

## *The Dhamma Wheel*

*December 12, 2018*

The sutta we chanted just now, *Setting the Wheel of Dhamma in Motion*, was the Buddha's first sermon. And sometimes it's asked, "Where's the wheel? It's not mentioned in the sutta itself." There are two explanations. One is that the wheel was a symbol of power. When a king could get on his chariot and drive his wheels wherever he wanted to, that was the area under his power. Wherever the wheel was stopped, that was the limit of his power. And as the sutta says, this Wheel of Dhamma that the Buddha set in motion cannot be stopped by anybody, which means that there's no limit to its territory. So the image of the wheel indicates the power of the Dhamma.

But there's also the passage that mentions the four noble truths along with the three levels of knowledge with regard to each truth, and then sets out all the combinations of the three and the four. In English we call that a table. In Pali they call it a wheel, and this is the Wheel of Dhamma. As the Buddha said, when he knew the four noble truths and the three levels of knowledge appropriate to each one, that was when he was able to claim that he had gained full awakening.

The four noble truths, of course, are the truth of suffering or stress—the Pali word is *dukkha*—the origination of suffering, the cessation of suffering, and the path to its cessation.

In the case of the first truth, suffering is basically boiled down to clinging to the five aggregates. The Buddha never said that life is suffering. That's one of those fake Buddha quotes. He said something a lot more useful, to pinpoint exactly where the suffering is. It's not because of unpleasant sights, sounds, smells, tastes, or tactile sensations that we suffer. It's because of our clinging to certain activities we engage in. Even form, the first of the aggregates, the Buddha defines with a verb: It deforms. Feelings feel, perceptions perceive, fabrications fabricate, consciousness cognizes. And we cling to these activities—in other words, we feed off of them.

That's where the suffering is, so that's what we've got to focus on. Knowing the

suffering or knowing that first noble truth is one level, then there's knowing the duty with regard to it, which is to comprehend it. This doesn't mean just understanding the words. It means understanding the actual suffering that you find in your heart to the point of feeling dispassion for it. We don't think that we're passionate for our suffering, but all too often we cling to things that entail suffering. We've got to figure out where the clinging is, why we're attracted to it. Then we can compare the attraction to the actual drawbacks, and that's when we can let go. When we let go, that's the full comprehending.

The second noble truth is the truth of the origination of suffering. The word *origination* here means the cause, but the Pali word—*samudaya*—also means something that arises together. In other words, you're not going to be looking into your past lives for the cause of your suffering or the far distant past in this life. You're looking for something you're doing right here and now.

The Buddha identifies the origination with three types of craving. Here again, there's a misunderstanding that he said all desire is a cause for suffering, but actually there are some desires that are part of the path to the end of suffering. The desires that lead to suffering are: the desire for sensuality, the desire for becoming, and the desire to destroy becoming. Because we're thirsty in these ways, we feed off the things that we identify with, that we cling to. So the duty here is to abandon these three kinds of craving.

Craving for sensuality is not so much craving for sensual pleasures as craving for the mind's activity of fantasizing about pleasures. We engage in that a lot more than we do in actual partaking of sensual pleasures. You can think about a meal for a long time before and a long time afterwards, even though the meal itself doesn't take all that very long. The fantasizing is what we're really attached to.

Craving for becoming is craving to take on an identity in a particular world of experience based on a desire, hoping to use that identity within that world to attain the desire.

And craving for non-becoming is when you've taken on an identity in a world of experience and you want it to end. You want to stop it because it's not getting the desire you wanted.

These are the causes of suffering.

Here it's important to note that suffering in the four noble truths is very different from the suffering in the three characteristics. In the three characteristics, the stress of things changing is built into the way the world is. It becomes suffering in the heart only when you cling to those things, and that's the suffering of the four noble truths. The suffering of the three characteristics can't be changed, but we *can* get rid of suffering of the four noble truths so that the changes in the things around us don't weigh on the heart. And that's a piece of good news. We don't have to perfect the world before we're going to put an end to our sufferings. We can clean out our hearts, and that's what puts the end to the suffering.

So when you've abandoned the causes of suffering, that completes the third level of knowledge. In other words, you know the truth, you know what the duty is, and you've completed the duty. So that's six spokes in the Dhamma wheel.

As for the cessation of suffering, that's the abandoning of craving. With that abandoning, there's release from suffering. In other words, you find what the cause of the problem is, you solve it at the cause, and the results take care of themselves. You don't go around trying to put an end to suffering by abandoning it. That would be like going into a house, seeing that there's smoke filling the house, and you try to put out the smoke. As long as you don't put out the fire, the smoke's going to keep on coming, no matter how much you try to put it out. But if you find the fire, put it out, then the smoke takes care of itself.

And so you see here that the third noble truth is actually the act of performing the duty with regard to the second noble truth: letting it go. The duty with regard to that is to realize it as it's happening. In other words, it's something that you actually see happening in your own heart.

Then finally, with the fourth noble truth—the path to the end of suffering, the noble eightfold path—the duty is to develop it. Once it's developed, you've completed all twelve spokes.

So that's the Dhamma wheel of the Buddha. You basically engage in the activities that will put an end to suffering by attacking the cause.

His Dhamma wheel has twelve spokes. How about your Dhamma wheel? Hopefully we all know the four noble truths, at least, as they are explained and

that's the beginning. That's four spokes. Then we know the duties: another four spokes. That leaves the act of completing the duties: That's our work. So right now, we're developing concentration, focusing on the breath. That's working on the duty with regard to the fourth noble truth.

Everything in the path can be found in the four noble truths and their duties. Simply knowing about the four noble truths—even though we may know them thoroughly and say, yes, it's true what the Buddha said—is not the goal of the path. These truths are meant to take you someplace. This is why the path starts with knowing the truths and then having duties to perform and then knowing what it's like to complete those duties. They take you someplace: another reason why it's called a wheel. It spins along the path, and the more spokes you have, the more reliable the wheel is going to be.

So look at your practice. Have you been able to identify where in your mind is the suffering? We have that chant that says, “those who don't discern suffering,” and the first time around it sounds strange. “Everybody can discern suffering,” you might say. But even though everybody has a sense of suffering, they don't really discern it. They blame it on all kinds of things that are not related to clinging to the five aggregates. Which means that even though they suffer—and they may suffer very greatly—they don't discern it. This is what we're working on here: to get the mind in a place where it can really discern the suffering.

This is one of the reasons we have to get the mind so quiet and alert at the same time because when suffering happens it's very hard to sort out exactly where it is and actually to perform the right duty, which is to comprehend it. Usually, our main reaction to suffering is to try to push it away. And we push blindly, pushing at the wrong things. So to counteract that tendency, we've got to get the mind quiet.

This is why the Buddha identified right concentration as *the* important factor of the path, and all the other factors as its supports and requisites. Because it's when the mind is in right concentration that it can actually perform these duties.

Now these aren't duties that the Buddha imposes on anyone, but he says if you want to put an end to suffering—notice, it's conditional—*if* you want to put an end to suffering, this is what you've got to do. There's no other way around it.

But remember that right concentration is provisional. It's part of the path. It's not the goal. There's still some becoming in here, when you take on an identity as a meditator, so there's still going to be a sense of self. There'll be some clinging, but it's useful clinging. If you're taking a chariot down the path, you've got to hold on. If you let go, you just drop there on the road. So every effort that gets put into practicing concentration—and that includes fostering the desire to do it right—is all to the good.

There's a passage where Ven. Ananda is teaching a nun and, as he points out, we practice to put an end to craving but there's a certain amount of craving that gets us there. And as we hear that other people have put an end to suffering, we hear that the Buddha's Dhamma wheel is complete, and we look at ours and it seems to be like a mouth with missing teeth. You say, "He could do it. I'd like to do it too."

That craving is part of the path. It's part of right effort. Ananda also says that we practice for the sake of putting an end to conceit but we have to use conceit, of a healthy kind, in order to put an end to conceit. The healthy kind, of course, is seeing that other people can do this: "They're human beings. I'm a human being. If they can do it, why can't I?"

So remember, the path is provisional. We take on a certain identity, we take on a certain goal, we have certain desires that we foster, we take on certain levels of becoming because they take us across. Remember the image of the raft: You have to hold onto the raft. Even though the raft is not your goal, you hold on to it. Once it takes you across the river, you can let go of the raft. In fact, to stay on the other shore, you don't have to hold onto anything at all. But if you let go of the raft in the middle of the river, you get swept downstream by the currents.

So even though there's a sense of self that you're using right now but that you'll abandon, and there's a desire, there's a level of becoming that you'll ultimately abandon, this is simply what you've got to do. You can't use nibbana to get to nibbana, because nibbana's not the kind of thing you can use or can get a handle on. You've got to make use of what you've got, and right view is there to remind you: This is how to use it well.

So we hold onto the chariot as the wheel takes us down the path. The more

spokes you get in your wheel, the more reliable it's going to be. This is why every night we don't sit here discussing the Dhamma. We sit here meditating. We're trying to work on those duties, to get them done, so that our Dhamma wheel will be complete and will take us where we want to go.