The Wheel of Dhamma

March, 2001

When you meditate, you’ve got to have principles in your meditation. Otherwise, you just flounder around. You have no idea where you’re going, what you’re doing. The principles come down to the Buddha’s first teaching, the Dharma Wheel. This forms the basis for everything else that he taught. So when you look at the Dharma Wheel up on the wall there, try to remember what it stands for and how it applies to you. It’s not just a wheel on the wall. It’s supposed to refer to some truths in the mind. In the Buddha’s first sermon, the Dharma Wheel, which part of the sermon is the wheel? It’s the part where he talks about the Four Noble Truths and the duties appropriate to each. And that’s it. Those are the big issues in our practice. Our problem is that we tend to bring other issues in as well, and forget the basic ones that are really important, that really get results. The Four Truths stress its cause, its cessation, and the path to its cessation. Those aren’t just abstract principles. It’s a way of dividing up the pie of your experience. What you’ve got right here, there’s part of it that’s stressful, there’s part of it that’s craving, and there’s part of it that’s the things you can do that would bring about the end of that stress, bring about the end of that craving. And buried in there is a cessation of stress. So one thing we have to do is learn how to ferret these things out. Once you’ve got them ferreted out, then we figure out what we’ve got to do with them. Like wherever there’s stress, the Buddha says to know it, to comprehend it. Now, to comprehend it, that means the mind has to be in a position where it’s not afraid of it. Because the major stress that we run into in meditation, of course, is pain. We sit here and after a while this part of the body aches, the legs begin to hurt, sometimes your back hurts, or you may come in here and you’re not feeling too well. And many times we sit here thinking, “What can we do to make the pain go away?” Well, that’s not following the duty with regard to pain or the task with regard to pain. The task is to comprehend it, which means that the mind has to be in a position where it’s willing to just comprehend the pain without any other motives getting mixed in. This is where the fourth truth comes in. You’ve got to develop the path. In particular, you’ve got to develop your powers of mindfulness and concentration. If your concentration isn’t up to the task, then no matter how much you try to comprehend stress, it just won’t work. It’s like aiming with a gun. No matter how good your eyesight is, if your hand isn’t steady, if the hand holding the gun isn’t steady, you’re never going to be able to hit the target. Or if you do hit the target, it’s going to be hit or miss. What you need is real steadiness of mind. So what do you do? You’re sitting here and there’s a pain in your leg. You don’t focus on the pain. You focus any place else where there isn’t pain. In other words, as long as you’re not up to fighting it off, then don’t get involved with it. Just let the pain be in the leg. Remind yourself that the pain has no intention to harm you or hurt you. It’s just something that’s there. If you get involved with it, it’s going to be troublesome. If you don’t get involved with it, it’s just going to be there in the leg. So you focus on another part of the body. It’s a place where you can develop your powers of concentration, develop your powers of mindfulness. Work with the breath so you have a comfortable spot, and work on focusing on that and ignoring the pain. It’s a very important lesson in concentration. It’s learning how to ignore other things that are irrelevant to what you’re doing. Once you have that sense of a base inside, a place where the breath is comfortable, where the mind is comfortable, then you can think of letting that sense of comfort spread from that spot. You don’t have to move your attention from that spot. Just think of the sense of comfort radiating out from there, down through the body. You’ll see that it tends to go on. There are also kind of channels in there, like the channels you see in a church. It’s a Chinese acupuncturist model. Once you tap into this sense of comfort at one spot, you can let it flow out through other parts of the body. Then in case there’s a pain, say in your knee, you think of the comfortable breath just flowing out past the knee, down through the foot, and out. If it’s in your shoulder, think of it going down through the shoulder and out the arm. In other words, you take the sense of comfort as your base and use that to let it flow. Sometimes you find that the pain actually goes away, that it was just a breath. It was a pain that was caused by a problem with the energy flow in the body. When the energy flow is right, then it’s gone. But you notice that other kinds of pain, if they don’t go away, well, it doesn’t really matter because you’ve got a good, solid place for the mind. Then you find that as you do this, you develop more and more confidence, and you feel less and less afraid of the pain. You feel you can manage it. When the mind is in that state, then it’s ready to take on the pain. You really look at it simply with the purpose of comprehending it. Whether it goes away or not doesn’t matter. That’s when you can really perform one of the tasks appropriate to the noble path, the noble truth. You just comprehend the pain. Otherwise, if you haven’t gotten to that point yet, you focus on the pain. How can I make this pain go away? Well, that desire to make it go away is part of the origination of stress. It just piles more problems on top of things. So you’ve got to get the mind in a position of strength where its motivation is just to comprehend the pain, to take it apart, to analyze it, to understand how it comes, how it goes. All of this when you’ve got a good, solid base of concentration. If the concentration isn’t solid enough yet, no matter how much you try to analyze the pain, things just won’t separate out. It’s like having a piece of tar stuck to your fingers. Well, you use another finger to take it off. Well, that finger gets stuck. Then you use the other hand to take it off the second finger. Well, that gets stuck, too. It’s because you don’t have a good solvent yet. You’re just using the force of your mind without any real concentration, without any real discernment. When the mind is still and solid, then your discernment really cuts through things. This is just one application of the principles of the Four Noble Truths, that Dharma Wheel. What the Buddha had was the Four Noble Truths, and each truth had three levels of knowledge. One was just knowing what the truth was. The second was knowing the task appropriate to it. And then the third was knowing that the task was done. So when you get all twelve spokes in this wheel, they worked it out as two different variables, and you work out all the permutations. Back in the time of the Buddha, it was called a wheel. You’ve got lots of the wheels, say, in the Vinaya, where you have a particular type of action, then you put together with different kinds of intentions, and then different kinds of results. And they say, “Well, if you do this with this intention, you get that result. This is the offense.” And he just goes on down every permutation. That’s called a wheel. In the Buddha’s first sermon, the wheel is the Four Noble Truths and the three levels of knowledge appropriate to them. And he said that when he had all twelve types of knowledge, that was what constituted awakening. And that teaching forms the basis for everything else that he taught. The whole issue of skillfulness comes in here. After all, the Four Noble Truths are related to the issue of skillful cause, skillful result, unskillful cause, unskillful result. So the issues here are, how skillfully are you managing your thoughts, your words, and your deeds? Those are the big issues. Those are the big issues in the practice. We keep coming back to this issue of skill, which means both understanding and then understanding things in terms of the Four Noble Truths and learning to perform the tasks appropriate to each. So when you run across an impasse in your practice, just stop and think, “Okay, what do I have here? Is it stress? Is it craving? Is it an element of the path?” Then remind yourself of what the appropriate task is. Now, you find, though, that you can’t do one task appropriately without doing the other ones. In other words, you can’t really comprehend stress unless you’ve developed good powers of mindfulness and concentration. You can’t let go of craving until you’ve understood stress. So these things are all connected. And even though it seems very difficult, rather abstract, it’s a good framework to have in mind, because when questions come up in the practice, ask yourself, “Well, exactly which of these four categories does that question fall into?” Once you know the category, then you know how you’re going to go about finding your answer. So you want to keep this Dharma Wheel in mind, because it helps sort out a lot of the problems in the practice. And it keeps you on track so your mind doesn’t wander off in useless inquiries, useless questions. It helps you sort out which questions are the ones that are worth following up, which ones are the ones that are worth just putting aside. It cuts through a lot of the undue pressure in the mind, and cuts away a lot of the burdens as well.

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