

The Wheel of Dhamma

April 13, 2006

The discourse that we chanted just now, Setting the Wheel of Dhamma in Motion, was the Buddha's first sermon. The wheel of Dhamma in the title refers to the passage that goes through each of the four noble truths and the three levels of knowledge for each of the truths. The first of the noble truths is *dukkha*, which means pain, suffering, and stress. The second truth is the cause of suffering and stress. The third is the cessation of suffering and stress. And the fourth is the path to that cessation.

In other words, the Buddha is saying that suffering and stress are problems that can be solved. In fact, the four truths are often been compared to the way medicine was taught back in India. First you diagnose the symptoms of the disease, then you explain the cause, then you explain the possibility of putting an end to the disease by attacking the cause, and then you set out the cure.

The three levels of knowledge with regard to each truth are, one, just knowing what the truth is; two, knowing the duty with regard to that truth. These aren't truths you just talk about. They're things that you actually have to work with. The third level of knowledge is knowing that you've completed the duty.

In terms of the first noble truth, the truth of suffering and stress, the duty is to comprehend it. So first you know that "This is suffering, this is the stress," and then you know what you've got to do about it.

This is probably the most interesting of all the duties. You have to comprehend it. Our most common attitude toward stress and pain is wanting to get rid of it. But that's not the task. The task is to comprehend it.

As for the cause of stress, the duty is to abandon it. With the cessation, your duty is to realize it. And as for the path, the duty is to develop it.

These duties or tasks work together. As you develop the path, you find that you do start comprehending stress more and more, and you're letting go more and more of the causes of stress.

This is particularly clear in the relationship between the first truth and the fourth. If you're going to comprehend stress, you have to put the mind in a position where it's willing to comprehend it. All too often, when stress, suffering, and pain come, you feel trapped. When you feel trapped, you just struggle, trying to push the stress away or trying to escape from the stress one way or the other. Often you just make the problem worse. The idea of just sitting there and trying to comprehend it sounds threatening. What you've got to do is to give yourself a

good place to stand so that you're not immediately swamped or overwhelmed by the stress or pain or suffering when it comes.

This is why we practice concentration, to give the mind that place to stay, a more secure foundation. In other words, when pain comes up, either a physical pain or mental pain, you don't just go jumping right into it. Try to find the part the body and the part of the mind that's not totally overwhelmed. At the very least, remind yourself, say, when stress comes into the mind, "Okay, at least you have awareness. The stress is an object of awareness. The awareness and its object can be two separate things." But often, it also helps to have a place in the body where you can go that's not influenced by the stress, not influenced by the pain.

So try to go there and learn to resist the temptation to go jumping back in, because our bodies are wired in such a way that as soon as there's any problem on horizon, any problem coming up into the radar screen: Zap! That's where we go. It goes against our habitual behavior to not immediately go there. But once you go there, you get sucked in. That doesn't help.

So you've got to remind yourself that you do have a separate place, you do have another place to stand. Try to make the breath as comfortable as you can in some part of the body. Find some part of the body that you can consciously keep relaxed and stay there. And practice just staying there. Whatever ideas come up that will pull you back into the stress or suffering, learn to say No to them. Actually, the stress doesn't suck you in. You're the one that goes sucking yourself into the stress.

So just learn how to say No, No, No thanks, No thanks. Don't make it a nasty No. Just, "No thanks, I don't need to go there." Just try to stay as securely and solidly as you can with that spot, with the awareness of that spot, wherever it may be in the body. Make that your foundation. Once that foundation is solid, then you can start looking into the stress and not feel so overwhelmed by it, because you always know you have a safe place to go if it gets really bad.

This is the point we actually can start trying to comprehend the stress. Actually, you've already learned something about it in the course of saying No. You've realized exactly what it was in the mind that would pull you away. That's the beginning of the comprehension right there. In the Buddha's analysis of stress that we chanted just now, he goes through all the typical manifestations of suffering and stress: aging, illness, and death, not getting what you want, getting things you don't want, being separated from what you love, being conjoined with things you don't love, like cobwebs in the room.

The analysis eventually comes down to what he calls the five clinging-aggregates: form, feeling, perception, fabrication, and consciousness. He says that we suffer because we cling to these things.

Form is any physical form. It can be the form of your own body or the form of things you're attached to, items that you like, people you like. Feeling is just registering the sensation of pleasure, pain, or neither pleasure nor pain. These feelings can be physical or mental, but in either case, we're talking about the feeling tone. These are things we really like to hold onto. The problem is, though, when you start holding on to pleasure, pleasure turns into something else, and you find yourself holding on to pain.

Perceptions are the mental labels you apply to things, the names you have for things so that you can recognize them when you see them.

As you practice, you begin to realize that perception is not an automatic part of your awareness. In other words, items don't come with their names attached. You apply the name. This is especially true inside the body, where we don't have a very good vocabulary in English for describing how the body feels from the inside, how awareness feels from the inside.

Then there's fabrication, which is the mind's habit of making thoughts, putting things together. There's an intentional element here.

And finally there's consciousness, which is the basic awareness of things at the six senses.

We suffer because we cling to these things.

The word *clinging*, in some passages, is translated as desire and passion, but the word for clinging in Pali also means sustenance. In other words, you're feeding on these things. You're trying to get happiness out of them, and they just can't provide the happiness you want. This is why you suffer.

What's interesting about these aggregates is that they're actually activities. One way of clinging to them comes from finding them useful in your sensual fantasies. Another way of clinging to them is believing that if you do things in a certain way, that in and of itself is going to constitute happiness. It's called clinging to habits and practices. Then there's clinging to views made out of these activities—primarily, perceptions and fabrications—and then there's clinging to ideas about the self, in which you identify with any of these things.

So when you find yourself suffering, try to analyze the suffering first in terms of the object you're clinging to, and then look for the clinging itself. Are you clinging to these things because you want sensual pleasures out of them? Or because you have particular views about them? Or are you just saying that "This is me and this is mine"? Are you clinging with a sense of having habitual ways of behavior that are really not producing well-being? This is what you look for: Where is the clinging? What are you clinging to? What kind of clinging is it? This

is the way the Buddha has you analyze suffering so that you can begin to comprehend it.

In terms of the practice, the important point is to have a place where you can stand where you're not getting sucked into the suffering, so that you really find yourself in the mood where you really do want to comprehend it. If you just sit there, trying to analyze it but thinking, "How can I get rid of this, how can I get rid of this?" you can't really analyze it. The other agenda just gets too strong. But if you're in a position where you don't feel threatened by it—"Okay, let's just sit here with this for a while and watch it to see where the clinging is, what's the object of the clinging, what kind of clinging it is": Once you see that the clinging is really causing the suffering, then you let go because you realize you have that option. You don't have to hold on.

That's because the Buddha is giving you better things to hold on to. You hold on to your state of concentration. You hold onto a sense of being the observer, awareness itself. In other words, you learn to replace unskillful attachments with more skillful ones. Eventually, you're going to have to let go of the skillful ones, but that doesn't mean you don't hold on tight in the mean time. It's like climbing a ladder. You hold on tightly to one rung, knowing that you're going to have to let go of it eventually, because you're going to go to a higher rung. Once you've grasped a higher rung, then you can let go of the lower one. If you hold on loosely to either the lower or the higher rung, though, you could easily fall.

So what we're doing right now is trying to find a sense of solid foundation inside, where the mind can be still, where it feels secure and unthreatened. This is a really important attachment to develop, as long as you keep in mind the fact that eventually you're going to have to let go. You let go because you've gained something better. Finally you can climb the ladder all away to the roof. When you're up there, you don't need to hold on to the ladder anymore. Then you can be totally unattached. But in the meantime, keep finding better things to hold onto. You've got the choice.

This is why we have meditation instructions to make you realize that there are more ways of approaching the bare facts of awareness, the bare facts of experience, than you might have thought. When you follow the Buddha's analysis of experience, you realize how much you shape things. There's a lot that's shaped by the past, but there's also an awful lot that's shaped by what you're doing, your intentions right here in the present moment. So he's giving you alternative ways of intending, alternative ways of putting new input in to the present moment, expanding your range of skills, expanding your imagination as to what you can do.

That way, when you find that there's suffering, you're not just stuck there. You can pull yourself out. If it's really strong, at the very least you've got a place to hold on to so that you can weather the storm until the storm passes. Then, when your foundation is more secure, when you're in a position where you can analyze things, he gives you ways of looking at suffering, taking it apart, so that it's not just one big mass. You see it as individual actions. You see the clinging that motivates the actions. You see that the clinging is unnecessary. That's when you can realize the end of suffering.

So keep that wheel of Dhamma in mind. There's good reason why the Buddha made this the topic of his first talk. The wheel, by the way, is an old way of organizing variables in Indian philosophy and Indian law. You'd get two sets of variables and you'd just go through the list of all the possible permutations of the variables. That was called a wheel. Like just now: You know the truth. You know the duty with regard to the truth. When you gain awakening, you know you've completed the duty. You do this with each of the truths, one by one. You know, "This is the truth of suffering, the truth of suffering is to be comprehended, then the truth of suffering has been comprehended." And so on around. That's the wheel. It's why the wheel over there on the wall has twelve spokes: four times three equals twelve. Keep that wheel in mind, because everything in the practice, everything in the path, finds its place in that wheel.