



In *Basic Teachings of the Buddha*, Glenn Wallis selects sixteen essential dialogues drawn from more than five thousand Pali-dialect suttas of the Buddhist canon. The result is a vibrant introductory guide to studying Buddhist thought, applying its principles to everyday life, and gaining a deeper understanding of Buddhist themes in modern literature. Focusing on the most crucial topics for today's readers, Wallis presents writings that address modern psychological, religious, ethical, and philosophical concerns. This practical, inspiring, and engaging volume provides an overview of the history of Buddhism and an illuminating analysis of the core

writings that personalizes the suttas for each reader.

“Glenn Wallis brings wisdom and compassion to this work of scholarship. Everyone should read this book.”

—Christopher Queen, Harvard University

“A valuable sourcebook with a good selection of the fundamental suttas enhanced by an eloquent introduction and comprehensive notes—altogether a very useful text.”

—Peter Matthiessen (Roshi), author of *The Snow Leopard* and *Nine-Headed Dragon River*

“Glenn Wallis’s new and accessible translations of some of the Buddha’s lectures to his original students, along with Wallis’s elegant guide to the texts, gives twenty-first-century readers in the modern West a fresh chance to learn from this teacher.”

–Charles Hallisey, University of Wisconsin-Madison

Review, by John L. Murphy / "Fionnchú"

Glenn Wallis' "Basic Teachings of the Buddha": Book Review

Similar to Stephen Batchelor's existential re-evaluation of dharma, scholar Glenn Wallis corrects the distortions of "Buddhist-hybrid-English terms" which interfere with true understanding of key concepts, in sixteen *suttas*. (Often known to us as "sutras." This type of reversion to the Pali, closer to the language by which the Buddha would have transmitted--and had preserved in oral form by his followers--his teachings in, rather than Sanskrit, shows how exacting this translation and commentary will be.) I found this approach to go back to early texts very compatible with Batchelor's "Confession of a Buddhist Atheist" (2010) and "Buddhism Without Beliefs" (*both reviewed by me as linked on Amazon [and this blog]*) as a serious study of how teachings can answer our own longings and challenge us as post-modern readers.

Umberto Eco may be familiar, but not in a book on Buddhism; he and Hans-Georg Gadamer suggest model approaches for Wallis' reader: a dialogue must be entered with a text, lest it as a "lazy machine" prove inert for us. The heavy work we put into mastering these sometimes repetitive, intricate, insistent teachings pays off.

Wallis expects us after studying these "basic teachings" to have a "doctrinally responsible basis" for more study, and to put words into practice as actions.

I could have read a whole book on what the introduction hints at in three-dozen concentrated pages of suggestion, insight, and challenge. "Religious literature is immediately recognizable as religious in large part because of its extravagant language. Such language is *not* inviting the reader to examine closely, much less argue with, the claims that it is conveying." (xxxiv) Wallis adds how we seem predisposed to accept as plausible a person's proclamation using grand language, and we become enchanted, awestruck, taken in.

He finds the Buddha himself took this tack in his initial attempt to sway his five former companions and Upaka! And, the Buddha learned to persist, to overcome doubt and to convince his audience as the suttas do us, in Wallis' expectation, if we regard the dharma "as at least potentially verifiable." (xxxv) Quite a demand for a reader coming to this as if a quick introduction--which it is and is not, so be prepared. He hints at sly wit.

His determination to present a non-speculative, experientially based dharma in the early teachings aligns too with many raised in a more secular or skeptical culture, but who still search for meaning. (After reading this, fittingly, I learned that Wallis co-founded "Ruin," a hardcore 80s punk band, when in college in Philadelphia.)

Amazon Reviewer E. Godfrey sums up the six-part structure or path constructed by Wallis to arrange the sixteen *suttas*. Habitat, De-orientation, Re-orientation, Map, Destination, and Going comprise the stages. These, Wallis explains, "are the result

of *my* effort to trace the footsteps of the Buddha," the "Fortunate One" as he renders his title (although I did not catch why this was)--a nice twist on the conventional "Enlightened One" or "Awakened One." Although Wallis lists many appropriate synonyms for "*dukkha*," arranged by intensity on pp. 120-1, he agrees they all contain "some degree of unease," and I accept his nuanced choice.

Instead of "suffering," then, we get a more flexible term; so with "Four Noble Truths," here as "pre-eminent realities," which to me fits with a conception of the points as aligning with "reality," or to me, how things are. Wallis also nods to Old English and Germanic roots, and this linguistic care is echoed in our tongue as well as the Sanskrit and Pali in which I trust Wallis' expertise, frankly. His commentaries appended after the *suttas*, separately, account for his careful selections of terms, and these should be consulted--as should the introduction and the eloquent, carefully delivered *suttas* themselves--with patient reflection. A book I can return to, and study over and over. (I have since compared this with Rupert Gethin's "Sayings of the Buddha"; I reviewed Wallis' companion edition of "The Dhammapada".)

P.S. The Amazon U.S. reviewers --my review appeared there on 2-9-12--generally favor this book, but one to date did not. The author leapt to his own defense against one hasty critic: "is this a parody"?