

How to Read the Dhamma

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We belong to a tradition that has long valued practice over study, but that doesn't mean that it insisted on no study at all. After all, Ajaan Sao and Ajaan Mun read books on the Vinaya and on the dhutanga or ascetic practices. That's what inspired them to go out into the forest to begin with. In other words, they took what they read and let that direct them.

Of course, they had to learn a lot of things that were not mentioned in the texts, and clear up a lot of issues that were not there—or were only vaguely explained. But it was a sign that they knew how to read. If there were questions, they would have to find the answers inside.

That's the same way we should learn how to read the texts. We're here to practice. As you notice, right now you're sitting with your eyes closed, focused on your breath. You're not focused on a book someplace. But what you're going to do as you're focused on the breath is shaped by what you've read, what you've heard. It's simply a lesson in how to take what you've heard and read, and turn it into your own Dhamma.

We think of a teacher like Ajaan Chah, who's noted for his very direct way of speaking. When you read him in Thai, though, you're really struck by the amount of Pali he uses very casually. He, too, studied a lot.

In the 1930s, Ajaan Lee would subscribe to the *Dhammacaksu* magazine that was printed by scholarly monks in Bangkok at the time. It had sutta translations and articles on the Dhamma. During the evening meditation at his monastery in Chanthaburi, every month when the new issue came out he'd read the entire magazine aloud during the meditation sessions. But given the very standardized and formal way in which Pali is translated into Thai, you wonder to what extent the sutta translations would raise more questions than they would answer.

You look at Ajaan Lee's writings when he's explaining certain points of doctrine: They contain not only standard Pali lists, but also the standard Thai translations. Those are given in the text. Coming from a rural area, coming from the forest, there was no way he could say that the standard translations were wrong, but he did have his ways of interpreting them so that the standard translations came to make sense. He went on the assumption that they *should* make sense, and he devoted himself to finding out a way in which they did. That's a good attitude to have as you study and practice.

You listen to some teachings that seem to point in one direction; you listen to others that point in another direction. You can either say, “These teachings don’t make any sense,” and leave it at that. Or you might say, “They’re not meant to make sense. That’s what’s cool about Buddhism.” But that attitude isn’t really helpful, either.

The helpful attitude is that these things must make sense somehow, and how is it? Ajaan Chah gives a nice example. He says, “Sometimes you hear me saying, ‘Go left, go left.’ Sometimes you hear me say, ‘Go right, go right.’ I say, ‘Go left,’ to the people who are falling off the right side of the path. I say, ‘Go right,’ to the people who are falling off the left side.” The teachings are meant to point forward. But sometimes you need to make course adjustments.

So an important part of practicing is learning how to read and how to think about and explore what you read. Remember that discernment comes from listening, which includes reading, and from thinking. Then it comes in the practice. And although the discernment that’s going to make a big change in your mind is the discernment that comes from practice, it has to be informed by how you read and how you think.

So go on the assumption that the Dhamma makes sense. If it doesn’t seem to make sense, ask yourself how you could look at it in other ways so that it would. This exercises your own intelligence. Instead of having to ask questions all the time and demand that things be explained, you take some responsibility for your understanding of the Dhamma.

A case in point is reading about the Buddha, reading about the noble disciples and their quest for awakening. You read them in different ways. When you read about the Buddha, he was a type of person, as he said, he would teach what was necessary. He would teach what was useful. Look in the Canon: There’s very little about his life, aside from the life of his practice. He mentions his wealthy background simply as proof that he knows what he’s talking about when he talks about sensual pleasures, and how the path of sensual pleasures doesn’t lead to true happiness.

He’s illustrating the point that *all* of his remarks about his quest for awakening illustrate principles. For example, he tells from personal experience how self-torture is not the true path. Going for the formless attainments and just staying there is also not going to solve the problem of suffering. Everything he mentions is meant to show how he committed himself to a path of practice, and then would reflect on it. As he later said, this is how you find the Dhamma: commitment and reflection. This applies particularly to what he learned about the

principles of action. You can see how he would act, and then reflect, and then make changes in how he acted the next time.

It's an illustration of the causal principle that he finally realized lay at the center of the issue of training the mind, which is that some causes arise together with their effects and disappear together with their effects. In other cases, the effects come after the cause and disappear after the cause has disappeared. This means that your actions do exert influences over time, but you can also make course changes in the present moment. You're not stuck in one line of cause and effect. There's always the opportunity of freedom of choice with every moment. The Buddha's description of how he came to awakening is an illustration of that principle.

So we read the Buddha's quest for awakening as a way of learning general principles that are applicable across the board. When you read about the members of the Sangha, though, it's different. Here's an illustration of the principle that Ven. Ananda talked about: You read or hear that there are others who have attained awakening. You think, "They're human beings, they can do it. I'm a human being, I can do it too." When you read the accounts given in the Theragatha and Therigatha, you find that there's a lot of what you might say is superfluous information. People tell us their background. In some cases, they were very poor; in some cases, very rich. Some people were very young; others didn't come to the Dhamma until they were old. There was one woman who didn't come until after she had had ten children and was totally worn out.

On the one hand, that information is superfluous. It has nothing to do with what the Dhamma teaches. But it does serve a purpose. Where you can read there's somebody who you can identify with—either it's because they're like you, have the same gender, have the same background, or simply because they're human beings with problems—you can relate to them. The idea that women need to read about women, men need to read about men, poor people need to read about poor people, doesn't have much traction in the Buddha's teachings. After all, he said that when you see somebody who's extremely rich, remind yourself that you've been there. When you see someone who's extremely poor, remind yourself that you've been there.

Ajaan Fuang told me a story one time of a man who was extremely poor and who had to fight with himself for hours about simply giving a gift of a cloak to the Buddha. I found it very inspiring. That may have been related to the fact that when I was a child there were a couple of years when my father was out of work. We'd never been as poor as the poor man in the story, but who knows, maybe

sometime in the past, in a lifetime that I can't remember, I did suffer from poverty. But at any rate, I found the story inspiring.

So you find that the individual details may not be that relevant to what you have to do in your practice. They may be there more for the sake of inspiration, that this is a path open to everybody, and that the details of your past life really don't have to get in the way of your meditation. That's an important lesson. Occasionally some of the accounts of the members of the Sanghas *will* give specific Dhamma information. There's one passage where Ven. Vakkali talks about how he's sick now in the wilderness. He thinks of all the great monks in the past and how they fought off their illnesses with the five strengths and the seven factors of awakening, so that's what he was going to do too.

Or there's Sister Sona, who said that when she went to see another nun and asked for the Dhamma, the nun taught her aggregates, sense doors, elements or properties. So there are some Dhamma teachings there. Still, there's not much in detail. The same with Ajaan Mun's life. At the very end of his life, he mentioned that his main teachings were the four noble truths and the four establishing of mindfulness. You read his life story, though, and there's very little detailed information about how he explained those teachings. Instead, there are a lot of other details to give you a sense of inspiration.

So when you read the Dhamma, read the lives of the Buddha and the members of the noble Sangha, remember that there are some teachings in there for instruction, and others are there for inspiration. Think of the Buddha's way of giving teachings. He would instruct, but then he would urge, rouse, and encourage. So when you read the Dhamma, try to get a sense of which passages are there to instruct you and which ones are there to encourage you.

Look for instruction from the first; take encouragement from the second. When you can make that distinction, that'll clear up a lot of confusion right there.