

Studying the Middle Length Discourses

1. Our Relationship to the Suttas

Teachings, whether Buddhist or otherwise, are neither sacred nor scripture without people relating to them as such. Much as a language is dead when no longer spoken, so a text is no longer sacred when it is no longer a living document for people who find it significant. The value of sacred text is not found in the text itself but rather in the meaning, inspiration, provocation, and direction people find in it. The sacred scriptures of the Buddha have been preserved all these centuries because of the historical continuity of people who have valued, worshipped, studied, and been guided by them.

For the last twenty-five hundred years, people have related to the Middle Length Discourses in many ways: It has been an entry point for gaining an understanding of the Buddha and his teachings; people have consulted it for advice on living wisely and on following the path to awakening; others have studied it to deepen their understanding of human psychology, in particular how it relates to the practice of liberation. A long tradition of monks have memorized and chanted it and Dharma teachers have used it as source material for their Dharma talks. It has also provided storytellers with their tales and historians have researched it for a better understanding of early Buddhism and ancient India. In contrast, some people filled with faith have treated the *Majjhima Nikaya* as a revered object to be worshipped and for some followers, the entire book – as well as select passages – has been imbued with a sacred, magic, and healing power.

Our Middle Length Discourse class – as well as your participation in it – continues the long stream of people who have entered into a relationship with this text. Hopefully, as you study it, your relationship to it will grow in interest, appreciation, and significance. However, I believe that the value you receive from the course will mostly depend on how you engage with the text. I hope that during the course you will approach the text in multiple and creative ways. Studying scripture is not just about acquiring knowledge. If we consider the text sacred, then we approach it willing to be changed by it.

And I hope you will have a wide variety of responses to the writings. Perhaps the times you find yourself doubting, uncomfortable, or disagreeing with what you read may be more valuable than the times when you approve or are inspired. I encourage you to question and debate what you read as reading Buddhist teachings is not just about agreeing or disagreeing with what you read. A more mature approach is to consider the contexts and the ways in which the teachings could be beneficial for you. Even things you might disagree with in most situations may be relevant in other situations. In other words, abstract questions of right and wrong may be less useful than questions of usefulness. You will find value in the teachings if you can explore when and how they may be useful. This approach is consistent with the Buddha's statement in MN 58 that he only teaches what is true, beneficial and timely. If this is the case, then it is the task of the student to discover how the teachings might be beneficial.

Reflections:

What assumptions or preconceived ideas do you bring to reading the Buddhist suttas? What attitudes and approaches to the Buddhist scriptures are found in the Buddhist tradition you practice? Are you likely to read the text more as an objective researcher or more as a seeker interested in how you might be affected by what you read?

Having good questions is one of the greatest aids to studying. Please take some time to consider what questions you could bring to your exploration of the suttas. During the year of studying the Middle Length Discourses you might also contemplate what kind of questions are appropriate for a Dharma practitioner and how a question might be responded to. An important passage that adds food for thought on this issue is Anguttara Nikaya 4:42. Here the Buddha states that some questions are appropriately answered with a definite statement; some are to be answered analytically; some through a counter-question and some questions should be avoided. Do you have ideas about what kind of questions should be put aside?

2. Why study the Middle Length Discourses?

The Middle Length collection of discourses is one of the most important collections of the Buddha's teachings. No other source has a comparable range and profundity of Dharma couched in rich, human encounters and events. In other words, this collection of suttas provides context for when and why particular teachings were given. The narrative stories found in many of the suttas of the Middle Length Discourses introduce us to the Buddha, many of his disciples, and a host of other people. As such, it purports to be a record of the birth of a living tradition of Buddhism that has continued to this day.

Familiarity with the Middle Length Discourses is invaluable for understanding the evolution of Buddhism that followed after the Buddha. The later Theravada tradition – and to a lesser, but still important degree, the Mahayana tradition – built upon what is found in this text. Knowing this early source material makes it easier to understand the continuities and discontinuities in Buddhist teachings as they developed over the centuries. This is especially useful in helping modern practitioners determine which of the many Buddhist teachings can be directly attributed to the Buddha.

Among the early sources, this collection of suttas provides the fullest information on who and what the Buddha was. It contains the most important accounts of the Buddha's quest for and attainment of awakening. The core teachings of the Buddha would have little meaning if the Buddha had not been radically changed through his awakening and in a number of suttas the Buddha discusses the nature of his own awakened mind. The Buddha as an exemplar was at least as important for the birth of Buddhism as were his teachings. Probably the closest we can get to a sense of who the Buddha was, is through how he appears in the Middle Length Discourses. By trying to acquire this sense we are following the advise in MN 95 that one should “investigate” a teacher before “placing faith” in the teacher and learn from him or her.

Most often the Buddha appears in his role as a teacher. The text has a wealth of stories of how the Buddha taught and how he affected people. While sometimes people were profoundly transformed by his teachings, there are also stories of monks and others

who were displeased with what he said. The Buddha is depicted in dialogue with kings, princes, brahmins, teachers and practitioners of other paths, his own monks, lay people, and even a mass murderer. One of the most famous stories in the collection is the account of the Buddha's meeting with Angulimala. Much less known are the three suttas describing how he taught his own son.

When the Buddha teaches in the Middle Length Discourses he predominately does so in response to being posed a question. From this we see that part of the Buddha's skill as a teacher lay in how he responded to these questions. It is interesting to reflect on what we can learn about the Dharma in this way that we might not be able to learn from the more abstract teachings found in such texts as the Abhidharma or in a summary of the Buddha's teachings in a modern textbook.

The Middle Length Discourses contain many of the Buddha's most significant teachings. It has, for example, his most comprehensive instructions for meditation practice, filled with guidance on insight and wisdom. The text also has important passages on topics like faith, karma, emptiness, dependent arising, and the nature of the Buddhist path and awakening. For Buddhist practitioners these teachings provide a wealth of instruction, support, and healthy challenges with which to develop one's practice.

Because the Middle Length Discourses is such a large collection of suttas, the collection as whole reveals overarching trends and patterns in the early teachings. We can get a sense of what issues and teachings were emphasized and which were not. For example, the frequent references to concentration indicate how important this was for the early tradition. And what might we conclude about the Buddha's teaching technique when we notice that in all the many references to *nibbana*, the text provides no description or definition of what *nibbana* actually is?

The Middle Length Discourses also provides one of the best windows into Indian society 2,500 years ago. We learn about kings and princes, other spiritual traditions of the times, the social divisions of the time, current beliefs and practices, as well as the behavior of the Buddhist monastic order. In addition to being important material for historians of ancient India, this also serves as a useful reminder that in studying the Middle Length Discourses we are studying people and a way of thinking that is in many ways quite distant from our own times and culture. I believe we should be quite careful to avoid easy evaluations and judgments of what we read without first trying to appreciate this ancient Indian culture on its own terms. Hopefully doing this will only increase the value that the Middle Length Discourse has in helping us understand ourselves.