

The Wheel of Dhamma

June 4, 2007

The sutta we chanted just now was the Buddha's first discourse. It's called Setting the Wheel of Dhamma in Motion. Did you see the wheel in discourse? It turns out that the term "wheel" in this context is a technical term.

Back in the Buddha's time, in philosophical texts or in legal texts, when they were going over various permutations, say, when they put two variables against each other and listed all the permutations of those variables: That was called a wheel. The wheel in the discourse was the passage where the Buddha talks about the realization: This is the noble truth of suffering, this noble truth of suffering is to be comprehended, and then realizing that he had comprehended it. Truth, duty, and the duty completed.

Then it lists the same things for the cause of suffering, the cessation of suffering, and the path to the cessation of suffering. You've got four noble truths with three levels of knowledge with regard to each truth: first, knowing the truth, second knowing the duty appropriate to that truth; and then third, knowing he had totally completed the duty. As he said, once he had completed that whole wheel, only then could he claim full awakening. This is why the Dhamma wheel on the side of the wall here has twelve spokes: four noble truths, three levels of knowledge. 4×3 is 12.

There's a good reason why the Buddha started the teaching with the four noble truths and the duties appropriate to them, because that's the whole framework of our practice. They may sound abstract. You may wonder why there are four noble truths. Why aren't there five or six or three? They're not truths *about* something so much as they are categories of how you think. When something happens in your life, you want to think in these terms if you want to put an end to suffering. The reason there are four of them is because they come down to two other variables: On the one hand, there's suffering and lack of suffering, and on the other, there's cause and effect—the things you do that lead to suffering, then the things you can do that lead away from suffering. That's the basic framework. That's why there are four truths.

From there you go on to the duties with regard to each of those truths. Suffering is something that should be comprehended, but for most part we don't like to comprehend it. We all want to run away from it or to snuff it out. We don't want to take the time to really look at it, to understand it. And because we

don't understand it, we don't see its cause. When we don't see its cause, there's no way we're going to be able to abandon the cause.

So your first duty is trying to understand when there is suffering the mind—and that can be anything from really heavy suffering to subtle stress. What is it? How does it come? How does it go? When you see it come and see it go, what else comes and goes along with it? That's when you begin to catch sight of the cause.

Then again, the cause is not something outside. It's something going on inside, in the mind: craving. And specifically three types of craving:

The first is craving for sensual desire. Notice it's not so much craving for sensual objects as it is craving for sensual desire. We really like the rush that comes with desiring something.

Then there's the desire to *be* something, to give rise to an identity in a world of experience.

And then there's the desire to destroy whatever identity or world that you've got.

Now, the Buddha is not saying all desires bad, in fact there is a desire that's part of the path. But these three kinds of craving really do cause stress and suffering in the mind. When you can watch the stress and suffering come and go, then you begin to notice these things come and go along with them. And your duty here is to abandon them.

The best way to see these things is to develop the path. That's the fourth truth. It's put after the third truth, the cessation of suffering, to remind you that it is possible to put an end to suffering, and what we're trying to do here is to realize that truth. But to do that you have to work on the path. That's the duty with regard to the path elements: to develop them. When concentration hits the mind, sometimes it seems to come without your knowing how it came, but you want to try to develop that. To do that, you have to understand that, too. You have to watch it come and go, but not just passively. When it comes, you want to understand why it's coming, so that you can foster those causes again. Make it something you can master, something you can rely on more and more consistently.

So those are the truths and the duties with regard to each of them. Now, how does this relate to our meditation? It's very closely related to meditation. When you're focusing on the breath, the very first question is: Is the breath comfortable or not? That's asking you to see: When does the comfort come, and when does it go? In what ways, what kind of desire to make it comfortable actually is going to make it less comfortable? In what way do you focus the desire to make it comfortable and work with that desire so that it *does* get results. That's where the

skill of the four noble truths comes into the practice: learning to distinguish between these things right at the very start, just in the simple area of the breath, and then that same principle carries you through all the way.

In fact, the principle starts even before you sit down and meditate. The Buddha once said that wisdom starts with the question: “What when I do it will lead to my long-term harm and suffering? And what when I do it will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?” That’s getting you to think in terms of the four noble truths right there, noticing that what you do is going to be a cause and can lead either to harm and suffering, or to welfare and happiness. That’s the framework of the four noble truths. And the focus again is on what you’re doing and the results you’re getting.

When the Buddha first taught his son, that was the first teaching he gave him: Look at your actions and see what results you’re actually getting. If you see you’re getting bad results, don’t repeat that action again. If you see you’ve got good results, take pride in the fact that you’re progressing in the training. “Progress” here means that you’re becoming more and more sensitive to the results you’re getting, and to the connection between those results and causes that actually brought them about.

So what starts out as a really basic principle that you teach a child is already getting you on the right path. You just want to carry it through consistently. When the mind attains a state of concentration, the first thing you realize is: What is concentration? Where does it fit on this map? It fits in under the path. It’s something to be developed. So you try to maintain it, to maintain that focus as consistently as you can, that sense of ease and comfort as consistently as you can. And to maintain it, you have to enjoy it.

This is where the desire comes in. You have to want to do it. You have to enjoy it. So the Buddha says to indulge in it. When the breath is really comfortable, don’t be afraid of liking it. Don’t be afraid of getting attached to nice states of mind, because they’re your path. Then again, though, you don’t latch on to them as the end in and of themselves, but you do hold on to them as your path. If you let go of the path, what have you got? You’ve got nothing. That’s why you don’t want to go straying off into choiceless awareness. That doesn’t appear in the path anywhere, because in all the things you’re doing you’re making choices.

You choose to stay with an object, your concentration object, and you choose to watch it carefully, because even these concentration objects are composed of those five aggregates. As you feed on them, you’re clinging to them. You’re clinging in a skillful way, but there’s still going to an element of stress there. You want to look for that. You look for it once you’ve really gotten solidly established

in that state of concentration. You ask, “Okay, where is the element of stress here?” The only way you’re going to see it is to see it coming and going. It’s going to flicker even in the steadiness of the concentration.

Concentration is not totally set. It’s got its ups and downs even though they may be a very subtle. But once you see them, then you know, “There must be something I’m doing. It’s different when there is stress and when there isn’t.” So you look for that. When you see what you’re doing that raises the level of stress, then you can drop it.

Here again, you’re learning to look at things in terms of the map of the four noble truths. They’re categories for sorting things out so that you can know what to do with them. That’s the extent of the interpretation you want to put on your experience. You don’t want to go beyond that, thinking in metaphysical terms, such as, “Is this emptiness? Is this whatever?”

The only metaphysical issue that the Buddha addressed is the issue of the reality of action. Action is a truth. Results are truths. The connection between them is a truth. What you’re doing is learning how to take that principle and apply it to this big question: Why is there suffering? Is there any way you can put an end to it? That’s all the interpretation you want to apply to things. When you go beyond that, you’re spinning off into more and more fabrication, more and more views, more clinging, more suffering.

So even though there may be an element of stress in the path, you try to keep it at a minimum by looking at things in these terms. Once you’ve figured out what you’ve got—is this stress, is this the path, is this cause of stress?—then you know what to do with it.

The Buddha’s teachings are all very pragmatic. The four noble truths are not just some sort of philosophical structure. They’re a training. They give you a framework for looking at things and judging: Is this working or not? You want to apply this framework to every level of the path.

In the very beginning, the whole question is: Is it good to be generous or is it not? Is it good to be virtuous or is it not? Generosity and virtue are part of the path, so you want to develop them. And as you develop them, you begin to see that suffering falls away: the suffering of being stingy, of having a narrow mind, of not being true to your principles. You see the results of your actions more and more clearly, that when you change the pattern of your actions, there will be a change in your life. Then you apply the same principle to your meditation practice, and it’ll carry you all the way through.

So the four noble truths are not some sort of quaint aspect of the Buddha’s teachings that are not directly relevant to what you’re doing. They’re inherent in

what you're doing, the framework that you should be using to look at what you're doing, so that you can figure out a way to cause less and less stress and suffering. That's why the Buddha started his teaching with these truths: This is a training, these are the principles of the training, and you apply them in every area. As Ven. Sariputta once said, the four noble truths encompass the entire Dhamma, they encompass the training. They're a very practical, pragmatic teaching.

So take that pragmatic approach. When something comes up in your meditation, the question is, "What can I do with this? What's this good for? Is this stress or is this the cause? Or is this the path?" Then you apply that task appropriate to that category. But when you finally get to awakening, you don't have to ask anymore. No more questions, no more tasks at that moment. That's what the truths of the Dhamma are supposed to do, where they're supposed to take you, because you've used them in the way they're supposed to be used.

So remember the question always is this: When something comes up in your meditation, "What's this good for? How does this fit into that framework?" Just thinking those terms makes the path a lot clearer right there.