

Suttas: Digging for Treasure

by Catherine Brousseau



For the last 8 years, I have been on a quest, a kind of archeological dig. The site? The suttas (discourses) of the Buddha. The treasure? To hold in my mind and heart the wisdom of a fully enlightened being and it's power to reshape my life.

"I always ask myself: What did the Buddha say?" Alicia said. "I love to go to the original sources. Reading the suttas reveals that they are alive and rooted in reality, back then...and now." Alicia is part of a group that gathers in Silver Spring one evening a month to study the suttas.

Some people join the group for a few years and then move on; others have been in the group for over 8 years. They participate in different IMCW sanghas around the area. Some have studied the suttas for years, others are beginners, a few are Dhamma¹ teachers, but we all value studying together. Mary's experience is typical: "Reading the suttas, especially in a group, makes the Buddha's teachings come alive."

The usual text we study is called *The Middle-Length Discourses of the Buddha (Majjhima Nikaya* in the Pali language). The suttas in it are short enough to cover in one evening, and varied enough to cover the broad scope of the Buddha's teaching and the many people who were influenced (or not) by him. We read the selected sutta aloud by paragraph that, according to Joanne, "slows us down, so we can give greater attention to, probe, and discuss what is in the texts."

Why study the suttas? With the great diversity of teachers (via talks, books, retreats, audio-files) and the variety of practices (meditation, reading, retreats, kalyana mitta groups) available to us, does one really get that much more from reading the scriptures? After all, there are thousands of them (see below), the text of a single sutta can be very repetitious, the setting is often just a dialogue between the Buddha and a single interlocutor (a person or group), and there is not even a linear storyline of the Buddha's life and teaching from birth to death!

So, I asked my friends who are with me on this archeological...I mean scriptural...dig: Why are you doing this?

Paul said, "The Buddha teaches that we need to experience the Dhamma for ourselves--not just rationally. I feel that studying the suttas and the commentaries is a practice that supports direct experience, because it is as though we are hearing the teachings directly from the Blessed One." Tracy added, "Reading scripture texts directly helps me pick up the many subtleties of the teachings."

"The Buddha instructs us to figure things out for ourselves," Mary reflected. "I value sutta study because I can go directly to the source, learn the teachings and test their validity for myself rather than relying on another person's analysis, or upon a prescribed doctrine mandated by a religious institution."

This observation by Jane may have a familiar ring: "I was raised in another religious tradition where we were taught the scriptures from childhood. Now on this path, I want also to become familiar with the scriptures of Buddhism, and not rely solely on secondary and tertiary sources. As I've studied the suttas, the words of the Buddha come to mind more readily and help me deal with all manner of circumstances in my daily life."

Even a yogi who knows the suttas backwards and forwards finds them "always fresh, always new." Susaanti went on to say, "Studying the suttas by myself and with a group deepens and grounds my practice. The practicality of the teachings for everyday life can be unclear when just read, but they become clearer during group discussion of what is meant and how we apply it in our lives."

Actually, the suttas are marvelous and vivid. They hold the earliest teachings of the Buddha and his interactions with all kinds of people asking him about the whole swath of human concern, from the daily

¹ This article will be using the Pali spellings of Buddhist words.

life of householders to the philosophies of the day and issues cropping up for the monks and nuns. Through the Buddha's rich use of metaphor, we gain a window into the texture of life in those times. His detailed instructions for dealing with the landscape of our minds are clear and completely accessible.

The suttas we read are part of the *Pali Canon*, a body of Buddhist scripture central to Buddhists of the Theravada tradition of Southeast Asia, and its offspring in the West, Vipassana: The word "Pali" means "text" because, after a 500-year monastic oral tradition, it was written down as an approximation of the dialect spoken in the Ganges valley of northern India at the time of the Buddha.

The *Pali Canon* consists of three parts or baskets, called Tiptaka:

- Vinaya: monastic code, the stories that led to rules, and ethical practices
- Suttas: talks given by the Buddha to various individuals and groups: monastics, laity, people from other religious paths
- Abhidhamma (later in origin): systematic philosophical and psychological analysis of experience

The suttas are organized in 5 Nikayas, or collections:

- Digha Nikaya (34 long discourses)
- Majjhima Nikaya (152 middle-length discourses)
- Samyutta Nikaya (2900 teachings arranged by theme)
- Anguttara Nikaya (2308 numbered discourses)
- Kuddhaka Nikaya (a heterogeneous group of 15 minor collections, including the famous Dhammapada)

A good place to start studying the suttas is the anthology, *In the Words of the Buddha*, by Bhikkhu Bodhi. Or, explore the online website, www.accesstoinsight.org: Click on "[Tipitaka](#)," or to read more about sutta study, click on "[Beginnings](#)" and scroll down to "Reading the Suttas." To hold the genuine artifact in hand, you can buy *The Middle-Length Discourses of the Buddha* on Amazon at a good price.

If you are interested in joining or starting a sutta study group, please contact me—contact information is available under "[Sutta Study](#)" on the IMCW website. Join the dig. Your own quest is about to begin!

Catherine Brousseau began mindfulness and Vipassana meditation in 1998. She took Bhavana Society Teacher Training courses and completed the Advanced Study & Practice Program at the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies, Massachusetts. Catherine co-teaches the dharma in [Takoma Park, MD](#) with Luisa Montero-Diaz and Trudy Mitchell-gilkey. You can reach Catherine at cbrousseau@rcn.com.