

The Dhamma Wheel in the Heart

December 28, 2016

We just chanted the Buddha's first sermon, Setting the Wheel of Dhamma in Motion. And the question sometimes comes up, "Where's the wheel?" It's in that passage where we repeat each of the noble truths, the duty appropriate to it, and the Buddha's declaration that he'd completed the duty.

Back in ancient India, in legal texts and philosophical texts, when they were setting groups of variables against each other, working out all the permutations, they called it a wheel. We call it a table. They called it a wheel. In this case, you've got four truths and three types of knowledge for each truth: knowledge about the truth, knowledge of the duty to be done, and then knowledge that the duty's been completed. So, three times four, that's twelve. That's why the Dhamma wheel on the wall over here has twelve spokes. And those duties are important.

We hear a lot about the four noble truths, but not so much about the duties. But the reason we have four noble truths is because there are four duties. Now, the Buddha's not imposing these duties on us. He's not a god who comes down and says, "You've got to do this." He's just saying, "If you want to put an end to suffering, this is what you have to do." It's the same on each level of right view. On the first level, mundane right view, it's belief in the principle of karma and in the principle that you should act in skillful ways and avoid unskillful ones. So the duties are just that: Develop skillful actions; abandon unskillful ones.

Then you move on to the four noble truths. Stress is to be comprehended. Its cause is to be abandoned. Its cessation is to be realized. And the path to the cessation is to be developed. You want to sort these things out clearly to make sure you're applying the right duty to the right category.

There's a story they tell of Chao Khun Nor, who was a famous meditating monk in Bangkok in the early part of the twentieth century. He was doing walking meditation one night in front of his hut, and a young monk who been at the monastery about a year or so came running up to him, said, "I'm just overcome with worry, overcome with these thoughts I can't control." Chao Khun Nor looked at him and said, "Well, you're doing the wrong duty," and turned and went into his hut. Fortunately, the monk had been studying enough Dhamma to understand: He'd been developing something he should have been abandoning.

So even though the wheel of Dhamma may sound abstract, it applies very directly to what you're doing right now, whatever the right now is. Right now you're meditating, you're trying to develop concentration. Any thoughts that

come up that are going to pull you away from the concentration, you label those as a cause of suffering and you abandon them. And you want to make sure you've got the duty straight. Otherwise, you can sit here developing all kinds of problems while you abandon the path.

So hold onto the breath. Stay with it. Hover around the breath the same way you'd hover around a child, a newborn child that has lots of needs. And you're right here. Ultimately, of course, the child will begin to grow and gradually get a more responsible for itself, and you won't have to be quite so attentive. But still, you do have to pay attention and you still have to be there to help nurture and foster the child. So when the mind is with the breath, protect that.

I had a problem when I was getting started in concentration, studying with Ajaan Fuang. He would have groups of people sitting together. And if someone happened to have a vision in the meditation, he'd tell them what to do. And he was quite quick in this. If he sensed that you had something going on, he'd say, "Okay, Debra over there, what's happening in your meditation right now?" It so happened that Debra was just having a vision, and so he'd tell her what to do. So, of course, everybody was listening in. And you began to think: Getting visions is a sign of progress. I wasn't having any visions. So whatever concentration I'd have, I'd just toss it away and try to find something else, until I finally realized that visions just weren't my talent. I turned around and started to appreciate what little concentration I had and was able to develop that by looking after it. So even though you may not be that satisfied with your concentration, protect it.

It's like having a child. When it first comes out, it's not quite the child you wanted. But you don't throw it away. You look after it. You train it. You teach it. You feed it. And the child will grow and will show its potentials. It's the same with the concentration. When it's just little moments of concentration, it doesn't seem all that powerful and it can actually seem kind of discouraging. But if you look after it and keep tending to it, trying to stitch one moment of stillness together with the next, together with the next, it develops through time. And it also develops depth.

As you begin to realize that this is a place where you actually can settle down, you get more comfortable. So ask yourself, "What's comfortable in the body right now?" Focus there. As for the pains, you can let them go for the time being. Focus on the things that'll give you strength, give you a sense of belonging here and enjoying being here. It may be in a simple place. Just relax your eyelids or relax your hands. And then just stay with that sense of relaxation. Relax the muscles around the corner of your mouth. Stay with that relaxation and then allow that sense of ease to spread. If any question comes up in the mind as to what's next,

you say, “This is what’s next.” Just stay right here. You want this to develop. You don’t want anything to pull you away for the time being.

Now, other thoughts will come up. If you can shoot them down right away, so much the better. If they keep coming back, coming back, then you may have to turn on them and look at them, at least long enough to realize why you don’t want to go there. As for thoughts of worry and anxiety, as we were saying today, you have to remind yourself: You don’t really know what’s going to happen in the future but you do know that you’ll need more discernment, more mindfulness, more alertness to deal with unexpected things as they arise. And where are you going to get those qualities? Well, through the meditation. All too often our worries come with a thought, “I should be worried.” You have to erase that should and apply a should to the concentration: “I should be concentrated. I should be working at least on my concentration.” And then get right back. Try to do this as quickly as you can.

So you’re developing the concentration and you’re abandoning all the distractions. Then you find that you can start applying that same ability to the rest of your life, because the practices we do as we meditate are not here just to do when you’re sitting with your eyes closed. A thought comes up in the course of the day and you want to know, “Okay. Is this something I should follow, or something I shouldn’t?” If it’s something you shouldn’t be following, then the Buddha says you try to hold it in check.

He gave the image of being a cowherd. During the rainy season, when the rice is growing, you have to make sure your cows don’t go into the rice fields. If they seem headed in the direction of a rice field, you have to beat them back. In the same way, you want to block your thoughts if they’re heading in the wrong direction. Now, there is a problem if you find yourself blocking thoughts and you didn’t know why. If you know why you’re blocking the thought, that’s perfectly legitimate. You see that it’s based on sensuality, ill will, harmfulness. Those are thoughts you want to block.

But if there’s a part of the mind that’s blocking a thought, and you don’t know what the thought is or why you’re blocking it, then you approach it in a different way, because the reason the mind doesn’t know is because it’s hiding something from itself and it’s also feeling threatened by the thought. So as not to feel threatened, you go back to the concentration. Try to get in touch with your breath. Try to smooth things out inside so that you have a place where you feel comfortable before you deal with the thought.

In the course of developing the concentration, you also find that you’re actually getting quicker about seeing little signals in the mind that you might have

missed otherwise. Why is that? Because when the mind leaves the concentration, it's not like it just suddenly goes off without any preparation at all. There will be little signals before it's about ready to go. It's just a little bit bored with the meditation or a little bit dissatisfied, or your focus isn't as strong as it was before. It's not fully with the object. Those are signs that things are going to get loose and that, as soon as the mind can, it's going to slip off. It's already made the decision. You want to get quicker and quicker at seeing that.

So when you develop these abilities with the concentration, you want to have a sense of feeling at home here, feeling unthreatened by the present moment and being quicker in seeing the signs that the mind sends out.

Then you can try inviting that thought in, the thought that was being blocked without knowing why, because hopefully you're able to see a little bit more clearly now. You can start taking it apart to see why it was that you felt threatened. It's in this way you gain some discernment and cut through some of the ignorance in the mind. Remember the Buddha's characterization of the meditation: not so much that you stop thinking, but you think the thoughts you want to think and you don't think the thoughts you don't want to think. Concentration gives you a place to rest the mind when it doesn't have to think. It allows for the discernment to generate the thoughts that you do want to think about and to cut through and block the thoughts that you don't, because you see they don't lead anywhere good.

At the same time, it'll give you a new sense of values as to what actually is worth thinking about and what's not worth thinking about, because there are a lot of thoughts that we think we should be thinking, or are good thoughts to think about, but as the mind gets more and more used to being still and seeing the thought all the way through as a process—where it's coming from, where it's going—you get a better sense of what really is worth thinking about. In other words, if you're going to be disturbing the ease and well-being of the concentration to think, you want the thought to be useful. You want it to serve a purpose.

So the concentration gives you a place where you can watch the process of the thought: What sparks the thought? How does it grow? Where does it lead? If you can see it's leading someplace you don't want it to go, or you don't want it to take you, the concentration gives you a place to stand so you don't have to go jumping into the thought.

Our problem is that we're like a person standing on the side of a road. Someone drives up in a car and says, "Hey. Hop in." Before we know it, we've hopped in the car. We haven't asked them, "Who are you? Where are we going?" Maybe the car looks shiny. Maybe the person looks attractive. And you're off. If

we lived our lives that way, we'd be dead by now. But that's the way we think. That's the way the thinking goes in the mind. An opportunity to think about something comes and you just jump right in. That's because the side of the road is not a good place to stand.

You want to give yourself a better place to stand so that if someone wants to take you for a ride, they have to come in, they have to find you. Then you can look at them to see who they are, because you're in no great hurry to go running off anywhere. After all, you're fine where you are.

In this way, as you develop concentration, you're changing the balance of power in the mind. The stillness gets more power and the tendency to go flying off in thoughts gets weaker. And the need to hide your thoughts from yourself gets weaker, too. You're in a better position. You've got a safe place to explore these thoughts that the mind shuts off without really knowing why. And you can start taking the problem apart.

So this is what we're doing as we're meditating: two of those duties—developing and abandoning. Developing the path, abandoning everything that gets in the way. But abandoning doesn't mean just blocking out. Sometimes it means you have to look at things carefully to understand them. *Then* you can drop them—not out of fear, but out of understanding. In this way, all the duties of the noble truths start getting completed.

In other words, you begin to comprehend what was the stress that was compelling you to go after the thoughts, or compelling you to run away from them. And the more you comprehend that, the less power it has over you, the less it can block the possibility of realizing the cessation of stress, which is a different dimension entirely.

They describe the moment when you first see it as the arising of the Dhamma eye, seeing that whatever is subject to origination is subject to passing away. On the surface, it sounds pretty simple. You look around. Things are arising, passing away. You say, "What's the big deal?" But this thought occurs spontaneously in the mind only when you've seen something that doesn't arise and doesn't pass away. You see the alternative.

Where are you going to find that? In the mind—or, as the Buddha says, you touch it with the body, which means that right here where you're aware of the body, that's where you're going to find it. It's already there, but all this other stuff is in the way.

So the concentration is a process of simplifying things, clearing things out—and particularly, the thoughts that come through the mind. When you get to the point where you can think what you want to think and don't think what you

don't want to think, then you can clear everything away when necessary. And that's when the Dhamma wheel in your heart gets all of its spokes.

So look at your practice right now. Which spokes do you have already? Which spokes are you missing? Do you know the truths? Do you know the duties? Have you gotten anywhere in completing them? If your Dhamma wheel has only one spoke, it's not going to be very strong. If it has two, it can move a little bit. But the more spokes you develop, the better.

So take that symbol on the wall, take the symbol in the Buddha's talk, and get a sense of how it applies directly to what you're doing, because it gives you guidance as to what you should be doing for your own true benefit.