

Attention to Your Potentials

December 12, 2022

Just now we chanted the sutta of Setting the Wheel of Dhamma in Motion. Sometimes people ask, “Where’s the wheel?” It’s in the part where the Buddha goes through the four noble truths and points out the three levels of knowledge for each. The first level is knowing the truth. The second is knowing the duty with regard to the truth. And then the third is knowing that the duty has been completed. Four truths, three levels of knowledge: four times three, twelve permutations altogether.

In English we would call that a table, where you set out the variables and all their different permutations. In the time of the Buddha, they called it a wheel. They used wheels like that in philosophical treatises and legal treatises. As in the Vinaya: There are lots of wheels that go through the permutations of a particular rule. If you do the action with a particular perception in mind, for example, what’s the result in terms of the penalty? When you do it with other perceptions, what are the results? The text goes through all the different permutations. Those are wheels.

The important point of the Dhamma wheel, of course, is that we don’t have four truths that are just interesting facts about suffering. They’re truths that carry duties. Awakening means completing the duties for all of them.

This is what appropriate attention is all about: looking at your experience in terms of those truths and the duties that have to be done. When there’s suffering, you look to see, what is the suffering here? And the Buddha says something radical. He starts out, of course, with pretty common examples of sufferings: birth, aging, and death; sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair; having to be with what you don’t like, having to be separated from what you do like, not getting what you want. That’s all pretty ordinary.

The radical part is when he says that it all comes down to the five clinging-aggregates. We read elsewhere that the aggregates themselves are not the problem. Arahants have aggregates, but they don’t suffer. It’s the clinging. And the idea that the clinging is the suffering: That takes a lot of getting used to. It’s also challenging us. The things that we cling to are things that we like, for the most part. There are also things that we feel we *have* to hold on to. If we don’t hold on to them, then we’ll feel lost. Sometimes we can cling to pretty negative things out of a sense that we have to do it. But whether you like the things you’re clinging to or not, still there’s a reason for wanting to hold on. And the Buddha is saying that clinging itself is the suffering.

So you have to look into that. Where is the clinging? There are four types: sensuality clinging, view clinging, habit and practice clinging, doctrine of self clinging.

Sensuality has to do with your likes in terms of sensual pleasures. You can think about what you want. In fact, that's the actual sensuality: your fascination with thinking about sensual pleasures.

The views are your views of what the world is like, and those two types of clinging are connected. If you want sensual pleasure, this is the world you're in. This the world where sensual pleasures can be found.

And should you? That's habit and practice clinging: how you feel you should go about getting what you want.

Then, of course, there's the *you* who's negotiating all this, the *you* who hopes to gain the pleasure and feels that either you're competent or not competent to do it. However you define yourself, you cling to it pretty fiercely.

These are the things that *are* the suffering. Once you realize that that's the suffering, then you look for: Why do you cling? That's why the Buddha has you look at craving. Otherwise, we tend to place the blame on things outside. The climate is horrible. Society is horrible. Politics are horrible.

There's a great Doonesbury cartoon, where a soldier's just coming back from the Iraqi war and he's been brain damaged. He gets back and his parents tell him what's been going on in the country. He tries to get one word out, but he has trouble speaking at that point. He says, "hand hand hand basket." Everything's going to hell in a hand basket. But that's not why we're suffering. We're suffering because we cling to the hand basket.

So think about that. You have to look inside. This is why we meditate: so that we can comprehend the clinging by seeing that the things we cling to are not worth it.

First we look for the allure, why we want to cling. But then we have to tell ourselves, "Okay, when you cling, these are the problems." A lot of times you say, "Well, I've got to cling. If I don't, what's going to happen to me?" This is why the Buddha reminds you of that third noble truth: that it is possible to find a happiness that's totally unalloyed, totally unblemished, totally—totally total, unchanging. It'll never disappoint you. That's what happens when you stop clinging. And that's the standard against which we measure the rest of the world. We see that, yeah, the rest of the world doesn't measure up.

So that's the first duty we have to keep in mind: comprehending the clinging that constitutes suffering. This is how you go about applying appropriate attention, when you see where you're clinging, you have to look at it to see why it's

not worth it, how you can develop a sense of dispassion toward it. That's what it means to comprehend it. You comprehend it to the point where you realize it's not worth it.

As for the cause of suffering, when the Buddha talks about appropriate attention, he focuses on the hindrances. He lists some of the defilements that get in the way of getting the mind to settle down. You have to look at them in an appropriate way as well.

One of the most interesting ones is where the Buddha talks about sloth and torpor. He says, there's a potential, there's a *dhatu* in the mind for energy. There's a potential for energy. *Dhatu* can also be translated as element. That's the common translation. But when you look at how the Buddha talks about dhatus, he talks about it both in terms of the physical world—the dhatus of water, fire, wind, earth, and space—and in terms of the mental world. Consciousness itself is a dhatu, and then there are dhatus that underlie qualities in the mind. There's the dhatu of renunciation. There's the dhatu of sensuality. In each case, with the exception of the dhatu of earth, the fact that we have phenomena in the world, of fire or floods or winds, or phenomena in the mind—essentially desires—is through the provocation of the corresponding dhatu.

In other words, there's a potential there, and there's something we do to provoke it. As when you make a fire, you're provoking the fire potential. When you get fascinated with sensual thoughts, the sensuality potential gets provoked. So you begin to realize that these things just don't happen on their own. A lot of your experience is based on what you provoke, and you have choices.

In this particular case, when you're getting slothful and torpid, you have to remind yourself, there is a potential for energy in the body. Think about what would happen if suddenly there were a fire and you had to get out. You'd find that you could run out a lot faster than you thought you could. There are stories of people lifting huge objects to get them out of a burning house, objects they ordinarily wouldn't be able to lift.

So we have within us potentials for energy that are pretty much untapped. One of the things you have to learn as a monk, as a meditator, is to find those potentials, because otherwise you sit and meditate for a while and you start getting sleepy, and part of the mind will say, "Oh, it's a sign that I need to rest." You have to fight that tendency, to see if the mind is just lying to itself, getting lazy.

So you have to look into the body. How can you energize the body, so that you can continue sitting and you can continue staying focused, longer than you might have expected? The ajaans talk about this a lot. Ajaan Maha Boowa says, "You

have to learn how to be amazed at yourself for putting out that amount of effort. That's when you know you're putting out enough." Ajaan Lee says that he found that it was almost as if his bones were made out of iron, he learned how to sit so long. It's from pushing the envelope, trying to find what reserves of energy you have and actually using them, instead of just keeping them in reserve all the time.

In this case, whenever there's a hindrance, the first thing you have to realize is that, okay, it is a hindrance. Normally, when there's sensual desire, the mind tends to side with it. When there's ill will, you tend to side with it. The person that you would like to see suffer really deserves to suffer: That's what you tell yourself. When you're feeling sleepy, "I need to give in to the sleep." Well, that's just what you just tell yourself. The Buddha calls it inappropriate attention. Appropriate attention is when you say, "I've got to fight this because it's an obstacle, an impediment. It's what's keeping me from understanding what's going on, why I'm suffering."

As for restlessness and anxiety, there is a potential for stillness in the mind. There is a part of the mind that just watches. So when distracting thoughts come in and they seem to come on thick and fast, you realize, "Okay, there's still a part of the mind that can just step out of the way. It doesn't have to get involved." Sometimes you find that if you fight these things off, they just get worse. In that case, you can tell yourself, "I'll just get out of the way." Those thoughts want to run, let them run, but you don't have to run along with them. That's an important realization in the meditation: realizing that your thoughts may go out, but you don't have to run along with them. You can just stay right here. When you don't go out running after them, they go only so far and then they die.

But if you run along with them, it's like going out in the foggy night with your flashlight. You want to see how far the beam of the flashlight goes, so you continue walking along, walking along, walking along. Of course, the further you walk along, the further it goes. There'll be no end to it. But you just stay right here, and the flashlight beam can go wherever it wants, but you don't have to get involved with it.

As for the hindrance of doubt, look at your mind to see what's bright and what's dark, what's skillful and what's unskillful inside it. If you're not sure, act on different qualities of mind that seem skillful and see what kind of actions they lead to. In other words, you don't overcome your doubts just by saying, "I believe, I believe, believe in the Dhamma." You get down to examining your mind in light of the basic question that the Buddha asks: "What is skillful and what's unskillful?"

That's how he described his search: He searched for what is skillful. We have this tendency to reduce the Dhamma to sound bites. Some people say it's all about letting go. Some people say it's all about acceptance. But when the Buddha reduces things to the simplest terms, it's all about a dichotomy: what's skillful and what's unskillful.

In the beginning, he'll give you some lists as to which actions are skillful and which ones are not. But as you get into the practice, you realize that question of what's skillful and what's not gets more and more subtle. It's a very basic distinction, but it's not as simple as it seems. There's a lot to explore there. But that's basically what we have to focus on. You realize that there are skillful qualities in the mind, and when you act on them, you get good results. When you act on the unskillful qualities, you get bad results. And by seeing that, you can overcome your doubts.

As for appropriate attention applied to the path, the duty there, of course, is to develop it. When the Buddha talks about appropriate attention in this area, he doesn't talk about the path as much as he talks about the seven factors for awakening. And here again, there are certain dhatu in the mind, certain potentials in the mind.

There are qualities that provide a foothold, as the Buddha said, to sustain mindfulness. There are qualities that sustain concentration, that sustain equanimity. You want to look for them. In some cases, he tells you outright. In terms of mindfulness, the sustaining qualities are what he calls purified virtue and views made straight. In other words, you straighten out your views in terms of what's skillful, what's not, and then you make sure that your virtue is pure. If there are blemishes in your virtue—in other words, where you've harmed somebody or harmed yourself, and you don't want to think about what you did—you put up a wall inside to hide that from yourself. The more walls there are in your mind, the harder it is going to be to remember things.

You want a clear, wide-open mind so that you can remember that when you did this, you got those results, when you did that, you got these results. You try to remember how you can apply that knowledge or that memory to what you're doing right now.

In terms of analysis of the qualities, applying appropriate attention there means to look into the issue of what's skillful and what's not, what's bright and dark in the mind: the same way you deal with the hindrance of doubt.

On this follows persistence, and here again you look for the potential for energy in the body. This factor for awakening counters sloth and torpor.

The remaining factors have to do with getting the mind into good concentration: rapture, calm, concentration, equanimity. These are things you develop. You look for the potentials there in the mind for it to settle down—because the mind does have these potentials. The present moment as it comes is not just a finished product. It's a work in progress. And there are potentials there. You'll learn how to provoke the potentials, activate the potentials, for the good things to show themselves, and leave the unskillful potentials alone. You find that you have more abilities in the path than you would have thought.

So try to amaze yourself with how much potential you have. After all, that's what the Buddha's teachings are all about: to show us that there's a lot more that we can do than we have been doing in terms of training the mind. If we simply go through the motions, that's what we get: motions. But if we find ourselves inspired by the Buddha's example, inspired by the example of the great ajaans, we're going to put out more than we would ordinarily would.

Ajaan Maha Boowa talks about how when he was young, he had heard the party line in Bangkok, which was that nibbana was no longer possible. He was afraid that if he practiced, he would just be putting himself through needless torture, needless pain. But he stopped to realize: The Buddha didn't set out the path to torture anybody, to be fruitless. The path has fruit. As the Buddha said, it's *akaliko*. It doesn't depend on the time. It depends on these basic principles of the four noble truths and their duties. Those are always true. So he overcame his fear that he would wear himself out for nothing. That was when he was actually able to get on the path and, as he said, to find out how amazing the results of the path actually were.

To get amazing results, you have to amaze yourself with the potentials you have. So look into them. That's what appropriate attention is all about: looking for those potentials inside you and not just giving up. The potentials are there and you can make the most of them.