

Friends with the Dhamma Wheel

December 12, 2020

We just chanted the sutta on setting the wheel of Dhamma in motion, and the question sometimes arises, “Where’s the wheel?” It’s in the part where the Buddha talks about the four noble truths, the duty appropriate to each, and then the fact that he had completed each duty.

It comes as twelve permutations. In other words, you’ve got four noble truths and three levels with regard to each. Three times four is twelve. This way of setting out different variables and running them past one another, which we in English would call a table—we’d put it on a page and make it look like a table—in India, they called a wheel. You went around all the different permutations in a circle—a good image to hold in mind if you have to memorize things like this.

So what are the duties? With regard to the first noble truth, the truth of suffering—which is that suffering is basically the five clinging-aggregates—the duty is to comprehend that. That means understanding it so well that you have no more passion, aversion, or delusion around it. We don’t think that we’re passionate for suffering, but after all, the Buddha defines it as clinging or holding on.

This may explain why there’s so much scholarship that really doesn’t like the four noble truths. You get people saying the Buddha never taught the four noble truths; it was a later invention. The truths aren’t noble. They’re not really truths. People don’t like the first noble truth because the Buddha’s basically saying the things that we hold on to most dearly are the things that are actually our suffering.

But no matter what people may say, as the Buddha pointed out, these truths are real and they’re unaltering. They were true in his time. They’re true in our time. They were true in the time of the previous Buddhas. They point to the fact that if you want to put an end to suffering, you have to understand it and realize that you are passionate for your suffering. You’re deluded around your suffering. When you can realize that, that’s an attitude that’s actually noble, which is one of the reasons that this is a noble truth.

The duty with regard to the cause of suffering is to abandon it. The cause of suffering, of course, is craving: the three kinds of craving for sensuality, for becoming, and for not-becoming. The duty there is to abandon it so that the suffering it’s causing can end. In other words, the Buddha is taking a cause-and-effect approach to things. When we find ourselves suffering and we want to get rid of it, it’s like trying to get the water out of a leaky boat. As long as you don’t fix the

leak, no matter how much you bail the water out, the water's going to keep coming in, coming in. The leak there, of course, is the craving. Patch the leak and then you can bail all the water out: no problem.

Usually, we tend to focus on the suffering, say we don't like it, and try to get rid of it. But we've got to comprehend it first. What we get rid of is the craving. And here again, there's a problem because craving is our friend. As the Buddha said, it's been our companion since who knows when. We have to realize that it's a false friend.

The third noble truth, the cessation of suffering, is basically the ending of that craving—dispassion for the craving. In other words, the third noble truth is basically the performance of the duty for the second noble truth. You develop dispassion for the craving. You let it go. There's no more passion left for it at all. *Nirodho*: It ceases. *Cāgo*: You give it up. *Mutti*: It's freed, an interesting idea. You've got your craving trapped, and you have to free it. *Anālayo*: You have no more nostalgia around it.

The duty here is to realize the cessation of suffering. You do that by performing the duty for the path, which is to develop it. The path, of course, is the noble eightfold path, starting with right view and ending with right concentration—basically, virtue, concentration, and discernment. You develop that. That's what you work on. That, of the noble truths, is the one that you have to develop passion for. The other three duties all start with dispassion. But with this one, you first have to be passionate for it to develop it—up to a point. When you've completed it and it's done its work, that's when you let it go.

Think of the Buddha's image of a raft. You make your raft, you take it across the river to the far shore, and then you leave it and go on your way. We're working on it right now. Now some day, this concentration you're developing, you're going to have to give up. But before you give it up, it's going to have to do its work to strengthen your discernment, to strengthen your virtue, and give you a good, solid place to hold on to as you cross the river. You can look at all the other things you have to be dispassionate for and deal with them from a solid foundation—the sense of well-being that comes when the mind can settle down and really be absorbed in the breath.

It's only when you're really solidly here, and those other things begin to fade into the background—all the things that would pull you away from right here—that you can look at this state. You see that this, too, is made up of aggregates just like suffering. And there is a certain amount of clinging as you develop it. That's when you can start developing dispassion for the path.

In Ajaan Mun's words, all four noble truths become one, and there's one duty, which is just to let go. But before you reach that point, you have to see them as four truths and realize that they have their separate duties. It's when you've completed the duties that you're awakened. That was the Buddha's insight. He completed the duties for all of these things and, as he said, once he completed that, then he could say that he was fully awakened.

What it all comes down to is looking at the principle of causality and applying it to the problem of suffering. It's pretty simple and it's basic. That's why it's such a noble truth—because it's so basically true. It requires that you admit causality, admit your role in causing the suffering and in being deluded about your own suffering.

We have that phrase in another one of our chants, “those who don't discern suffering.” People sometimes wonder how you can say that anyone doesn't discern suffering; everybody knows they suffer. Well, they may know they suffer, but they don't know why. They don't really know what the suffering is. They see it and they run away. They see it and they push it away. They don't stop to really look at it. They want to blame it on somebody else, something outside. But when you see that the cause is inside and are willing to admit that, then you can do something about it.

You have to submit yourself to this principle of causality, but then it opens possibilities. It's like being friends with causality. When you deal with a friend, there are things you have to put up with. You can't design all your friends the way you want them. But when you admit that the friend has certain strengths and certain weaknesses, then you can benefit from the friendship. And it's the same here. Once you understand the principles of causality and how they apply to suffering, then you can use them to do something about the suffering. You benefit from them.

So as meditators, it's wise not to listen to those scholars who really object to the four noble truths—who want to redesign the four noble truths to the point where there's nothing left before they realize they're not taking advantage of the friendship that those four noble truths offer. Here's a way to cure your suffering. It'll require doing things that may not be easy to begin with, but you find that you really do benefit.

So take a friendly attitude toward the Dhamma wheel and look at the Dhamma wheel inside you. You've got all the four noble truths. They're right there. They're all true. They're not hidden. We may not look at them. We may not understand them. But they're all there, and to really comprehend them is simply a matter of performing the duties. How well do you understand the duties? How

well have you mastered the duties? That's what we do on the path. As we develop our mastery, we develop our understanding so that we can perform the duties well.

Look at the Dhamma wheel inside you. How many spokes does it have? The complete Dhamma wheel has twelve spokes, although in the representations of the Dhamma wheel from ancient India, it has many spokes. That was probably their way of showing that the wheel is moving. As the texts say, once it's been put into motion, nobody can stop it. So make sure it's moving in your heart. When you're on good terms with it, it has an awful lot to offer you.