It's just to get them back on that center track."

The suttas serve as an excellent way for us to know if we're on that center track. If we start diverging from the Buddha's understanding too greatly, it's good cause for questioning. Of course, we have to have faith in these words before we can use them that way—we don't take it blindly. But once we start to study and acquire some faith, it becomes very useful for refining our take on the path, on life, on right view.

This brings up the whole question of concepts and learning about concepts. Our meditation practice has been kind of anti-conceptual from the beginning, which is great—it's what we've needed. We needed to get back to direct experience. We had that as children, then sort of lost it in all the years of schooling. Meditation gave us a way to get back: breath in, breath out, body sensation arising and passing, thought coming and going. This is anger, this is joy, this is fear, this is contentment. We learned what it was to be with our own experience without too many concepts.

But now, having done that, we can start to bring in some concepts again. One of my teachers explained how concepts work using this analogy: If you go out in the garden and dig for a morning, your hands get dirty. You can brush off the dirt, but when you come in, they're still a little muddy. So you run a little water and put soap on your hands and wipe them. Then what you've got is a big soapy dirty mess that you have to run under clear water to get rid of. Only then are your hands really clean.

Dharma concepts are like soap. Worldly concepts are the dirt. We come in with all kinds of mistaken worldly concepts like "this is me," "this is my body," "these are my emotions." Those are not correct, so we have to take up dharma concepts to clean those off. But then we get stuck with the dharma concepts: "Oh, I'm all about not-self. I know you're not quite there yet, but I'm about not-self."

We don't want to attach to dharma concepts either, and that's why we need meditation to wash off the dharma concepts so the mind is just clean and bright and not fixated anywhere. But we have to really get in and apply those concepts first. Concepts like the five aggregates, dependent origination, becoming—this word bhava, what it means to take birth. We need to grapple with those until we can track them in our moment-to-moment experience. Once we've understood, then we can let go. Because all the concepts are really just encouraging us: let go, let go, let go.

But we have to apply them in every little corner where holding comes before we can let go.

Inspiration is another reason to read the suttas. There are some very moving, inspiring, dramatic passages, and we'll come to one today that I hope you'll enjoy and find inspiring.

Not so often will Western teachers say to their students, "Go all the way for liberation. Go for full enlightenment. Make that your goal." But the Buddha does it all the time. He's always saying that. It's good for us to hear that. It kind of picks up our idea of what's possible.

One of my students just got into reading the Majjhima and we were talking about this. I said, "Do you find it a little daunting that the Buddha says things like this?" She said, "No. It's great. It's great the Buddha was telling people to go for it. What else would you want the Buddha to do?"

So it's like that. You meet this voice that's talking from the depths and pointing to the depths again and again. I find that reading these texts really strengthens the quality of faith. You just get a sense of how reliable this voice is.

Now the question always comes up: how reliable is this voice? These things are 2,500 years old. They've been passed on through who knows who, through talking, through writing down in foreign languages, coming over here. How reliable is any of this? Do we know that any of this is the word of the Buddha? No, we don't.

But if you start to hang out with that voice, you get a sense of where that voice is coming from. Because one of the things I find—I think the thing I find most amazing in these texts—I've probably read close to

3,500 pages of the translations plus footnotes from these books. There's almost no internal disagreement. There are one or two statements I kind of disagree with. One or two in 3,500 pages. There are a lot I simply don't know about. There are a lot I kind of write off because they're cultural and don't seem relevant today. But when this voice, the Buddha of the Pali suttas, talks about the way things are, the way the mind is, the way we get caught, and the way we get free, I haven't seen any disagreement, any discrepancy, anything I thought was off through all those pages.

So I think it's unlikely that many different voices contributed to this. I think there are places—and the scholars can tell you more about where, Bhikkhu Bodhi, Venerable Analayo can tell you about where things have been inserted. I think it's very clear that there were editors to this work who inserted stock passages, inserted some other stories, inserted some cultural references that aren't so meaningful today. But if you listen to the sections that talk about the Dhamma—that is, the way things are—I find it completely reliable.

And that's astounding because that voice of the Buddha is talking about topics of great philosophical and doctrinal subtlety. This is not simple stuff that's being covered here. There are very small distinctions between existence and non-existence, being and non-being, that are being pointed to without any sense of two different points of view going on.

I was talking with Wes Nisker about this. After 2,500 years, it must have gotten turned around a little here and there. And he said, "Probably, but it works." That's the other thing. Even if there are some discrepancies, the gist of it works.

And so reading these texts and starting to get some trust in the fact that this works and that the voice is consistent, you start to feel that you can really have some faith in the Dhamma, some faith in the Buddha as he's portrayed in these pages.

And then something that has always interested me is, what did the Buddha really say? We hear so many things. If you sit in the hall at Spirit Rock, you will hear many different quotes. And I've listened to a lot that are not accurate—"the Buddha said this"—and I know that he didn't. So this is the way to find out what the Buddha really said about many different topics. I find it really trustworthy in that way also.

So there have been changes, there have been additions, there have probably been some deletions. I consider them relatively minor. The core of the teachings I think is very reliable here.

But I want to talk now a little bit about what's tough about reading these because there are some areas of the suttas that are really grating on modern Western sensibilities.

So the first thing that you'll see is many discourses are directed to monks and nuns. Those teachings don't work so well for lay people. And we might feel, you know, I should be taking up the practices that monks and nuns are, but we're not monks and nuns. It doesn't make sense for us to try to take up all the practices of monks and nuns when we're living as lay people.

So, simple question. What's the big dividing line between a monastic life and a lay life? Dinner. The evening meal. That's a big one. What else? Children. Sex. Money. Possessions. Movies. CDs. Fiction books. All these things are part of our lives as lay people, and they're fine. The Buddha didn't say anything against these for lay people, but they're not allowed in the monastic code.

So if we listen to a teaching that explains to monks and nuns why they shouldn't be engaging in these things, it's easy for the mind's tendency to think, oh, I shouldn't be either. But the Buddha never meant that and never said that. So we have to keep our ears up when the theme is renunciation.

Renunciation is a really powerful practice. That's what Sally taught on this morning. It's the central piece of the monastic life. Very helpful because you could say it's the lifestyle of letting go of cravings. It is an approach to spiritual life that says, anytime craving comes along for anything in the sense realm, I'm not going to follow it because I've given it up to start with. I'm not going to have an evening meal. I'm not going to have sex. I'm not going to have money. I'm not going to have children. I'm not going to have possessions. I'm not going to enjoy shows, singing, jewelry, makeup, costumes. I give up all of that.

Just reflect for a minute, what would your life be like if you gave up all those things? Let's say you could be supported, right? But you didn't have any spare money to spend. You'd have the requisites of food, lodging, shelter, and healthcare, but you didn't have any other money to spend. What would your life be like? Or without your partner, without an intimate partner, without listening to music or going to movies? You'd just about be a monk or a nun, wouldn't you? So you might as well ordain and get supported.

So all of us are in lay life essentially to have access to these sense pleasures. When you think of it, that's essentially what it comes down to. There's nothing wrong with it. Other people will choose a totally renunciate life and follow that guideline, and it works very well for them. But for various reasons, it's not so appealing for us. That's fine.

So when the Buddha gets on a rant against sense pleasures, which he does, against sexuality, which he does, you have to realize that's for monastics to support their level of renunciation. It's not directed to us as lay people. He spoke differently to different audiences.

The comment is we're somewhere in between, and I fully agree with you. This is also a really interesting place to explore. Where are you in between? To what extent do you resonate with the teachings on renunciation?

Because we have all benefited from retreats, from silent retreats, we have all tasted some of the power of the renunciate lifestyle. When you're doing a retreat up the hill here, you're slipping into a renunciate lifestyle. If you take the five precepts, you're giving up some things. If you take the eight precepts, you're giving up most everything else.

So I find this a really interesting seam to keep investigating. We make these choices day by day. Where on this spectrum from overindulgence in sense pleasures to complete renunciation of sense pleasures do we

want to be? This is both a general question about lifestyle and a day-to-day question. A friend calls up and wants to go out to a concert. Do we do that, or do we stay home and meditate? Any of you could have been home watching the Packers this afternoon. Instead, you're here talking about suttas. This question about where I want to renounce and what it will benefit me is such a fascinating ongoing place to inquire, given the place that we're in.

I'll tell you the way that I think about it. I approach it in two different ways. I think of my practice when I'm at a facility like up the hill as my renunciate practice, and I plan to spend a certain amount of every year in a situation like that so that I'm carrying out a renunciate lifestyle for part of my year. When I'm at home, I play with different schedules where I renounce to different degrees.

I've actually just finished a four-week home retreat where I sit for about five hours a day, but I keep up a little bit with email. I go to the gym or exercise virtually every day, listen to a dharma talk in the evening, but I chat with my wife over meals. That's it. I don't go out for social things. I don't watch movies. I don't go out listening to music. For me, it's a lovely way to live. I could just keep going like that for a long time.

So playing with this spectrum is really fun. I encourage you to do it not out of a sense of guilt or shame or "I ought to be," but with the understanding that the idea behind renunciation is that one renounces a lesser pleasure or a lesser happiness in order to gain a happiness which is greater. The idea of renunciation is to find a deeper, truer, more reliable source of happiness. So play with that. See what things contribute to it.

The other thing that will rub—and it will probably always rub—is that the suttas are not very friendly to women. Simple example: the Buddha resisted, according to one sutta, accepting women into ordained life, even though the person asking was his stepmother, Mahapajapati, who had nursed him after his mother died, to whom he owed a great deal. It's recorded that when the Buddha agreed to accept women into ordination, he said, "Oh, but if I do this, the life of these teachings will only be half of what they would have otherwise."

Now, I have good news on this score. Venerable Analayo, who is a wonderful scholar of the text, who's reading Chinese now as well as Pali, says that he doesn't believe this part of the sutta is authentic. Through his investigations, both of the internal facts and inconsistencies in the historical record of that sutta and by comparison to Chinese sources where some fragments of the canon have survived, he doesn't believe that account is authentic—either the Buddha refusing three times to ordain women or the statement that the length of the sasana will be cut in half. So that's nice to know.

Nonetheless, there are other insults to women all along the way. In the monastic discipline, a nun who's been ordained for fifty years is supposed to bow down to a monk who's been ordained for one day. That's how the seniority goes. The most junior monk is senior to the most senior nun. These things can really upset one. Many of these traditions continue to the present day because this is dictated by the Vinaya. The Vinaya has not changed essentially since twenty-five hundred years ago. These are the rules of conduct

that govern monks and nuns in the world today. They won't be changed overnight. So this is really not so suitable for our Western sensibilities.

But a few things. First, it's really clear this comes out of Indian culture of twenty-five hundred years ago. This is the way the whole society was structured. Whatever you may feel about the Buddha's creation of his own culture in the sangha, he did not go about trying to change the outer culture. He pretty much took the outer culture as it was. He talked about ways that people needed to relate to one another in partnerships and raising families, ways that kings should relate to subjects, but he did not actively go out and try to overthrow a monarchy or establish a different social order. His own sangha was very different. He threw out all the caste rules.

and he didn't go out and try to abolish the caste rules in the wider society.

What I see is that he left the outer society largely as he found it, and his own views were probably conditioned by it to some extent. He did take a significant step in admitting women at all, because generally women were not admitted to holy life at that time, so that in itself was quite radical. But he placed them in a lower status within the hierarchy.

Now, was that simply so the rest of society wouldn't react negatively and withdraw their support from the entire monastic community? Or was it because he genuinely viewed it that way? I don't know. We may never know.

Sometimes when people encounter this cultural element in how the Buddha delivered his teachings, they ask, "Well then, was he really enlightened? Could he truly be enlightened and still have those cultural blind spots?" My only response is that I believe he was free of greed, hatred, and delusion, and I also think his worldview was shaped by the society around him. Personally, I think both of those things can coexist.

This situation from the Buddha's time has continued down to the present day. I know people who choose not to support current modern Theravadan monastics because women aren't supported equally. I understand that perspective and wouldn't try to dissuade anyone from it.

My personal view is that this situation cannot and will not continue in the West, though it may take fifty, seventy-five, or even a hundred years to change because there's tremendous momentum behind the Buddhist tradition in the Vinaya. Many Western monks are deeply committed to this change—they welcome it and want to see it happen. But they can't break away entirely on their own or they'll lose their connections to their Asian roots. Many monastics find themselves in this middle ground of disagreeing with the current state while lacking the power to change it overnight.

Personally, I feel empathy for their struggle and hope that progress will come sooner rather than later. But I believe it must move forward. It has to evolve in the West, or Buddhism in that form won't survive here. That's simply my personal perspective, but it's one of the tensions you'll encounter in these teachings.

The third challenge is that intellectually, this material is quite dense. Some texts are very concise, complicated, and broad, requiring time to digest. Just be patient with yourself. Once you learn the basic vocabulary, you'll find your way in.

Here's the essential vocabulary—and I'll run through it quickly since you probably already know most of it: Four foundations of mindfulness, five aggregates, six sense bases, five hindrances, three kilesas, ten fetters, five spiritual faculties, seven factors of awakening, four brahma-viharas, twelve links of dependent origination. Once you grasp this basic vocabulary, it will carry you through most of the suttas, because the Buddha essentially taught the same core principles repeatedly for forty-five years, adding layers of subtlety.

"Can I ask a question?"

"Yes."

"The discord this creates in me is about the relationship between having a monastic system and how it exists today. You could argue that 2,500 years ago there was a necessity. But the fact that Buddhist teachings were directed so heavily toward monastic life—not to say they weren't also directed to laypeople—seems to create a pathway suggesting that this really is the way to enlightenment, as opposed to the other way. Why have a monastic system at all? I'm grappling with that. It reminds me of being raised Jewish and having Catholic friends say that if you didn't embrace Christ, you could never go to heaven. It's like, 'Oh really? If I didn't do it that way, I couldn't?' That same feeling is coming up around this, and I'd like your insight."

So the question is about why the Buddha created a monastic system. Are you asking whether he's saying it's a superior way to live, or that it's the only way?

"Is he saying it is the way?"

He is absolutely not saying it's the only way. There are records in the suttas of laypeople attaining enlightenment at all four stages, including full enlightenment.

The question is about distinguishing cultural elements from core teachings when reading the suttas, particularly regarding karma.

The way I approach this distinction is to look for fairly clear Indian cultural references—specific devas dwelling in particular heavenly realms, detailed cosmological hierarchies, and other elements that seem tied to the cultural context of ancient India. These often appear cultural to me.

However, the broader framework underlying these specifics—that there are realms of existence beyond the human realm, that rebirth occurs, and that karma determines where one lands in this cycle—these seem integral to the Buddha's description of how things actually are. Whether we can verify this from our own experience is another matter, but it's clear the Buddha presented this as fundamental truth, not

cultural accommodation.

Take the Buddha's repeated assertion that "there is no discoverable beginning to this samsara—beings have been wandering in this cycle of birth and death, hindered by ignorance and fettered by craving, since beginningless time." He emphasizes this consistently throughout the texts. I don't think it's merely a figure of speech.

The teachings on karma and rebirth are so thoroughly woven throughout the suttas—book after book, story after story—that I believe they represent core elements of what the Buddha taught. Sometimes I hear suggestions that the Buddha didn't really mean these teachings, that they were just skillful means to draw in Hindu practitioners. But given how extensively these concepts appear, I think one would be misleading oneself to dismiss them as mere cultural artifacts.

This doesn't mean we have to believe these teachings. You can focus entirely on what's immediately experienceable here and now—mindfulness, ethical conduct, mental cultivation—and work with that for years, perhaps your entire life. That approach will serve you well.

When you encounter teachings in the suttas that don't resonate or feel comfortable, don't worry about resolving them immediately. Leave them as open questions. You don't need to figure everything out now, and you certainly don't need to believe everything to benefit from the path. The beauty of the dharma is that much of it can be verified through direct experience, and that experiential understanding can develop gradually over time.

The distinction between cultural and essential isn't always clear-cut, and sometimes you may need to discuss these questions with teachers or study commentaries to develop better discernment. Context matters enormously in these determinations.

You don't have to believe anything that you don't want to believe in this teaching.

In talking with Gil about this question, he offered a beautiful perspective: "If I were certain that there is no reincarnation, would you change your practice?" I thought about that and said no. I find that quite meaningful.

There's actually a sutta in the Majjhima Nikaya, number 60, where the Buddha presents this same inquiry. He asks: if you don't believe in rebirth, how would you live your life? The response comes: "Well, I'd want to be kind to people, I'd want to take care of my family, and I'd try to purify my mind so I didn't harm others." The Buddha responds, "Great."

He then asks: "And if you did believe in rebirth, how would you live your life?" The answer: "Well, I'd try to be kind to others, take care of my family, and purify my mind." The Buddha's response: "Good." So it comes out to the same.

You mentioned his teachings spanned 45 years—is that how long Ananda was connected with him to

preserve all of this for us?

That's an excellent question. The Buddha taught for 45 years, from age 35 to age 80. However, Ananda was only his attendant for the last 25 years of his life. So there was indeed a period when Ananda wasn't present to record the discourses directly. Yet some of the recorded discourses seem to have occurred fairly early in the Buddha's teaching career.

I have a sense that the Buddha repeated many of these earlier teachings for Ananda's benefit at some point later on. There's a compelling example of this dynamic: In the Satipatthana Sutta, there's an encouragement to practice mindfulness on the unbeautiful aspects of the body—the asubha meditation on the thirty-two parts, contemplating what's not beautiful within us. The Buddha taught this practice and then went off on retreat.

When he returned, there were significantly fewer bhikkhus than before. Why? A number of monks had committed suicide because they were so disturbed by the unbeautiful aspects they were contemplating. Recognizing this harmful outcome, the Buddha said, "Let's not emphasize that practice so strongly. Instead, let's teach mindfulness of breathing."

This is how the Anapanasati Sutta came to be promoted—to counterbalance the emphasis on asubha meditation, which was not producing beneficial results in the monastic community. I believe this shift occurred fairly early in his teaching career.

Why don't we take one more brief break, and then we'll return to complete our exploration of the sutta.

Transcriptions produced locally using Swiss low-carbon electricity. Corrections and rewriting by cloud-hosted AI.