

Using Scriptures to Travel the Way

People new to practice often underestimate the value of traditional scriptures. Perhaps that is one result of the easy availability of sacred writings in our modern age. In the past, scriptures were copied by hand, and later were printed with carved wooden blocks. Both methods were painstakingly slow, limited in the number of copies they could produce, and extremely vulnerable to impermanence. Even wooden blocks wear out with use and both paper and wood can easily be destroyed by fire or neglect.

Scriptures in the Serene Reflection tradition are writings of the Buddha and great masters down the centuries. They are intended to help us with our training. Scriptures are the Dharma, one of the Three Treasures taken refuge in by the Buddha's disciples. Here is a three-fold division of scriptures that I find useful:

First are roadmaps, checklists, and manuals. These writings show us: 1) the route to go (*Sandokai* and *The Most Excellent Mirror-Samadhi*); 2) reality checks or how to verify if we are on the right track (*Scripture of Great Wisdom*); and 3) how to operate our vehicle (*Precepts and Vinaya – monastic regulations*). These are all practical instructions for traveling and are usually specific to the tradition in which you are training. We learn them by heart so that we know where and how to proceed in the midst of pouring rain or a snowstorm. We store them up so they'll be there when we need them. In that sense they're more like a sea captain's charts: in the midst of a gale, you don't have a quiet, dry place to peruse them at one's leisure.

A second category is travelogues and narratives. These are stories of other people's experiences. Examples are the *Lotus Scripture* and the *Avatamsaka (Flower Garland) Scripture*. These writings relate

or describe what someone else saw, heard, or experienced. They can inspire us and clarify our journey, but they cannot take the place of our own travel and personal experience.

A third category is prayers and praise. **Prayers** are ways to ask for directions or help. Two that we use frequently are the *Litany of the Great Compassionate One* and the *Shurangama Litany*. Traditionally these are called dharanis (“true words”) or mantras. **Praise** is an expression of gratitude. One doesn’t get very far on a journey without a grateful and appreciative attitude. Good examples in our tradition are the *Ancestral Line* and the *Adoration of the Buddha’s Relics*. Praise can also include hymns of joy (*gatha* in Sanskrit), which we usually refer to as “invocations” in our liturgy.

A fourth category, used very little in our tradition, is technicians’ manuals and science books. Analytical and detailed in nature, these writings can sometimes provide helpful information about our vehicle and the area we’re traveling through, but generally are not very useful for meditators. Traditionally these are called *Abhidharma*.

Scriptures constitute the core of our ceremonies. Chanting them together helps us memorize the Dharma. Many of our Scriptures are set to a specific musical chant, for many are written in verse. We also rely upon listening to each other’s voices rather than individually reading a book. It’s a community practice. Originally, most scripture was oral literature, intended to be sung aloud, learned by ear, and passed down by frequent repetition. Chanting or reciting scriptures also provides a skillful way to learn to harmonize as one sangha. We practice staying together both in tune and tempo, as well as concentrating on the same teaching.

Note: These categories are not intended to classify all Buddhist scriptures or to be watertight divisions. They more or less follow traditional classifications, but here I have arranged them according to how we use them in our Serene Reflection/Soto Zen practice.