

# Taking the Buddha as Your Teacher

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## The Word of the Buddha

The remarkable historical reality is that the discourses that the Buddha taught about two and a half thousand years ago, what we presently refer to as the early Buddhist *suttas*, are still available to us. The historical fact is that we still have direct access to the word of the Buddha. I will explain later how we can know and be sure of that.

In this booklet we will discuss why we should take an interest in what the Buddha taught and the significance of these teachings as part of Buddhist practice. Hopefully some of you will get encouraged to start reading the suttas and get inspired by the very words of the Buddha himself. You will then understand why these are so fundamental to any real Buddhist practice.

## Different Traditions

When you look around the Buddhist world today, you see a large number of different sects and traditions that have evolved over the centuries and millennia. Most of these were established by charismatic leaders, a trend that continues to the present day. A consequence of this is that most people, whether lay or monastic, take a particular monk, nun or a lay Buddhist as their teacher. How often do you hear anyone say that they take the Buddha as their teacher? Yet the validity of all Buddhist traditions and sects depends on how well they reflect the word of the Buddha. Unless you read the word of the Buddha yourself you just cannot know whether you are practicing real Buddhism.

## Future Perils for Buddhism

The Buddha talked about the future perils for Buddhism. He said that in the future people will listen to poets and poetry, to outsiders (non-Buddhists), and to disciples (the disciples of the Buddha, up to the present day). They will be interested and lend an ear to their teachings. But when the word of the Buddha is being spoken—those profound teachings connected with emptiness—they will not be interested, they will not lend an ear. (AN5:79; Future Perils)

This I feel sums up what has happened in large parts of the Buddhist world. People are often not interested in trying to understand the profound suttas of the Buddha, yet they have an almost endless appetite for teachings from those who are really just his disciples. Instead of going to the source, to the root teachings, it is as if we are seeking knowledge among the branches and leaves of this enormous tree of Buddhism. It is astonishing how prescient the Buddha was in his understanding of what course Buddhism would take in the future.

Fortunately, in recent years there has been a movement in many places of the Buddhist world to return to the suttas. You find that some of the best-sellers among Buddhist publishers are precisely books that present the suttas.

## Historical Reasons

There are obvious historical reasons why people have taken a greater interest in various traditions or teachers rather than the word of the Buddha. The main reason is that until very recently the suttas existed only in the Pali language, or other dead languages

such a Sanskrit or ancient Chinese. In the very earliest period of Buddhism, the language used by the Buddha and his first students was the language of the ordinary people. Everyone could understand the teachings. But over time the language used to preserve the suttas became more and more removed from the language used by the general population. The result of this was that for a period of over 2,000 years nobody could read the suttas except for a very small group of specialist monks and nuns. Nobody else had direct access to the word of the Buddha. If you were a lay person or if you were a monastic who could not understand Pali, you had to rely on these expert monks or nuns to understand the suttas. The teachings were filtered and interpreted by these teachers. This is one of the reasons why different traditions developed over time: certain teachers were the ones who transmitted and interpreted the word of the Buddha to you. People became dependent on these teachers and they used them for guidance on how to practice the Buddhist path. This is a significant problem.

## Teach in the Local Language

Those of you who have read some of the suttas may know that the Buddha himself said that the Dhamma should be taught in the local language of the people. (MN139) So when the Dhamma comes to Sri Lanka it should be taught in Sinhala, and when it comes to the English-speaking world it should be taught in English. Wherever it goes it should be taught in the language of that country so that the people can understand what the Buddha taught. How to teach the Dhamma is a foundational aspect of Buddhism, and yet we have moved so far away from this basic requirement.

In recent decades progress has been made in this area. Translations of the Pali suttas are now available in most Theravadan countries. Still, the language used is often so lofty and formal, including lots of Pali and Sanskrit terminology, that ordinary people are unable to read and understand the translations. This is true in Sri Lanka and also in Thailand. Even the translations into English are sometimes done in a deliberate old-fashioned way, the idea being that this gives the texts a more formal and authoritative character. But reading the suttas in Victorian English creates a gap between the reader and the content of the text, and it is difficult not to feel a bit alienated. That is unfortunate because that is not how the Buddha taught. The Buddha used the contemporary language, and his message would have gone straight to the heart of his listeners.

Fortunately more modern translations are gradually emerging. We now have very good and reliable translations in modern English. The language is still a bit formal, and many people still find them hard to read, but things are improving rapidly. More translations are on the way, some of which should be very accessible and easy to read. And that is exactly how it should be—we are merely following the Buddha’s advice. And since we are now getting access to the suttas, we should take the opportunity to find out what they teach. We will then become more independent of contemporary teachers, and we are less likely to be led astray should they turn out to be unreliable.

## The Danger of Relying on Teachers

Sometimes we come across teachers who are very inspiring and charismatic. They seem to have a lot of *mettā* and people get drawn to them. But then, even though their external appearance is such,

it often turns out that their internal qualities are not as pure as people thought they were. After placing confidence in such monastics, you find out that they are doing all sorts of unsuitable things, such as living in luxury or even having relationships.

When this happens people get very disappointed, and sometimes even lose faith in Buddhism. Instead of seeing the bigger picture, they throw out the whole caboodle. They think Buddhism is corrupt, that the teaching is no good. This is what can happen when you rely on a teacher or teachers rather than on the Buddha himself.

Sometimes it is not quite that bad, but what a teacher teaches may not be in accordance with what the Buddha taught. The teacher is not showing you the path of the Buddha. For instance, they may not take you to the peaceful, blissful states that the Buddha said are available and necessary. Or they may not take you to the same goal that the Buddha talked about. The problem is that this is often quite subtle, and it can be difficult to know whether a particular teacher is teaching the right path. The only way you can know is by going back to the word of the Buddha and using that as your standard. That should always be your final reference point to know whether someone is teaching the right path.

## Our Refuge

The problem of relying on individual teachers is a problem of refuge. We are going for refuge in the wrong place. The Buddha never said we should go for refuge to individual people or that we should take their teaching as a final authority. In fact this goes against the Buddhist idea of refuge.

Buddhist refuge is in the Triple Gem: the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha. What does that mean? First of all the idea of refuge is that we have a place to go where we can seek answers to our questions and solutions to the problems in life, as and when they arise. Everyone has problems from time to time, and it is a blessing to have a source of wisdom and inspiring teachings that can help us when the need arises. But the Buddha's teachings are more than just about problem solving. Even when things are going well, they can help us to improve our lives further and ensure that our future is brighter than our past. Everyone wants to be more at peace, more contentment and happier in their lives. Everybody wants less problems and difficulties.

Our refuge, the Triple Gem, is the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha. The Buddha is the historical Buddha who lived two and a half thousand years ago. Now you cannot go to the Buddha with your questions because he is not around anymore. So what should we do instead? We go to his teachings, the Dhamma. The Buddha specifically said in the Mahāparinibbāna Sutta that after his passing away the Dhamma should be our teacher. That is where we go for refuge. So our refuge in the Buddha and the Dhamma is found in the suttas that the Buddha so powerfully bequeathed to mankind.

The third refuge is the Sangha, the monastic community. The Sangha refuge is not an individual monk or nun, but the Sangha as a whole. The Sangha consists of those people for whom Buddhism is their entire life; they are like the professional Buddhists. Because they are the professionals, you can normally expect them to be well-versed in the Buddhist teachings. Just as you go to the doctor when you are ill and not to the plumber, if you have a spiritual question or problem you go to the Sangha rather than going

somewhere else. The Sangha is normally proficient in the teachings and it practices the teaching to the best of its ability.

But the most important reason why the Sangha refuge is so powerful is that it includes *ariya* Sangha, the noble Sangha. These are the individuals who have understood the teachings through direct insight. These are the true “professionals” since they have direct access to the same truth the Buddha discovered. Whatever these individuals say, you can be sure that you are getting good advice. So that is where you find your refuge, in the *ariya* Sangha.

The *ariya* Sangha may use their own words and phrases, they may explain in a different way from what you are used to, but it points back to the same source, the same Dhamma. So even the Sangha refuge is pointing back to the Dhamma, back to the same suttas, to what we know is the word of the Buddha. So that is the triple refuge, and it all points in one direction—to the suttas, to those beautiful and powerful teachings that we have inherited from the Buddha.

## Who is Awakened?

When you travel around the world and meet monks, nuns and lay people, everyone says, “My teacher is enlightened, my teacher is an *arahant*; I don’t know about other teachers, but my teacher is an *arahant*.” You find this happening again and again, and after a while you think there must be lots of *arahants* in the world. You soon realize that you cannot trust this. Just because people say their teacher is an *arahant* that does not mean very much, because we all want our teacher to be somebody special. After all, we have to justify why we are a disciple of this particular teacher. Why

would you want to be a disciple of somebody who does not have his act together? We all want our teacher to be an arahant. This means that other peoples' views are not a good criterion for deciding on the matter. You realize you cannot rely on hearsay.

In the end, the only person we can be sure was awakened, who understood the Buddhist teachings fully, is the Buddha himself. If the Buddha was not awakened, the thing we call Buddhism no longer has a proper foundation and it just collapses. All Dhamma teachers throughout the history of Buddhism rely on the assumption that the Buddha was awakened. If the Buddha did not get it right, their teachings too become meaningless. Because everything in Buddhism points back to the Buddha and because confidence in the Buddha's awakening is essential, that is where we should place our confidence. This is another reason why we should read his teachings and why everything else has to be compared to it. The word of the Buddha is the gold standard against which everything else needs to be measured. Only teachings that do not contradict the suttas should be accepted as genuine.

So these are some of the ways I urge you to think about the Dhamma. I should add that it is very important to have living teachers, to have somebody you feel has understood the Dhamma. In fact it is in the interplay between the ancient Buddhist tradition and the living examples of that tradition that true faith and confidence often become possible. Just remember not to allow your faith in individuals to overshadow your refuge in the Triple Gem.

## Ancient and Contemporary Blend

This interplay between an ancient tradition and a living example is an aspect of Buddhism I have found very powerful. On the one hand we have an ancient tradition going back two and a half thousand years, which has been proven again and again. There is something extraordinary about the fact that we can read these ancient suttas yet feel a sense of familiarity with them. They are timeless and independent of culture in a very profound sense. For me that is one leg on which this edifice of Buddhism stands.

The second leg is that you have people practicing these teachings today and attaining the same results that the Buddha himself attained and talked about so long ago. This combination of ancientness and contemporariness is one of the things that makes the Dhamma so powerful.

Imagine a guru who goes around saying that he is awakened, but he has no tradition that he follows, no lineage that he can refer to. He or she does not have anyone to look up to other than himself or herself. That does not feel right: it is just too easy for the ego to be involved. But when you have awakening combined with an ancient tradition, then even the most highly attained spiritual masters of Buddhism will bow down to that tradition, to the Buddha. There is a safeguard in that and it is inspiring. The ego has much less basis for getting out of control. Once again this shows the importance of the suttas, which are the carriers of the ancient Buddhist tradition.

## A Practical Example

I would like to show how this can work in practice. My teacher Ajahn Brahm often uses stories to elaborate on the nature of meditation practice. He tells the story of how as a youth he went to the Yucatan peninsula in Mexico to see the remnants of the ancient Mayan civilization. To get there, he had to travel through thick, dense jungle where you only see a few meters ahead of you. When he arrived at the first pyramid and climbed it, he was able to see the landscape all around for the first time in days. He could see the roads and the little rivers going through the jungle, he could see the other pyramids poking through the jungle cover, and far away he could see the horizon. He realized that this was an amazing metaphor for what happens in meditation practice. When you have a deep meditation for the first time, it is like you elevate yourself above the jungle of life with all its problems and busyness. Suddenly, for the first time, you can see around you, see life, understand what we call sensuality and how we operate as human beings. I always thought this was a very interesting and powerful simile. Then one day when I was reading the suttas I came across the following:

Suppose there was a high mountain not far from village or town. Two friends approach that mountain hand in hand. One of them climbs to the top, while the other remains at the foot. The one below asks his friend on the top: 'What do you see from the top of the mountain?'

'I see pleasant parks, pleasant forests, pleasant lands, and pleasant ponds.'

'It's not possible that you should see that.'

Then the one on the top of the mountain comes down, takes his friend by the arm, and leads him to the top. After giving him a few moments to catch his breath, he asks: 'Well, what do you see from the top of the mountain?'

'I see pleasant parks, pleasant forests, pleasant lands, and pleasant ponds.'

'Just before you said that was impossible.'

And the other replies: 'I was obstructed by this huge mountain, and I didn't see what was there to be seen.' (MN 125)

The above simile is given by the Buddha to illustrate how meditation changes your view of reality. A monk had just been telling a prince that it is possible in the Buddha's teachings to gain *samādhī*, deep states of meditation where the mind is fully unified and one-pointed. But the prince would have nothing of it. Soon afterwards the Buddha tells the monk that of course the prince could not understand, because he was obstructed by a big mountain, the mountain of ignorance, the mountain of the five hindrances. These things obstruct you from seeing things according to reality. It is only when you get to the top of that mountain that you get an overview and begin to understand what is going on.

For me the similarity between this simile from the suttas and Ajahn Brahm's story is very meaningful. I do not know whether Ajahn Brahm first read this sutta and then subconsciously applied it to his own teachings, or whether his story just happens to be virtually identical to what is found in the suttas. The point is that the story gains in authority and importance when you see that it comes from the Buddha. And when you see that a teacher's expression is so close to the word of the Buddha, your respect for that teacher

increases enormously. In this way the suttas give us guidance as to who has understood the Dhamma and who has not.

This does not mean that we should be very judgmental or that we should go around denouncing or praising teachers. What it means is that it gives us a rough idea where we should place our confidence. We have to be honest about that, for it matters enormously. Some people are worthy of confidence, others less so. That is just the way things happen to be. Some people are good meditators, some are not; some are wise and some are not so wise. That does not mean we should be upset and negative about the people who are not so wise. It just means we are dealing with reality and acting on the consequences of that reality.

It is important to have some sense of where we should place our confidence and that is what the suttas help us decide. When you get acquainted with the suttas you start to make your own judgments, and that gives you an important sense of independence.

## The Suttas are the Word of the Buddha

But how do we know that the suttas are indeed the word of the Buddha? This is an important question, since our confidence in the suttas hinges on the answer. Over the past 150 years or so a fair amount of research has been done, especially among academics, that enables us to answer this question quite precisely. It is important to take this kind of research seriously because if the Word of the Buddha is as important as I am trying to say it is, then we need to be as clear as possible about where it is to be found. We cannot really afford to delude ourselves and pretend that

something is the word of the Buddha when it is not. I will summarize that research for you.

One of the most powerful findings of modern Buddhist studies is that the suttas have been preserved in different traditions and schools of Buddhism over a very long period of time. You find that the Word of the Buddha has been translated into Chinese and some of it into Tibetan. Some of it still exists in Sanskrit sources. Some of it is found in languages you probably have never heard of, such as Sogdian or Khotanese, which are ancient Turkic languages that existed in Central Asia about 2000 years ago. And I have not even mentioned the Pali Canon, which is the most complete Canon of early suttas.

What is remarkable is that these different sources stem from different schools of Buddhism, schools that separated from each other around the time of Asoka, almost 2,300 years ago. This is within 150 years of the Buddha's own lifetime. This means that when you read the suttas in Chinese, for example, you are reading suttas that have existed separately from the Pali suttas for almost 2,300 years. Yet the astonishing thing is that when you compare them they are in many instances virtually identical. Where there are differences—due to textual corruptions or whatever—these are normally found in unimportant details. The core teachings are in many instances verbatim the same. This shows us how extremely carefully these teachings have been preserved, and this gives very strong grounds for accepting that what we have today is indeed the teachings of the historical Buddha. This is the first thing that research shows you.

Another important result of this research is that those teachings that are common to the different sources, especially the Chinese

and the Pali, can normally be considered the most original. This is so because whatever teachings they have in common must have existed before the schools went their separate ways. On the other hand, teachings that exist in only one school, but not others, are likely to have originated after the schools separated. So again, it is easy to decide what the word of the Buddha is and what we need to be more careful with.

The research also shows that the teachings you find in the Pali Canon are generally the most reliable and original teachings that are available today. Sometimes you can use the suttas found in Chinese to help correct mistakes that may have crept into the Pali. But generally speaking the four main Nikāyas of the Pali Canon—the Long Discourses, the Middle Length Discourses, the Connected Discourses and the Numerical Discourses—is where you find the word of the Buddha. This is not a matter of faith, but a matter of established fact.

## Be Independent in the Dhamma

So I would encourage you to take those discourses out and start reading them. I think you will find them inspiring. Sometimes you may not understand a certain sutta or a section of a sutta. In such cases just skip it, and then get back to it later on. When something is difficult to understand it is also useful to consult with a teacher to guide you through the more subtle aspects of the word of the Buddha. So teachers are far from useless, and if you use their guidance wisely they can be a help to self-help. Gradually you learn to read the suttas on your own.

As you read these suttas and as you learn from them, you start to gain a sense of independence, a sense of being your own man or woman. You start to get a feel for the Dhamma and you are able to make your own judgments about the teachings. You are gaining a degree of independence in Buddhism, and that is a very empowering feeling. You feel a direct connection to the Buddha and that you are in charge of your own practice.

So the purpose of having a teacher is to enable you to move towards greater independence. Gradually you feel more self-reliant and that gives you a more powerful basis for persevering in the practice for a long time.

## Get Inspired by Reading the Suttas

Sometimes people think the suttas are so elevated that they doubt their ability to understand them. But the truth is that they are not that elevated or hard to understand—they are meant for ordinary people. The people who became monks and nuns at the time of the Buddha were no different from you and me. And it was these ordinary people who attained *sāmadhi* and the stages of awakening under the Buddha. If they could understand, so can we!

There are some minor barriers to gaining access to the suttas, but they are easily overcome if you tackle them in the right way. As I mentioned earlier, difficult phrases or sections can be understood with the help of a good teacher. Then there is the problem of repetitiveness, which is due to the oral origins of these teachings. Reading the suttas is quite different from reading modern literature. But once you get used to the repetitiveness, once you pass that barrier, you realize it has certain advantages. When things

are repeated, it gives you an opportunity to reflect more carefully on the message. As you get used to the style, you often find that the suttas speak to you in a very directly way, as if the Buddha himself is giving you a teaching, which is exactly what he is! And that feels really awesome.

The suttas are generally simple and practical teachings that often you can apply directly in your own life. Often they are also very evocative, with beautiful similes and occasional stories, such as the simile of the mountain mentioned above. The suttas contain an enormous number of similes which make the teachings come alive and add to their power. They make you feel inspired and emotionally uplifted. They give you a better understanding of the more theoretical teachings, and they can be a source of great joy.

So reading the suttas is not just about gaining intellectual understanding, but about gaining spiritual nourishment in the sense of being uplifted and inspired. Such inspiration makes you want to meditate and practice the path.

When you have a basis in the suttas, you also find that listening to a talk by a contemporary teacher is transformed. You understand their teaching in an entirely new way. You are able to see how their message fits into the larger context of the word of the Buddha. Everything becomes clearer and the two support each other.

## Where to Start

To get the most out of the suttas it is important to start in the right place. One such place is to read an anthology of carefully selected

suttas. A modern favourite is *In the Buddha's Words*, a selection of suttas translated and introduced by Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi.

Once you feel relatively comfortable with the core content of the suttas, you can access the suttas directly in their traditional format. Personally I feel the Majjhima Nikāya, the Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha, is a nice place to start. This collection contains a range of teachings, from the most basic to the most lofty. Remember that you do not have to read it cover to cover. Rather it is often better to just flick through the content and read whatever inspires you at the time.

Another favourite is the Dhammapada, a collection of Buddhist verse. Many people find the Dhammapada particularly inspiring.

## The Buddha's Knack for Similes

To wind up I will give you one more simile from the suttas, a simile which is both evocative and meaningful. This simile too is about mountains. There is something majestic about mountains: they are beautiful on a very big scale, and they often give rise to a sense of awe and wonder. You can see why they make for powerful similes.

There is a sutta in the Kosala Saṃyutta where the Buddha is conversing with King Pasenadi of Kosala, one of the most powerful kings at that time:

The Buddha says to the king: "What do you think, great king? If a man would come to you from the east, one who is trustworthy and reliable, and he would tell you: 'For sure, great king, you should know this. I am coming from

the east and there I saw a great mountain, high as the clouds, coming this way, crushing all living beings. Do whatever you think should be done, great king.'

"Then a second man would come to you from the west and a third from the north and a fourth from the south, and they would all tell you the same thing. If, great king, such a great peril should arise, such a terrible destruction of human life, human existence being so difficult to obtain, what should be done?"

And the king replies: "If, Venerable Sir, such a great peril should arise what else should be done but to live by the Dhamma, to live righteously, and to do wholesome and meritorious actions."

"I inform you, great king, I announce to you: old age and death are rolling in on you. When old age and death are rolling in on you, great king, what should be done?"

"As old age and death are rolling in on me, Venerable Sir, what else should be done but to live by the Dhamma, to live righteously, and to do wholesome and meritorious deeds?"

"So it is, great king, so it is. As old age and death are rolling in on you, what else should be done but to live by the Dhamma, to live righteously, and to do wholesome and meritorious deeds.

"Just as mountains of solid rock,  
Massive, reaching to the sky,  
Might draw together from all sides,

Crushing all in the four quarters—  
So old age and death come  
Rolling in on living beings:  
They spare none along the way  
But they come crushing everything.” (SN 3.25)

I like this sutta. It is evocative and powerful. When I read this sutta it gives me a sense of urgency, a sense of the need to focus on what really matters in life. We tend to rush around, endlessly doing things, but our final destination is always the same: old age and death. Why are we thoughtlessly rushing to our grave? How can we best spend our time before it is too late?

Although this simile is powerful to me, for you it may be different. Read the suttas for yourself and find the passages that inspire you. The suttas are a treasure house of wisdom. But a treasure that is left buried is of no use to anyone.