Week 1, Part 1: Introduction to the Suttas

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 43:35

This is the first class in a series of four on the suttas, and it will be really helpful if you have a copy of the handout. There was a question earlier about whether you needed to buy a book for the class. You don't need to, because in each class we'll photocopy the text that we'll be studying. But if you want to pursue it further, I really recommend starting with the blue book called *In the Buddha's Words*. We'll talk about that more as we get into the study specifically.

Today's class is going to be in two parts. In the first half I want to talk about a general approach to this material because this is not the easiest material to read or study. So I want to give a little background and talk about how to approach it and why we would want to approach it, and some of the obstacles we encounter as we do.

There's an enormous distance between 21st century Westerners and the India of 500 years before the birth of Jesus. Making this transition involves questions of philosophy, history, culture, social norms, ways of seeing the world, and ways of understanding. Really, when you enter the world of the Pali suttas, you're entering a foreign country. And it's more foreign than going to India today, which God knows is unsettling enough. So you'll meet a lot of unusual people and unusual ideas, unusual practices in the pages of these texts. I want to give some perspective on how to relate to all that first, and we'll talk a little about why we bother.

In the second part of the class, I want to focus on one text in particular. That text is found in the middle-length discourses, what's called the Majjhima Nikāya. It's Sutta number 26, where the Buddha relates his own search and journey to enlightenment.

I want to talk culturally about where we are in the West today, having grown up in the 20th century and now finding ourselves in the 21st. We find ourselves with certain attitudes of mind that make it difficult to make the shift into this kind of study. For one thing, we're starting to use our conceptual apparatus—you could say our intellect, our thinking mind—when we get into the suttas. And this is something that many of us are in recovery from having overdone.

When you think about the main institutions that have formed us—schools and churches, synagogues, organized religion—neither of those have been entirely satisfactory for most of us. In the educational system, from my point of view, we've been way too intellectualized and there's not been enough attention, if any, given to the inner life, to happiness, and the possibility of development. On the other hand, in the religious sphere, Western religions have tended to focus on dogma a lot and also neglected ways to increase the sense of well-being and happiness, not given such skillful tools for inner life.

So many of us have been in kind of rebellion from our intellectual history through colleges or whatever, and we've been in rebellion from the religion that we grew up under because it wasn't speaking to us personally so effectively. As we connect with the Pali discourses, we are connecting with our intellect and we're connecting with the religious tradition. And both of those things can be off-putting. You're going to get, as we get into these suttas, a clear dose of traditional Buddhism. And it will at times seem quite religious. There will be things that resonate and things that don't resonate.

When I reflect on where we've come—Jack Kornfield and Joseph Goldstein started teaching Vipassana retreats in California almost 40 years ago, I think the first one was in 1974. So 40 years on, we still don't have an organized study program at Spirit Rock specifically for the suttas. There's DPP, which is experience and study, but we still don't have an established study program. It's kind of interesting. I think it's taken us this long to recover from the beating our intellects took growing up. And we need to combine this love of learning with a delight in the outcome.

These texts can offer exactly this combination of learning and delight. While there are some cultural adjustments we need to make, I hope you will discover genuine joy in reading these teachings and find that they truly enrich both your practice and your understanding of what you're undertaking.

From my perspective, it's not my job to convince you that everything the Buddha says in these texts is correct. My role is simply to introduce you to them and allow you to reach your own conclusions. You don't need to believe everything in these texts to be an effective practicing Buddhist. I encourage you to approach the readings with an open mind, taking what resonates with you and not worrying too much about the rest.

I will discuss some of the challenging aspects that can be off-putting, but I want to prepare you for these beforehand. Consider this a kind of inoculation—understanding what might be difficult in the Pali suttas so that when you encounter these elements, you'll have some resistance to being put off by them.

When I contemplate how I want to grow in Dharma personally, I often think of His Holiness the Dalai Lama as an aspiration. How many of you have attended his multi-day teachings? Not just a public talk, but extended teachings lasting four or five days?

Those who have know that in public talks and at the beginning of his extended teachings, he embodies the warm, outgoing bodhisattva of compassion. He can put an entire room into joyful uproar, touching people's hearts and making immediate connection on that fundamental level. He possesses this remarkable ability whether he's addressing the United Nations or speaking to 200,000 people in Central Park—he makes that direct heart-to-heart contact.

But if you stay for several days of his teachings, he transitions out of that mode into the role of pedantic Buddhist philosopher. He will explore the subtleties of the Heart Sutra, Madhyamaka teachings, or Dzogchen texts and practices with tremendous precision and scholarly rigor. So he possesses this deeply

scholarly and intellectual dimension that emerges during formal teaching, alongside that beautiful heart quality that can connect with anyone when he chooses to engage it.

In my view, this is how our practice should develop. We should cultivate that engaging heart quality while simultaneously developing our understanding of these texts, because I believe it's our comprehension of the texts' depth that can point us toward corresponding depth in our meditation practice.

Until we begin to read about what's possible through Vipassana practice, we won't aspire to it. But as the texts reveal the possibilities and depth that the Buddha uncovered, we can find inspiration to go deeper, to venture further than what we've experienced ourselves. I believe that study serves as an excellent guide for our meditation practice.

At a recent teaching I attended with the Dalai Lama, he quoted an old Tibetan master—I can't recall if he even mentioned the name—who described three aspects of Dharma practice. I think this applies to us as well. This master said: "When I meditate, I bring to bear my study and my critical reflection on my meditation experience. When I study, I bring to bear my meditation and my critical reflection. When I critically reflect, I bring to bear my meditation and my study."

These three facets should engage us all in furthering our path: meditation, study, and critical reflection.

Remarkably, these were identified by the Buddha himself 2,500 years ago in a passage from the Dīgha Nikāya, where he described three kinds of wisdom.

He called the first *sutamaya paññā*. You probably know that *paññā* is the word for wisdom. *Suta* means hearing, and *maya* means "made from." So this is wisdom that comes from hearing. When you listen to a Dharma talk and begin to see things differently, when you have insights or understanding from a teaching—this represents *sutamaya paññā*. This was the only form available in the Buddha's time, since there were no written scriptures then. Everything was transmitted through hearing, though reading fulfills the same function today. We could say reading or hearing—*sutamaya paññā*.

The second level is *cintāmaya paññā*. *Cintā* means thinking. This is the wisdom that comes from reflecting upon what we've heard in light of our experience. We all need to engage in this process. We hear a teaching about the cause of suffering, about right speech, about the Eightfold Path. We must reflect: is this true in my life? As we move through different actions, times, and circumstances, we need to examine whether these teachings accurately describe what happens to us. Through this process of mentally chewing over the teachings with our thoughts and concepts, we come to verify what we've heard.

The final level the Buddha described is called *bhāvanāmaya paññā*. *Bhāvanā* means mental development and is sometimes synonymous with meditation. This represents the insights or wisdom that arises from our direct meditation practice.

When the mind has been stilled through the cultivation of samadhi and we are able to see more clearly

the way things are, then insight and knowledge arises based on that clear seeing. This is the meaning of the term yata-bhuta-nyana-dasana, knowledge and vision into things as they are.

So this is the third type of insight, and this is the most liberating. Sometimes you'll get a deep flash from just hearing. Sometimes you'll get a deep flash from a reflection. But most often the liberating insights come when the mind has been stilled through meditation, and then that still mind is turned to contact with reality—that's bhavana-mayapanya.

So a complete program of Dharma practice involves all three of these aspects. In the forty years roughly that Vipassana has been available in the West, we focus so strongly on the bhavana part because frankly I think we were all in a state of emergency. I know I was. When I came into meditation practice, I had some burning suffering that I needed to have some cold relief water put on. And meditation was the direct vehicle to that.

As we continue and gain more ease in our personal lives, then I think that's a very good time to bring in the study element. We have some meditation experience, some degree of harmony. Then we can look for where the greatest depth can come. And then study plays a wonderful role here.

Tibetans have another analogy that our Dharma practice is like climbing a tall mountain. It's tall. We know there's a long way to go. But they say that meditating without studying is trying to climb the mountain without a map. But studying without meditating is like trying to climb the mountain with your feet tied together. So we really need both.

I was reminded of this map, the importance of the map piece recently. Sally and I were going on a hike with some friends. Sally's my wife and she taught here this morning, so we're doing a whole day between us. We were going on a hike with some friends and we got to the trailhead. There was a hiker already walking down the trail, so I just popped out of the car and dashed off after the hiker I saw going down the trail. But what I didn't notice—and then a few people started following me—what I didn't notice is that he was going to a dead end. But Sally didn't follow me because she'd found the map. So she figured out where the trail actually was and started going that way, and so we all had to turn around and follow her because she had the map.

So studying can let us avoid some of those dead ends. You might go a long way down a certain track before realizing it's kind of a dead end, and the study can put us back on track.

I want to talk a little bit about the background to these texts. This is one of the books that has come to us, the Middle Length Sayings or the translation of the Majjhima Nikaya. The fact that we can hold a book like this in our hands today is very improbable. These words were spoken purportedly 2,500 years ago, more than that. And the fact that they have come down in such seemingly complete—I won't say completely complete, but seemingly complete and useful form—is miraculous.

When we start to hear the story about how this book comes to be, it sounds to me like something out of

Raiders of the Lost Ark. I mean there are all these mysterious things happening. There are secret texts that are filed away in hidden chambers and guarded by celibate acolytes in caves and forests for centuries and centuries while wars and kings and different struggles go on in the background, and it's amazing that it survived at all.

So I want to tell a little bit of the history of how these texts have come to us. It'll give you some sense of the rarity of what we have here.

After the Buddha died, a group of senior monks—they were all considered to be fully awakened—came together in Rajagaha in northern India in a gathering called the First Council. And they spent the rains retreat, which is three months long, in a group of caves just in the hills above Rajagaha.

There were three main players at this gathering. There were many, many enlightened beings, it said, but there were three main players. Maha Kasipa was the remaining senior disciple of the Buddha's—went back a long time, because both the Buddha's main disciples, Sariputta and Moggallana, died before him, so they were no longer available. So Maha Kasipa was kind of the senior monk remaining. He was a very strict and tough guy. He was an ascetic monk and held people to very tough standards.

The second person who was very key was a monk called Upali. And Upali had in his memory all the rules of the monastic discipline and was able to recite them at that council and so gathered up all the codes that governed the monks and nuns.

And the third person was Ananda. Ananda had been the Buddha's attendant for the last twenty-five years of his life. So he had been personally around him nearly every day. He listened to many, many discourses. And if he had missed a discourse, if the Buddha was giving it to someone else, Ananda would ask him at the end of the day, "What did you say? Please relate it to me because I want to remember it."

It was Ananda's recollection that provided the material for the suttas. Sutta, the literal meaning is thread, but the translation we use is discourse. So when we talk about the Pali discourses, these are the suttas—the actual words that the Buddha spoke during his lifetime, primarily as recollected by Ananda at that first council.

The timing of this council places it around 483 BCE, according to Bhikkhu Bodhi's estimation. While scholars debate the exact dates of the Buddha's birth and death, this translator of our text suggests that the Buddha died 483 years before the birth of Christ. The first council occurred in the six months following that time.

Now, it may seem really unlikely that one person could remember all the discourses of the Buddha. That's quite a feat of memory. But Ananda was known for having a prodigious memory. And just as a counterpoint to that, there are monks in Burma today who can recite all the suttas at will. They hold contests where senior monks will start reading a sutta anywhere—they'll pick open a book and start reading in Pali, then ask another monk to continue. The monk simply picks up and continues from that

exact point. Then they'll choose a different volume and pose the same challenge to another monk. These monastics can do this flawlessly. There are monks in Burma today who have memorized the entire canon in Pali, which isn't even their native language. So I think it's entirely possible that Ananda could have remembered all of that. He had a very clear mind and exceptional memory.

Now let's examine the structure of what has come down to us. If you look at the second page of your handout, titled "An Outline of the Pali Canon," you'll see that the teachings are organized into what are called three baskets, or Tipitaka.

The first basket is the Vinaya Pitaka—the monastic rules that were recited by Upali at that first council. There are six volumes in English translation of the Vinaya. I don't know anybody who's read them all. But if you want a kind of Cliff's Notes guide to the Vinaya, Thanissaro Bhikkhu has written a wonderful book called *The Buddhist Monastic Code*, which explains these rules in accessible terms. It's an excellent place to explore if you want to understand what these regulations are about.

There are approximately 227 rules for monks and 254 rules for nuns. This disparity exists not because nuns are intrinsically more prone to transgression, but because their lives required more protection given the social conditions for women in ancient India. The Vinaya contains all these written guidelines and their corresponding offenses. It's essentially a complete legal system that the Buddha developed as circumstances arose, complete with penalties, judicial procedures, standards of evidence, and so forth.

The second basket is called the Sutta Pitaka—the basket of discourses where all of Ananda's recitations are collected. This is broken down into smaller collections, which we'll examine shortly.

The third basket is the Abhidhamma Pitaka, which translates as the basket of higher dhamma. It's concerned with extremely detailed analysis of moment-to-moment experience. You could say it describes human experience told completely from the perspective of no concept of self—just moment-to-moment unfolding of sensory contact, factors of consciousness, mental factors, and so on. This comprises seven volumes in the Pali Text Society edition. I also don't know anyone who's read all of these.

However, there are accessible guides. As noted on your handout, if you're interested in the Abhidhamma, an excellent introduction is *A Comprehensive Manual of Abhidhamma* by Bhikkhu Bodhi, which offers a readable summary of this complex material.

There is one teacher in our group who knows the Abhidhamma quite well—Steve Armstrong. He completed an Abhidhamma retreat here in October of this year, which I hear was very well received. If you're interested, I think he'll probably offer it again if we invite him back. Marianne, are we going to invite him back? You said five years? Well, we'll work on Steve to return sooner than that.

These are the three baskets. In terms of the historical background, let me share the legend behind the Abhidhamma. According to tradition, the Buddha spent one rains retreat in a heaven realm, and it's said that the Abhidhamma material had to be delivered in one sitting.

And that's why he went to the heaven realm—because it was hard to sit for three months uninterruptedly in an earthly body. In the heaven realm, his mother had taken her rebirth, and so he gave the teachings to his mother in her next incarnation. His mother died shortly after he was born. So it's said that he gave the teachings to her in one straight sitting in a heaven realm. And then daily he would manifest in his earthly body and deliver the summary of the day's teachings to Sariputta, who was considered the foremost in wisdom of all the disciples. And Sariputta collected it and that became the basis for the Abhidhamma.

Now, if you believe that, I have a bridge toward San Francisco I'd like to sell you. Scholars don't think it happened that way. Western scholars believe that the material in the Abhidhamma was collected over about 250 years after the Buddha's death and assembled by later monks. They seem in universal agreement on this process, and they can sort of track the aging of the assembly of the Abhidhamma. So if you talk to a committed Buddhist in a traditional country like Burma, they will believe that the Abhidhamma came from the Buddha himself. But if you talk to a Western scholar, they'll say, no, it was collected by later practitioners, and so actually resembles more of a commentary than a direct transmission from the Buddha.

So in these things, I tend to side with Western scholars. I have faith in their scientific approach, and I view it as a later collection, but one that has a lot of valuable insight and incredible minute understanding of the processes of mind and body. So very worth study, but not necessarily the words of the Buddha.

Whatever was around, certainly the monastic basket and the discourse basket was transmitted for 400 years only orally. There was writing at this time—500 years BCE, there was writing—but it was only used basically for record keeping with things like finances and imperial accounts. So emperors would use it to note down who had paid taxes and where they had made donations and how many bushels of grain they'd received in the recent tax year. But writing wasn't considered suitable for putting down the highest spiritual teachings because it was felt that writing could get corrupted too easily. Somebody could miswrite a word, it would be copied wrongly by someone else and the essence would be lost. They felt it was more faithful to reproduce these teachings by memorizing them and transmitting them orally from one person to another.

So what happened over these 400 years is that different groups of monks and nuns picked different sections of the text to memorize. So one group would be in charge of the first section of the Majjhima Nikaya. Another group would be in charge of the first section of the Samyutta Nikaya, and so forth. And it would be their responsibility to chant these regularly, to teach new people how to memorize them and chant them and what they meant, and to pass that on over the years.

So this went on this way for about 400 years. And in that time, these texts migrated to Sri Lanka because one of the great emperors of India, a fellow named Ashoka, became a convert to Buddhism, I think around 250 BCE, and then sent his son, I believe, as a missionary to Sri Lanka to establish Buddhism there. His son established Buddhism there. The transmission of the text was taking place. But a king came up in Sri

Lanka who persecuted Buddhism. It was a threat to what he believed. So he began persecuting the Buddhist monks and the nuns and trying to destroy their religion. And as he was doing that, it's said that some of the texts were in danger of getting lost—that one section of the text, almost all the monks and nuns had died out who were responsible for that, and there was only one person left in Sri Lanka who knew those texts.

So when it got to that point, the elders said, oh wait, this is too risky. We could lose everything under this king. And so they decreed that the text should at that point be written down. So this happened about 400 years after the death of the Buddha, about 100 BCE—the first time that these texts were first written down. And they were written down in this language called Pali, which was an ancient language, alive at the time of the Buddha most likely, but it's dead today, so we don't know exactly. We believe the Buddha probably spoke Magadhan, not Pali, but Pali may have been closely related to Magadhan. That area that the Buddha grew up in was called Magadha in ancient India.

Pali is similar to Sanskrit, but it's less refined. Sanskrit has always been the high language of Indian literature, especially scriptural literature. And it's said that if you know Sanskrit, hearing someone speak Pali is like trying to speak Sanskrit with pebbles in your mouth. So it's a little cruder form than Sanskrit. But it's complete. It's philosophically refined and complex and very workable.

So the Pali suttas were alive in India. They were written down in Sri Lanka by 100 BCE. Over the few hundred years after the death of the Buddha, what happens to a big group of people after the founder dies? Do you observe this? They start arguing, don't they?

When there's not that central figure to hold it together, the arguments break out. That's exactly what happened after the Buddha's death. Arguments broke out and people started interpreting the doctrine differently. They started interpreting the monastic discipline differently. This led to a splintering into eighteen different schools in about the four hundred years following the Buddha's death.

That figure is an approximation because there are some schools that can be considered one school, or if you look at it differently, they could be divided into even more schools. But eighteen is the general number.

To give you a sense of some of the disagreements: one of the influential schools that arose to the east, the Mahasanghikas, said that monks and nuns could have money. The Buddhist discipline was always based on a vow of poverty, not handling gold and silver or money. This group said no, monks and nuns should be able to handle money. Neither side would relent, so that caused a split.

One school I really like the name of—the Pugalavadans. Isn't that great? The Pugalavadans. Their doctrine was that the self existed. They said it was somewhere between a concept and an ultimate reality, but that there was something called a self which had some real existence. Doctrinally, that's at odds with most of the other schools which say everything that you can recognize is not-self. So the Pugalavadans had a

different stance.

It was only at about this point—100 BCE, four hundred years after the death of the Buddha—that the Mahayana showed up at all. Nobody knows the exact origins of the Mahayana. Their teaching is similar to the early schools, but they emphasize the path of the bodhisattva, the active role of compassion, and the central role of emptiness in understanding the philosophy. None of them are so different, but it's a different emphasis. This has formed the major divide over the centuries since—Mahayana and our school.

Now our school, the Theravada, was one of those eighteen. The curious thing is all the other schools died out. The Theravada is the only one of the early schools that has survived in practice to the current day. Fragments of other canons are around. Every school had its own canon. They would rewrite some of the scriptures. They would rewrite especially the Abhidhamma, maybe the Vinaya. No complete canon has survived except for the Pali canon, which is connected with the Theravada school.

As I read the descent and the splintering of these schools, it does seem to me that the Theravada has come down in a very straight line from the original Sangha of the time of the Buddha. Some other schools were clearly splitting off—the Mahasanghikas with their different Vinaya, the Pugalavadans with a different doctrine of self. But as I read the evolution of these eighteen schools, I believe the Theravada is a straight lineal descendant of the early Sangha. So I feel it's pretty well in line with the original teachings as far as we can know them.

When the Mahayana came along, you may have the impression—because Mahayana is almost exclusively the school in Tibet, China, Korea, Japan, Taiwan—that once the Mahayana arose, it took over. That by its intrinsic philosophical superiority and elegance of its compassionate heart, it won over all the believers it touched. It's not true.

The two schools coexisted side by side in India for about a thousand years. Some early Chinese visitors recorded their visits to India and kept journals that can still be read today. They recorded that there was actually a majority of early Buddhist practitioners as opposed to Mahayana practitioners in the monasteries they visited in India at the time.

We don't have a convenient term for all these early eighteen different schools. They're often referred to as carriers of Nikaya Buddhism. So this is the Majjhima Nikaya. Nikaya just means these collections—collection. These collections of early discourses is what the followers based their teachings on, so they were often known as Nikaya Buddhists. Sometimes it's just called early Buddhism, Nikaya Buddhism. We can't really call it Theravadan Buddhism back then, because that was just one school. But there were seventeen others at the same time that all had basically the same philosophical approach. The Mahayana took it off in a different direction.

Over the years, what has come down to us is the Theravada and the Mahayana. Later in Indian history, about the seventh century, Buddhism became very influenced by the tantric practices of Hinduism. Those

tantric practices as they came into Mahayana formed, as it went to Tibet, Vajrayana Buddhism. So those are the three main schools that we have today of meditative practice.

Then, in India, around the eighth to the twelfth centuries, there were successive waves of invasion from Turkey. This is when Islam entered India. In those waves of invasion, the Muslim invaders destroyed most of the monasteries. Scriptures were burned and lost.

You can still see the scorch marks on the wood if you visit Nalanda today, not far from Bodh Gaya, where the university was destroyed by fire. In the excavations, archaeologists have found bowls that appear to have been abandoned mid-meal—people immediately putting down their food to flee the scene of invasion and destruction.

Buddhism in India essentially ended around the twelfth century. While Hinduism couldn't be wiped out because it lived in every home, on every street corner, woven into every family's practice, Buddhism could be eliminated because it was concentrated in monasteries. It was predominantly a monastic tradition, making it vulnerable to systematic destruction.

But by the time Buddhism ended in India, it had already been successfully transplanted. The Theravada school and the Pali suttas were established in Sri Lanka. Through the Silk Route, the Mahayana version traveled north through Kashmir into Tibet and China. From Sri Lanka, Buddhism extended sometime around the eighth to tenth centuries to Burma, Thailand, and Southeast Asia. Later, it could repopulate into India from these neighboring countries.

The unfolding of Buddhism across Asia tells a remarkable story. At various points, virtually all of Asia was Buddhist or largely Buddhist. Starting in India, where it coexisted alongside Hinduism for centuries, Buddhism spread west to what is now Pakistan and Afghanistan. You may remember when the Taliban destroyed those large Buddha statues in Bamiyan—those dated from the third century CE, evidence of Afghanistan's once-strong Buddhist presence.

To the east, Buddhism migrated throughout Southeast Asia and Indonesia. The magnificent monument of Borobudur in Java, built around the eighth century, stands as testament to this expansion. To the north, Buddhism became predominant in Tibet and central to Chinese culture, spreading from there to Korea, Japan, and Taiwan. Across this vast swath of Asia—from Afghanistan to Japan, including Mongolia—Buddhism flourished for many centuries, coexisting harmoniously with local traditions like Shinto in Japan, Confucianism and Taoism in China.

Today, Buddhism finds itself somewhat in retreat across Asia, challenged by the twin forces of capitalism and communism. Communism has had devastating effects in China and Tibet, while capitalism's advance in places like Thailand has diminished the energy among youth for traditional practice. Communist influence also affected Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. Yet beautifully, Buddhism is returning to India, completing a circle that began twenty-five centuries ago.

Visiting these ancient sites in India proves deeply inspiring. The Indian government now preserves and maintains the places the Buddha frequented during his lifetime, opening them to pilgrims and practitioners. Standing in these locations, you realize the incredible lineage we're part of—a tradition spanning 2,500 years that has inspired magnificent architecture, art, and sculpture, fostered large communities of dedicated practitioners, and attracted people willing to devote their entire lives to carrying forward these teachings.

We join with all of this vast heritage. It's extraordinary to realize our roots reach back so far into history, connecting us with countless generations of seekers and sages who have walked this path before us.

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