

# *The Wheel of Dhamma*

*June 13, 2005*

The Buddha started his teaching career with the four noble truths, as we chanted just now in the Discourse of Setting the Wheel of Dhamma in Motion. These truths are not just statements about reality. They're a guide, a guide in how to look at things. You can look at reality in all kinds of ways. You can look at your experience in all kinds of ways. But the Buddha pointed out that the best way to do it for the purpose of overcoming and putting an end to suffering is to see things in terms of these four truths or four categories: stress or suffering, its cause, its cessation, and the path to its cessation.

The first step is to learn how to identify exactly what in your experience is stress and what you're doing to cause it. There are actual two kinds of stress. One is just plain old stress in things in and of themselves, due to the fact that they're dependent on conditions. Because they're dependent on conditions, there's only so much you can do to alleviate that kind of stress. But then there's also the stress of clinging, which is caused by craving—and that's the kind of stress you can do something about. You can actually put an end to it. So you have to look at your craving to see exactly where is it causing stress. Often it's easier to see the stress than it is to see the craving. So you want to learn how to look for stress, and then see what comes along with it. He also says to note the times when it's absent, and what kind of mental state goes along with that. Look at the mental state that leads to the absence or the end of stress: That's the path.

Each of these four truths has a duty. Stress is to be comprehended. Its cause is to be abandoned. The ending of stress is to be realized. And the path is to be developed. What rounds off the wheel of Dhamma is realizing that you've completed all of these tasks. There's a passage where the Buddha says that he saw that each of the four noble truths has three levels of knowledge: knowing the truth, knowing the duty appropriate to the truth, and then knowing that he had completed that duty. Four truths times three levels of knowledge yields twelve permutations. That's why the Dharma wheel over there on the wall has twelve spokes.

It all sounds very basic, very simple. What's radical about it is that the Buddha uses this teaching to undercut a lot of things like theories about who you are. I was just reading the other day someone saying that the end of stress and suffering is when you see who you truly are. The Buddha never said. In fact, he said to avoid that question, looking for who you truly are. Instead, look to see what you're

doing to cause stress. And part of what you're doing to cause stress is creating a sense of self out of things that really can't provide you with any true happiness. But that's as far as he pursues the question of who you are: Just look at the sense of self that you create, see it as a creation, and learn to see it as unsatisfactory, that doesn't provide the security that you might normally think it would provide. Try to develop a sense of dispassion toward the activities you tend to identify with, so that you can stop doing them.

It's your passion that keeps you doing these activities, creating stress through identifying with things, or holding on to sensual desires, holding on to your views, holding on to habitual ways of doing things. Learn to look at things in terms of activities. See self not as a thing but as a product of an activity—a lot of activities. When you can develop dispassion for both the product and for the activities, then you stop doing it. You stop causing stress in that particular way.

Then you can look at other issues in life, and you begin to see them from the point of view of these four truths. You see them as activities. And you ask yourself: "Is this an activity I want to pursue or is it not?" Now, there are some things you do want to pursue if they're part of the path: developing virtue, developing concentration, developing discernment. You have to *want* to do these things. You have to use all your ingenuity in doing these things, because they're going to take you to where you want to go.

So learn to develop a desire for them. And keep in mind that third noble truth, too: There is a possibility for the end of suffering. That truth is there to stretch your imagination. This is why the Buddha puts that truth ahead of the path. For most of us, it's outside of the realm of possibility that there actually could be an end to suffering. We tend to live our lives within very narrow confines: "This is the way the world is. You've got to accept it. You've got to accept the bad with the good, so learn how to make the most of that situation."

But you're just making the most of basically a bad situation. We go around through life, blind like this, but the Buddha said it is possible to put an end to suffering. When he holds out that possibility, it changes the way we approach everything, all these activities we do to grasp at little bits and pieces of happiness. What can we do to change our desires to focus in the right direction, change our sense of what's possible, use our ingenuity to look for an end of suffering?

It requires that we engage our entire mind, all of our activities. But always keep that possibility in mind. It's like being lost in a forest. If you think there's no end to the forest, then everything is just more and more of the same forest. You're not going to look for a way out. But if you're convinced there has to be a way to get out of the forest and there are meadows in the places where you really want to be,

then you're going to keep looking. You are going to be willing to put a lot of effort into it, finding that way out, using whatever little clues you have, trying to be as observant as possible, and trying different ways out. When you run into a dead end, don't give up. Try looking for another way. All of this depends on the conviction that there's got to be a way out.

So always keep that possibility in mind. Without that, the practice just keeps spinning around in the same old place and never gets out of the world. You hear people saying, "Well, the path is the goal, or there really is no goal." If you ever hear a Dhamma talk like that, just turn it off, because those are some of the most destructive teachings there are. The Buddha says there *is* an end to suffering. He made the end of suffering a separate noble truth from the truth of the path, so it's not the same thing as the path.

And the path is not an attempt to clone awakening. You hear descriptions of the awakened mind and you think, "Okay, it's equanimous and patient. I'll will be equanimous and patient, and not try to strive, not to strive for anything, because the awakened mind doesn't strive." But the reason the awakened mind doesn't strive is because it's already arrived at where it wants to go. As long as you're still on the path, you have to develop all the qualities the Buddha recommended, including desire—the desire to figure out which qualities in the mind are skillful and which ones are unskillful, and what can you do about them so that you can maximize the skillful ones and get rid of the unskillful ones and make sure the unskillful ones don't come back.

They say that the awakened mind is free from desire, but to get there, you have to cultivate desire. The image Ven. Ananda gave is of going to a park. To get to the park, you have to have the desire to go there. Once you've arrived, then you don't have any more use for that particular desire. That's when you can give it up. Or another analogy you can make is the road to the Grand Canyon. The road to the Grand Canyon doesn't look like the Grand Canyon, but if you follow it, you get there, and it opens up into a vast space that's not at all like the road.

So always make room in your imagination for the possibility that what the Buddha said is true: There is an end to suffering. There is a way out of the forest. And he describes the path. So you look around you. Exactly what around you looks like that path? Follow it—because the path is made up of things we already have. We already have virtue to some extent, concentration to some extent, discernment to some extent—to a greater or lesser extent. The question is, what will you need to develop them? How to recognize them? How to develop them? How to strengthen them? Those are the qualities that will take us to where we

want to go. It's nothing mysterious. The teachings are all laid out there, right from the very first teaching.

We have a tendency however, to want to make them mysterious. We hear about the great abstract Buddhist teachings, say, about emptiness. It all sounds very paradoxical, and you can think about it for hours and days. But that's not why the Buddha had you think about emptiness. He had you think about emptiness because it's a way to get you to focus back on the four noble truths.

Emptiness as a meditative dwelling is appreciating when you get into a particular state of concentration and sense that it's empty of things that used to disturb it. The disturbances that come from an unconcentrated mind are gone in that state. Appreciate that fact. Then, as you begin to settle in, you begin to see there still is some level of disturbance there in that state of concentration. It's based on the oneness built around the perception you're using to stay in that state.

Once you can actually see that fact as it's happening, then you let go of that particular perception. It'll be replaced by a more refined one. So you settle in there, appreciate the lack of disturbance there. Then try to sense where there's still a disturbance. "Disturbance" here is another word for stress. That whole process is a way of applying the four noble truths to your practice of concentration.

The other meaning of emptiness is that the six senses are empty of self or anything pertaining to a self. And again, the purpose of that teaching is to get you to focus on the four noble truths. How so? Well, if there's no self there in the senses, nothing there really is you, then what's arising and passing away? The Buddha says to focus on the fact that it's simply stress arising and stress passing away. That gets you back to the four noble truths again. And that gets you back to the question, "What am I doing that's causing the stress?"

All of his teachings are meant to focus you right here, even his teachings about karma and rebirth. Every time he talks about karma and rebirth, he talks about the power of your actions, the power of actions that shape not only your future lives, but also the whole course of the universe. Where are our actions being made? They're being made right here.

The story always comes back to what you're doing right here and now, and what you can do to make it more skillful, so that you're causing less stress. Then you follow that particular lead until you get ultimately to the absolute end of the stress. You're out of the forest.

So all of the Buddha's teachings—no matter how abstract, no matter how sophisticated they may seem—all point right back here: What are you doing right here and now? And particularly, what are you doing that's causing stress? Can you learn to stop?

The third noble truth is there to encourage you, that unlike all the other pursuits of the world, this one is not futile. This path really takes you someplace you've never been to before. In the words of the texts, you see what you've never seen before, attain what you've never attained before, realize what you've never realized before. This particular pursuit really goes someplace—although, technically speaking, once you get there, you realize it's not a place, but that doesn't matter. Once you realize that what the Buddha taught really is true—there really is an end to suffering, there really is a deathless—that's the end of all issues.

So imagine that. Keep that in mind as you practice, because that's your compass.