

Comprehending Pain

July 6, 2009

The wheel of Dhamma has twelve spokes. Back in the time of the Buddha, when they explained things in sets of variables, instead of making a table, they would just go down the list of all the combinations of how the variables played off against one another. Because the list went around all the possible permutations, they called it a wheel. You see a lot of these in the Vinaya, where they explain all the different factors that would be related to a particular offense and then combine all the factors in lists called wheels.

It's the same with the Buddha's first sermon, his first Dhamma teaching. He talks about the four noble truths and how each of the noble truths has three types of knowledge related to it. The Dhamma wheel lists all twelve permutations of the four truths times the three levels of knowledge

In the case of the first noble truth, the truth of stress, the first level of knowledge is simply that this is what stress is: clinging to the five aggregates. Second, there's knowledge of the duty appropriate to stress, which is to comprehend it. Third is the knowledge that you have totally comprehended it. You've completed the duty.

With regard to the second noble truth, the truth of the origination of stress, the first knowledge is that there are three forms of craving that lead to clinging: craving for sensuality, craving for becoming, craving for non-becoming. Knowing that these are the things that give rise to stress: That's the first knowledge. The second knowledge is knowing that your duty is to abandon these things. And the third knowledge would be knowing that that you've completed the duty: Those three forms of craving have been totally abandoned.

The third noble truth is the cessation of suffering or stress. The first knowledge is knowing that the cessation of suffering equals dispassion for those three kinds of craving. In other words, you attack the problem at the cause. The duty here is to realize this: What would be to have all stress and suffering end? Then finally you realize you have fully realized the cessation of suffering. That's the third knowledge.

As for the fourth noble truth, the path to the end of suffering, that's the noble eightfold path, starting with right view and ending with right concentration. Knowing the factors of the path lead to the end of suffering is the first knowledge. The second knowledge is knowing that these factors should be developed. You try to develop right view, right resolve, right speech, right action, right livelihood,

right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. The third level of knowledge is knowing that all the factors of the path have been fully developed.

So the Dhamma wheel is complete at the moment of awakening, as the Buddha said, when he had complete knowledge of these four noble truths in their three rounds and twelve permutations. The three rounds have to do the three levels of knowledge. The twelve permutations entail going all the way around the wheel, listing each level of knowledge for each truth. When you've completed the wheel, that's when you can claim to be awakened.

Two of these duties are particular interesting. One is that stress has to be comprehended. We don't usually react to stress or pain by trying to comprehend it. We usually try to get rid of it. We don't like it. We don't want to have it around. We want it be done with it. So we try either to snuff it out or to turn and run away from it. But that doesn't put an end to it. You've got to comprehend it, which means knowing it to the point of dispassion.

We don't usually think that we're passionate for stress, but we are passionate for things that entail stress. We have passion for forms, feelings, perceptions, thought constructs, passion for sensory consciousness. Our passion for these things is what constitutes stress. So you've got to cut through that passion by comprehending what's actually going on.

The other interesting duty is that we have to develop right concentration, because if you're going to sit here and watch the pain until you can really comprehend it, you need strength. You need support. You can't just jump into the ring with a world-champion boxer without having some sort of training, some sort of regimen that gets you strong enough so that you can fend off your opponent. This is why we have to develop right concentration. It's not simply a matter of watching a concentrated mind state coming up and saying, "Oh, there's concentration," or watching it go and saying, "Ah, I've gained insight into inconstancy or impermanence. These things come and go."

It's like trying to travel from one city to another. A bus that's going to take you there comes by. If you just say, "Oh, here comes the bus; there goes the bus," and you never get on the bus, it's not going to take you there. Even though the bus goes there, it's not going to take you there, because you don't get on it.

The same with right concentration: You have to try to develop it. When it comes, you try to maintain it. If it's not there, you try to give rise to it. This involves work. There's going to be effort. That's why we have right effort as one of the factors of the path. That has to be developed as well: the effort to abandon unskillful mental qualities that have arisen, and then to prevent more unskillful

qualities that haven't yet arisen from arising; then wanting to give rise to skillful qualities, and wanting to maintain them once they've arisen.

So the path involves effort, and it's the right concentration that gives you the strength rewarding your efforts so that you can keep on working at the path. That's because right concentration provides a sense of ease and well-being, rapture and refreshment.

You want to learn how to recognize these qualities as they come. That's the first knowledge with regard to the path. It's not just knowledge that "These are the names of the factors." You have to notice these qualities as they are present.

Now, the problem with the ease and refreshment of right concentration is that when they first come, they're very weak. You may miss them. You may not even notice them, especially when you read in the texts about the extreme forms that rapture can take: waves coming over the body, a sense of tingling that fills the body, your hair standing on end. These things can get pretty extreme. So you sit here waiting for the extreme forms to come, and what you miss are the seeds of these things.

Ajaan Lee translates *piti* or rapture as a sense of fullness. Ask yourself, which parts the body seem full and content right now? Where's the blood flowing well? Focus on those parts. That's the beginning of this feeling of fullness and refreshment that's going to come. Allow those parts to have that nice feeling of fullness all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out-. Notice when you impose tension on them, when you tighten them up. Just relax, relax, relax. That's how you learn to give rise to the sense of fullness. Then you try to maintain it and allow it to grow.

That's one way of getting into right concentration. You've got to find some part in the body that feels pleasurable and then learn how to maintain that feeling of pleasure all way through the in-breath, all the way through the out-. Then allow it to spread. As you get better and better at this, you gain more and more confidence in staying in the present moment without feeling threatened by any feelings of pain or stress that come up. You've got the strength of concentration as your support.

It's from this sense of support that you can actually start looking at the stress. You've already had some experience as you've been working with the breath, noticing little patterns of tension and learning how to work through them. This is the skill you're going to use to deal the other deeper, more blatant forms of stress. But the comprehending, here, doesn't mean that you get rid of them. You learn how to sit with them and watch them: What is this feeling of pain? Say you've got a feeling of pain in your knee or in your hip. Does it move? Does it change? Look

for the ups and downs and moving-arounds of the pain. Then look to see what the mind is doing in response to the pain, or how it's shaping your sense of the pain to begin with through its perceptions.

Remember: As the Buddha said, the actual suffering itself is clinging to the different aggregates. There's craving that's located on something, and around it develop passion and delight for that thing, which is the same thing is clinging, and then the clinging lands on a particular form of feeling or perception.

So when you're looking at the pain, you've got those five things to look at: all five aggregates. How does a feeling of pain relate to form if the body? Are they the same thing or are they not? How does it relate to your perception of the body? How does it relate to your perception of pain? How does it relate to your perception of who you are in relationship to the pain? If you see yourself as the victim, it's like seeing people shooting at one another out in the street and you run out in the street to be right in the line of fire. Of course it's going to hurt.

So you want to look at other possible perceptions around the pain. If you can perceive yourself as someone who wants to comprehend the pain, that totally changes the relationship. Then you can look at the stories simply as mental fabrications around the pain. It's very easy, when you're sitting here pained by something, to start thinking about other times you've been pained and how unfair it always is or whatever. Those thoughts are just fabrications that simply add more suffering that doesn't have to be there on top of the pain.

Finally, the consciousness of the pain: Is the awareness of the pain the same thing as the pain itself or is the awareness something separate? "Separate" here doesn't mean they have to be in different places. They can actually be in the same place, but the awareness is a different level of activity, a different type of activity.

So the teachings on the aggregates are there for you to start taking this big glob of pain and analyzing it into various strands. When the pain gets analyzed into five strands, it doesn't seem quite so overwhelming. You begin to see that it's not just a given, an accomplished fact that you're stuck with. The mind, as soon as there's any kind of sensation, starts fabricating thoughts and perceptions around it. So learn how to fabricate thoughts and perceptions that are actually helpful on the path.

You might want to start with the perception of form you've got. What is form? Form is the four physical elements properties: earth, water, wind, and fire, or solidity, coolness, energy, and warmth. Those things are all form. But the actual feeling of the pain, that's something else. If you can notice a sensation that's warm, that's not the pain. Or if there's a sensation that's cool, that's not the pain. The energy or the solidity: They're not the pain. The pain flips around among

these things. The properties are like a lattice into which the pain slips and climbs and dives, moves around. But they are one type of sensation and the pain is another type of sensation.

The perception, the mental image you have of the pain, that's something else. Your perception of yourself in relationship to pain, your perception of the form in relation to the pain, your perception of just simple awareness with relationship to the pain: You might want to test to see exactly what these perceptions are.

That's how you perform the duties with regard to the noble truths. It's all very practical. If you first learned about Buddhism in school, the first lesson probably was: The Buddha taught that there are four noble truths—without any idea as to why there are four, and not five or three, or what's noble about them, what's true about them, what their purpose is. It all sounds very abstract, very foreign.

When you realize, though, that he's talking about something extremely intimate—your experience of suffering and what you can do to put an end to it—then it becomes very concrete, very practical. He takes that old principle that if you want to solve a problem, you don't solve it at the symptoms, you solve it at the cause, and he applies it to The Big Problem: suffering.

What's amazing is that the Buddha is able to make this topic of suffering the number-one topic of his teaching, because he saw it as the number-one issue in people's lives. From there he is able to use this very ordinary experience as a basis for awakening. Pain is an ordinary experience, but it's also bewildering. We've been dealing with pain for who knows how long, and it keeps running our lives. We want to do something about it, but without the proper guidance, we do all the wrong things. We just keep piling more and more pain, more and more suffering on ourselves. This is why we're bewildered by it: because it is complex, all these different strands interacting.

But their interaction is right here. It's in a place where we can watch it. When you get the right concepts and the right ideas in mind, and turn them from concepts and ideas into skills, that's when you begin to see how useful this teaching is, how universal it is. It's not just something that somebody thought of for Indians 2,500 years ago. It's this Dhamma wheel that keeps rolling all over the world.