



The Reading Habits of One Bhikkhuni

by Ayya Sudhamma Bhikkhuni

Present requested that I describe my reading habits in case it may offer a little insight into the life and intellectual development of a bhikkhuni.

The bedrock of my readings remains the thirty-something books of the Pali Canon (in English). I've gone through most of the books at least once, but the deeper teachings come across differently in later readings and little is retained the first few times anyway, so they remain a source of interest, always new.

When I want a good source of reading-in-bed pleasure (yes, I still do that at times), I can turn to our tradition's rich storytelling legacy: the three volumes of the Jatakas' entertaining tales on the Buddha's past lives, the Dhammapada Commentary's colorful stories behind the Dhammapada verses, the inspiring Udāna stories and verses, and the Therīgāthā Commentary's sobering and uplifting stories behind the verses of the elder bhikkhunis.

While shaping up the library at Santi, I found a draft copy of Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi's long-awaited, soon-to-be-released translation of the *Āṅguttara Nikāya* (Numerical Discourses), and occasionally delve into it with delight. Aside from that, these days I open the other books of the Canon such as the *Majjhima Nikāya* (Middle Length Discourses), the *Saṃyutta Nikāya* (Collected Discourses), the *Sutta Nipāta*, and the *Vinaya* (Code of Discipline) in order to do research—either to answer questions that have arisen or prepare teachings for others. Once I've cracked open one of these

books for a research purpose, I usually go on to read nearby sections because they catch my eye and make me think.

I keep a journal with a personal collection—my own anthology—of words of Dhamma that greatly inspire me. This has become central to my personal development both as a student of Dhamma and as a teacher to others. My efforts started a couple of years ago with encouragement from a good spiritual friend, a *kalyana mitta*, who pointed out a new website that teaches how to make the best use of scriptures (including keeping a journal), called **Reading Faithfully**. He then lovingly nagged me until I chose a small pseudo-leather-bound journal and began writing my favorite scriptures into it. Now I carry the potent little journal with me when traveling and use it when giving teachings (since these words inspire me the most, these teachings come across well). I refer to it often and find it most helpful when feeling dull. I recommend everyone check out Reading Faithfully and start their own anthology of scriptural passages that speak to them.

At Santi Forest Monastery, I discovered that residents rely upon an amazing resource book by Ven. Analayo: *A Comparative Study of the Majjhima Nikāya*, referring to it frequently when we study a discourse. This reference book compares, chapter by chapter, the contents of the Pali Canon's *Majjhima Nikāya* with similar Indian scriptures (some just fragments) recorded in ancient Chinese, Tibetan, Sanskrit, and a few more languages. Since the various versions of each discourse tend to be nearly identical, any variations between

them become fascinating bits of evidence of changes made to one or more texts, often—but not always—with the more believable reading coming out of the Chinese version. Now I cannot imagine attempting to study the Majjhima Nikāya without access to Ven. Analayo's valuable work. (Note: This book isn't easy to obtain. It is listed first among Ven. Analayo's 200-plus writings here: <http://www.buddhismuskunde.uni-hamburg.de/fileadmin/pdf/analayo/publications.htm>.)

In addition to frequent brief forays into the Canon, I'm now reading, or re-reading, Bhante Sujato's books—all of them—as fast as I can. He recently announced his intention to retire from leading his community (where I'm currently staying), Santi Forest Monastery, before this Vassa to go into seclusion as a lone monk. All my questions about his teachings must get answered now, I'm afraid; therefore I'm pursuing this effort with urgency. His writings are brilliant, oftentimes too chock-full of detailed research to be of interest to a wide audience (not to mention his complex wording that conveys every nuance to maintain an exacting accuracy). It is worth the effort to glean what one can. Bhante Sujato's writings challenged, perhaps crumbled, my earlier simple faith in the Pali Canon and hence in Buddhism; perhaps that is partly why I wanted to come study with him, to learn the basis of his faith, which clearly didn't rest upon any easily refuted assumptions. Now, absorbing his discoveries and perspectives both from his writings and in person, my understanding has become

more nuanced, less righteous, less isolated, and broader. (A collection of his writings can be found at: <http://sites.google.com/site/santipada/bhantesujato%27swork>.)

Just yesterday I re-read Bhante Sujato's unique, highly creative novel based on the life of one of the early arhat nuns, entitled *Dreams of Bhadda*. Though short enough to read in one sitting, the book's haunting imagery—based upon a true story—will not soon leave you. My one complaint about the book is that it gives the impression that the nun's success as a debater of

religious philosophy came directly from her loss in love, whereas according to tradition, she was actually a highly educated master of religious traditions.

Foremost among Bhante Sujato's writings in its impact upon me personally has been *A History of Mindfulness: How Insight Worsted Tranquility in the Satipatthana Sutta*. It's not found online right now only because he is currently editing the book. Be patient; it will reappear. When I read the book

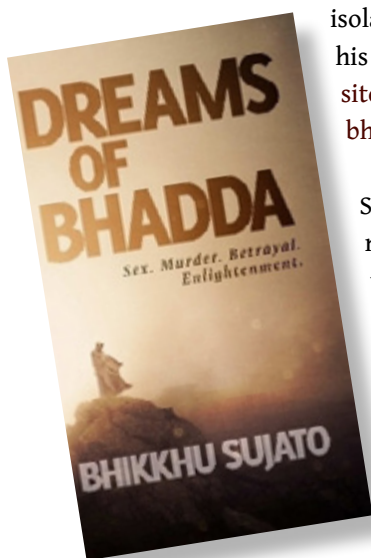
in early 2010, I skipped the difficult parts and focused on the main message of the second half of the book, where Bhante dissected parts of the Satipatthana Sutta to argue effectively that much of the text was added in later times to the Buddha's basic sutta. I found the resulting new—yet older—stripped-down version more useful to my practice. This was my first real introduction to text-critical studies of Buddhism and the beginning of the end to my comfortable unquestioned beliefs as a Buddhist fundamentalist. Now I am going back to the beginning of the book, trying to understand it all, particularly Bhante Sujato's detailed explanation of how to analyze text using other ancient recensions of scripture as a basis of comparison.

When the PDF version of *A History of Mindfulness* was first linked onto the Santi website, it came with a warning: "This is a complex and scholarly work, not for the fainthearted." A few days ago, after puzzling over it for some time, I resorted to asking Bhante Sujato how to understand one of his charts in the book; despite several minutes of explanation, I'm still not clear what he meant. Even Bhante came to notice the difficulties plowing through his text and conciliatorily offered a brief synopsis, writing in his blog with his usual self-effacing style: "I've been revising . . . *A History of Mindfulness*, and I'm kind of amazed that anyone actually read it. It's hard going." For those with better things to do than wade through oceans of textual references, here's the *sankhittena* (short version): <http://sujato.wordpress.com/2011/01/18/a-brief-history-of-mindfulness/>.

Next on my list of to-read books are background histories of Indian thought that may explain some social expectations and pressures to which the Buddha responded, as well as the classics in text-critical studies. These include Richard Gombrich's *How Buddhism Began: The Conditioned Genesis of the Early Teachings* and Erich Frauwallner's *The Earliest Vinaya and the Beginnings of Buddhist Literature*.

Human-interest writings such as autobiographies and travel accounts also catch my attention easily, and we have seventy such books on the shelves here at the Santi library. One that I often recommend to visitors is Ajahn Sucitto and Nick Scott's hilarious yet deeply moving two-volume account of their travels in India, *Rude Awakenings* and *Great Patient One* (both available as [free downloads](#) or as print editions).

That Bird Has My Wings, the autobiography by Jarvis Jay Masters, a death-row inmate who found a refuge in Buddhist practices, caught my eye one day when someone left it on the library table; it turned out to be a page-turner that I hardly set down until done. Jarvis offers a moving account of the terrors of his early life, with an honest, insightful assessment of how early influences led to his bad choices and ruin. Efforts to free him have been in the news recently.





Despite trying to make quick progress with Bhante's works, I cannot yet put down the autobiographical travel account that I'm currently reading: *Ten Thousand Miles Without a Cloud* by Sun Shuyun. This book is further broadening my worldview, so I want to describe it in more detail. Ms. Shuyun, a highly educated Chinese woman raised under Communism, hoping to better understand her Buddhist grandmother's religion, decided to personally retrace the epic journey taken in the seventh century by the famous Chinese monk traveler, Ven. Xuanzang (also known as Hsüan-tsang). This monk helped establish Mahayana Buddhism for future generations by going to India to retrieve many scriptures not yet known in China, which he later translated. He also kept such remarkably accurate accounts of the lands through which he traveled that historians rely upon them to understand the habits of people long ago, and modern archeologists continue to use them to dig for lost cities and holy places. We owe our current knowledge of the primary Buddhist pilgrimage sites in India to British men in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries who used this ancient Chinese Buddhist master's precise and detailed records.

Ms. Shuyun's travels take her across mountain passes and deserts, into the middle of war-torn regions, through abandoned ancient cities, and into bustling modern tourist sites. While traveling through Central Asia to India (passing through western China, Afghanistan, and more before exploring India and heading home again), she weaves together a tale of her family history, the history of the lands and people she encounters, and the modern forces affecting them. Ms. Shuyun draws such a sympathetic picture of the individuals in every land that the reader is left caring for these people as if they were her own relatives. Meanwhile, the author explores the Mahayana Buddhist beliefs that drove Ven. Xuanzang to bravely undertake his nearly impossible journey. She discerns a continuing, subtle impact of the Dhamma upon the countries that later lost

their memory of Buddhism while trying to truly understand the Dhamma for herself.

Ten Thousand Miles Without a Cloud is autobiography, travelogue, history, and spiritual journey, all in one go. I gained a much greater understanding of the history and modern problems of every land through which Ms. Shuyun passed, a deeper appreciation for how history generally unfolds over the centuries, and more respect and interest towards Mahayana teachings.

One more area to address: What do I read online? I use the Internet to look up specific suttas, the other day joyfully beating Bhante Sujato in locating a debated quote. (As he quickly flipped through the pages of the Connected Discourses, I used Google.) Occasionally, I read articles sent to me by monks and nuns on Facebook. I check headlines, read up on social changes, and find I am drawn to dramatic stories, particularly news of generosity or heroism. If I have some time, I read the news analyzed in more depth on Slate.com, which also helps me catch up on what is happening in the U.S., but the human-interest and storytelling angles continue to grab me: Doonesbury and Slate's advice column ("Dear Prudence") both continue to rate high among my favorite reading material.

With the mid-year months here in New South Wales, Australia, bringing a chilly, dreary, damp winter quite unlike the sweltering summer heat of my hometown in the U.S.A., a hearty fire in the library's wood stove warms the room. I pull off my woolen things and perhaps break into a sweat while settling in comfortably to read. In the morning we work; in the afternoon, we often find leisure to meditate or read. Time passes too quickly while reading in the library, and often the daily evening teatime catches up with me. As other residents arrive for refreshments, I must move my books aside to make room for the trays.

Ven. (Ayya) Sudhamma Bhikkhuni was born in Charlotte, North Carolina, in 1963, and educated at UNC-Chapel Hill and NYU School of Law. She was married and enjoyed a brief career as an attorney in San Francisco. She encountered the teachings of the Buddha while suffering personal losses that forcefully drove home the truth of the Dhamma on impermanence and suffering. Soon she wished to ordain. In 1999 she gratefully received from the elder Sri Lankan monk Ven. Bhante Gunaratana the opportunity to enter the holy life as a novice at his monastery, the Bhavana Society, in West Virginia. She obtained higher ordination as a female monk (bhikkhuni) in Sri Lanka in 2003. For eight years she served as the resident monk at the Carolina Buddhist Vihara in Greenville, South Carolina. Currently, on the invitation of out-going abbot Bhante Sujato, she is helping the Santi Forest Monastery in New South Wales to establish a Bhikkhuni Sangha leadership for the monastery.

