Wheel of Dharma, The

October 27, 2004

The passage we chanted just now was the Buddha’s first sermon, called “Setting the Wheel of Dharma in Motion.” The Wheel, there, was that passage where we chanted the Four Noble Truths together with what they call the three levels of knowledge with regard to each of them. One is knowing the truth. The second was knowing the duty or the task appropriate to the truth. And then the third was knowing that the task was done. In the case of the first truth, suffering, the task is to comprehend it. Comprehending means understanding something to the point where you can finally let it go. The second noble truth, which is the cause of suffering, is three forms of craving. Craving for sensuality, craving for becoming, which means craving the kind of worlds that the mind creates, and craving for no becoming. In other words, when something has been created, you don’t want it to change. Or if you have something that you don’t like, you want it to go away and not have anything come back. Those events in the mind should be abandoned, those kinds of cravings. That’s the duty or the task of that noble truth. The third one is the cessation of suffering, which is the abandoning of that craving. It’s interesting that the task of the second one is the third truth. And there’s a task that doubles on top of that, which is that you should realize it. In other words, you be alert while you’re letting go. So many times we let go of craving in the mind simply to grab another one, and we’re kind of blurry about what we’re doing. So our duty is that when we let go of craving, we should notice that, watch it, realize what’s happening. And then the fourth truth, which is the path to the end of suffering, is the eightfold path. The duty there is to develop it. So you’ve got four truths, three levels of knowledge, appropriate for you. Four times three is twelve. That’s why the Dharma wheel up there has twelve spokes. That’s the wheel that the Buddha set rolling. What this means is that you look into those twelve spokes and you can find the whole teaching. What we’re doing right now, practicing meditation, that’s part of the path. We’re developing insight, we’re developing concentration, so that we can comprehend suffering, we can comprehend stress. And we can see why it’s coming. All these truths are based on a couple of assumptions. One is the desire for happiness. This is why the Buddha focused his teachings on the issue of suffering, because suffering is a big issue for anyone who’s really serious about happiness. Actually, it’s a big issue for anybody, because most people should be serious about happiness. And yet, if you look at the way most people lead their lives, it’s as if they really didn’t care. They’re willing to take somebody else’s word for what works, without really looking into it on their own. Which is why so many people lead miserable lives, even though they want to be happy. But the fact that the Buddha focused on the issue of suffering, putting an end to suffering, shows that his underlying motivation is one of goodwill, the desire for happiness, both for himself and for all the beings who are ready to listen to his teaching. The second underlying fact is the teaching on action, or karma, that what you do really does make a difference. It really does shape your life. And the skillfulness of your actions is going to determine how much happiness or how much misery you’re going to meet in life. This, too, underlies what we’re doing right now. We’re not sitting here waiting for happiness to come whack us upside the head, or for an awakening to come and appear like a little light inside the mind from someplace outside. It comes from doing things. That’s what the path is all about. And it comes from making choices. Like right now, we’ve decided to focus on the breath. You want to maintain that intention throughout the hour, which means you’re going to be making little choices all through the hour. Because it’s not the case that once you’ve decided you’re going to stay here, all other intentions, all other possibilities are going to clear out and come back in an hour’s time. Things will keep popping up. Think about it. Think about this. Think about that. How about this? How about that? I’m getting bored with this. Let’s go someplace else. All these little voices in the mind, it’s like you’ve got a committee there. And not everybody in the committee has been won over by the agenda for the hour. So, especially in the beginning, you may find it hard to stick with your intention. But the more the mind is able to settle down and be still, the more clearly you’ll see those alternative intentions. And once you can see them clearly, then you can do something about them, or at least clearly make the choice that you’re not going to follow them. This is easier when the breath is comfortable, which is why as soon as you’re able to gain a spot in the body where you can clearly observe that now the breath is coming in, now the breath is going out, you can gauge that spot. Is it comfortable? Is it comfortable all the way through the breath, or does it seem to get a little bit uncomfortable towards the end? If it’s uncomfortable towards the end, then you can change it, make it a little bit shorter. Or if it seems too short, you can make it longer. This is an area where you have choice. The breath responds very well to your decision to make it longer or shorter. Your leg won’t grow longer or shorter in an instant if you want it to be longer or shorter. Your nose won’t grow longer or shorter if you want it to in an instant. But your breath will. It’s very responsive. And the more attention you pay to it, the more you find that there’s a lot of potential in there for getting extremely comfortable. Because once you’ve got that one spot that feels good, you can think of the comfort that comes from that spot spreading throughout the body. Up, down, and around. You can think of the whole body breathing in, the whole body breathing out. If that’s too much to take on at any one time, you can go through the body, section by section, watching each section as you breathe in, as you breathe out, noticing if there’s any tension or tightness, and releasing it if there is tension. Breathing through it and then moving on to the next section, however you decide to divide up the body. In whatever order you want to explore it, you can go through the body several times. Each time you go through it, you find you’re more sensitive to patterns of tension that you may not have noticed or you may have taken for granted the first time around. Eventually, you will be able to settle down in one spot and just let your awareness spread out to fill the whole body, knowing that now the whole body’s breathing in. The whole body’s breathing out. You’re aware of the whole body, from the top of the head down to the tips of the toes. You can get most, if not all, the body to feel really good as you breathe in and breathe out. This makes it a lot easier to stay with the breath. It becomes a lot more interesting and satisfying than simply forcing yourself to stick with the in-breath or the out-breath, no matter what it’s like. You’ve got some play here. It’s a way of showing goodwill for yourself and becoming more and more sensitive to that principle of action, that you do have choices and your choices make a difference. You can choose to sit here with a miserable breath and see what happens, or you can choose to sit here with a very comfortable one. It’s a lot easier to stay with it when it’s comfortable. The only drawback is if you let it get comfortable and you don’t start expanding the range of your awareness, you’re going to drift off. But if you’re very clearly aware of the whole body as you breathe in, the whole body as you breathe out, your awareness of the present moment gets a lot more solid. So you’re operating on those two basic assumptions that underlie the Four Noble Truths. One is the aspiration for happiness, and the second is the realization that it’s going to depend on the choices you make. As the mind gets more quiet, you begin to see there are layers and layers of choices that are made all the time. A lot of times they’re lost in the static. It’s like a radio station that hasn’t been tuned properly. You get this basic signal, but a lot is missing. It’s lost in the static. When you get precisely on the frequency, you begin to hear a lot more. It’s the same with the mind. A lot of choices that were hidden in the static suddenly become clear, and you’re better positioned to decide if you want to follow through with that choice or not. Is it going to lead to happiness or is it going to lead to suffering? That’s something you can also see. So what we’re doing falls right in those twelve spokes of the dharma wheel. We’re developing factors of the path, and we’re beginning to see where there’s stress in the breath. And when there’s stress, you can change it, change the way you’re breathing, so that you’re operating less on craving and more on knowledge, which is the replacement for craving. We might put another way. It takes your desire for happiness, which is a kind of craving, but it’s a skillful craving, if you approach it from the point of view of one genuine goodwill, the desire for long-term rather than simply short-term happiness. And it’s based on the realization that your choices are going to make all the difference in the world, because those four truths are based on your choices. Essentially, in the principle of action writ large, actions of the mind can either lead to stress and suffering, if they’re imbued with craving, or if they’re imbued with the knowledge, the mindfulness, the concentration that comes from following the path, the knowledge that comes from virtue. We tend to think of virtue simply as rules to follow. But why do you follow the rules? Because they give you a lot of insight into your mind, in addition to creating better circumstances for the practice. When you make up your mind that you’re going to follow the precepts, say, against lying, you suddenly become a lot more alert to issues of ways you fudge the truth. So you’ve got to be mindful of the precept and alert to what you’re doing to make sure that you don’t break it. And you have to become more discerning in how to say things so that you’re not saying any untruths, but you don’t reveal anything that you don’t really want to reveal, say, if it’s going to be harmful. All that requires a lot more alertness, a lot more ingenuity. So the precepts are there to make you more aware, to make you more knowledgeable about what’s happening in your life, and also, again, to sensitize yourself to the issue of the choices you’re making. Concentration, when you really settle down and are still, you can see things in a lot more detail than you could when you were simply rushing around, noting this, noting that, noting that, noting this, back and forth. You sit still and you can be very clear, because, one, you have a point of reference that doesn’t move, so even the slightest movements in other parts of the mind become apparent. And when you’re still, you can see things in a lot more detail than you could when you were simply rushing around. And discernment, of course, is what sees through all the mind’s subterfuges, even the most extremely subtle ones. So we’re here to fight craving with knowledge. We’re here to overcome suffering with knowledge. That knowledge comes from, one, taking our desire for happiness really seriously, not in the sense of being grim, but realizing that it’s important. It should have top priority. And second, realizing the principle of action, how important our choices are. So when the choices come up in the course of the hour, well, you’ve done enough breath, let’s think about this. Let’s think about tomorrow’s meal. Let’s think about where we’re going tomorrow, what I’m going to do, what I did today. Realize you’ve got the choice not to follow those things. If you’ve found that you’ve gotten off course, you have the choice to come right back. In other words, learn how to exercise your power of choice clearly, alertly, and you find that you get more and more skilled at sticking with the things you want to stick with, dropping the things you want to drop, making choices that really do lead to happiness.

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