Wheel of Dhamma, The

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Buddha started his teaching career with the Four Noble Truths. Like we chanted just now in the Dhammacakka, the Wheel of Dhamma, or setting the Wheel of Dhamma in motion, the truths here are not just statements about reality. They’re a guide, a guide of how to look at things. You can look at reality in all kinds of ways. You can look at your experiences in all kinds of ways. But the Buddha pointed out that the best way to do it, for the purpose of overcoming, putting an end to suffering, are these Four Truths, seeing things as stress or suffering and its cause, the path to its cessation and its cessation. So the first thing is to learn how to identify exactly what in your experience is stress and what you’re doing to cause it. There are actually two kinds of stress. There’s just the plain old stress of things in and of themselves. But then there’s also the stress of clinging, and that’s caused by craving. That’s the kind of stress you can do something about. So you have to look at your craving. Exactly where is that causing stress? Many times it’s easier to see the stress than it is to see the craving. So you want to learn how to look for stress and then see what comes along with it. You also notice other times when it’s absent. What kind of mental state goes along with that? You have that mental state that leads to the absence of the end of stress. That’s the path. And each of these Four Truths has a duty. Stress is to be comprehended. Its cause is to be abandoned. The ending of stress is to be realized, and the path is to be developed. And then what rounds off the Wheel of Dhamma is realizing that you’ve completed all of these tasks. There’s that passage where he says, when he saw it with the Four Noble Truths, three levels of knowledge, twelve permutations, four times three, knowing the truth, knowing the duty appropriate to the truth, and then knowing that you’ve completed it. That’s when that Dhamma Wheel over on the wall has twelve spokes. It all sounds very basic, very simple. What’s radical about it is that Bodhi uses this teaching to undercut all the kinds of things, like theories about who you are. I was just reading the other day that the end of stress and suffering is when you see who you truly are. The Buddha never said that. In fact, he said to avoid that question, looking for who you truly are. Instead, look to see what you’re doing to cause stress. Part of what you’re doing to cause stress is creating a sense of self out of things that really can’t provide you any true happiness. But that’s as far as he pursues the question of who you are. Just look at the sense of self that you create, see it as a creation, and learn to see it as unsatisfactory. That doesn’t provide the security that you would normally think that it would provide. And try to develop a sense of dispassion towards the things that you tend to identify with so that you can stop doing it. It’s your passion that keeps you doing it. It’s creating the stress through identifying with things or holding on to sensual desires, holding on to your views, holding on to habitual ways of doing things. So learn to look at things in terms of their activity. Self, not as a thing, but as a product of an activity, a lot of activities. When you can develop dispassion for both the product and for the activities, then you stop doing it. You stop causing stress in that particular way. Then you look at other things, other issues in life, and you begin to see them from the point of view of these four truths. You see them as activities. You ask yourself, “Is this an activity I want to do? Is this an activity I want to pursue? Or is it not?” Because some of the things you do want to pursue, if they’re part of the path, are developing virtue, developing concentration, developing discernment. You have to want to do these things. You have to use all your ingenuity in doing these things, because they’re going to take you to where you want to go. So learn to develop a desire to do these things. And keep in mind that third noble truth, too, that there is a possibility for the end of suffering. That truth is there to stretch your imagination. This is why the Buddha puts that truth ahead of the path. For most of us, that’s outside of the realm of possibilities, that there actually could be an end of suffering. We tend to live our lives within these very narrow confines. Well, this is the way the world is. You’ve got to accept it. You’ve got to accept the good with the bad. So learn how to make the most of that situation. Make the most of basically a bad situation. We go around through life with blinders like this, but the Buddha said it is possible to put an end to suffering. When he holds out that possibility, that changes the way we approach everything, all these activities we do to grasp at little bits and pieces of happiness. What can we do to change our desires to focus in that direction, change our sense of what’s possible, use our ingenuity to look for an end of suffering? It requires that we engage our entire mind, all of our activities. But always keep that possibility in mind. It’s like being lost in a forest. If you think there’s no end of the forest, everything is just more and more of the same forest, you’re not going to look for a way out. But if you’re convinced there has to be a place where you can get out of the forest and into the meadow, into places where you really want to be, then you’re going to look. And you’re going to be willing to put a lot of effort into it, finding that way out, using what little clues you have, and trying to be as observant as possible, and trying different ways out. And when you run into a dead end, don’t give up. Try looking for another way. All of this depends on that conviction. There’s got to be a way out. So always keep that possibility in mind. Without it, the practice just keeps spinning around in the same old place. It never gets out of the world. And you hear people saying, “Well, the path is the goal,” or “There really is no goal.” If you ever hear a Dhamma talk that’s like that, just turn it off. Because those are some of the most destructive teachings there are. The Buddha says there is an end to suffering, and he made the end of suffering a separate noble truth. So it’s not the same thing as the path. And the path is not an attempt to clone awakening. You hear descriptions of the awakened mind, and you think, “Well, okay, it’s equanimous, and it’s patient, so I’ll be equanimous and patient, and not try to strive, and not try to do anything, because the awakened mind doesn’t strive.” Well, the awakened mind doesn’t strive because it’s already gotten to where it wants to go. As long as you’re still on the path, you have to develop all the qualities the Buddha recommended, including desire. The desire to figure out what qualities in the mind are skillful and which ones are unskillful, so you can maximize the skillful ones and get rid of the unskillful ones and make sure the unskillful ones don’t come back. They say the awakened mind is free from desire, but to get there, you have to cultivate desire. The image that Ananda gave was of going to a park. To get to the park, you have to have the desire to go there. Once you’ve gotten there, then you don’t have any more use for that particular desire. That’s when you can give it up. Another analogy you can make is the road to the Grand Canyon. The road to the Grand Canyon doesn’t look like the Grand Canyon, but it takes you there. Or, if you follow it, you get there. It opens up into this vast space that’s not at all like the road to the Grand Canyon. So always make room in your imagination for the possibility that what the Buddha said is true. There is an end to suffering. There is a way out of the forest. And he describes the path. So you look around you—exactly what are around you looks like that path—and then follow it. Because the path is made up of things that we already have. We already have virtue to some extent, concentration to some extent, discernment to some extent, the greater or lesser extent. The question is, what can we do to develop them? How to recognize them? How to develop them? How to strengthen them? Because those are the qualities that will take us to where we want to go. It’s nothing mysterious. The teachings are all laid out there, right in the very first teaching. We have a tendency, however, to want to make them mysterious. We hear about the great abstract Buddhist teachings say about emptiness. It all sounds very paradoxical, and you can think about it for hours and days. But that’s not why the Buddha had you think about emptiness. He had you think about emptiness because it’s a way to get you to focus back on the Four Noble Truths. Emptiness, as a meditative dwelling, is appreciating when you get into a particular state of concentration, where there’s disturbance and where there’s no disturbance. The disturbances that come from an unconcentrated mind are gone in that state. Appreciate that fact. Then, as you begin to settle in, you begin to see, “Well, there still is some level of disturbance here in this state of concentration.” It’s based on the oneness built around the perception that you’re using to stay in that state. Once you can actually see that fact as it’s happening, then you let go of that particular perception, and it will be replaced by a more refined one. So you settle in there, appreciate the lack of disturbance there, and then try to sense where there still is a disturbance. Disturbance here is another word for stress. That whole process is a way of applying the Four Noble Truths to your practice of concentration. Emptiness is when things are empty of self or anything pertaining to a self. Again, the purpose of that teaching is to get you to focus on the Four Noble Truths. How is that? There’s no self there and nothing really of yours. What is arising and passing away? The Buddha says, “Focus on the Four Noble Truths.” Focus on that simply as it’s just stress arising. There’s just stress passing away. It gets you back to the Four Noble Truths again, and that gets you back to the question, “Well, what am I doing that’s causing the stress?” All of his teachings are meant to focus you right here, even his teachings about karma and rebirth. Every time he talks about karma and rebirth, he talks about the power of your actions, the power of action to shape not only future lives but just the general course of the universe. Well, where are actions being made? They’re being made right here. The story always comes back to what you’re doing right here and now, and what you can do to make it more skillful so that you’re causing less stress. Then you follow that particular lead until you get ultimately to the absolute end of stress. You’re out of the forest. So all the Buddha’s teachings, no matter how abstract or how sophisticated they may seem, all point right back here. What are you doing right here and now? And particularly, what are you doing that’s causing stress? Can you learn to stop? The Third Noble Truth is there to encourage you that, unlike all the other pursuits of the world, this is one that’s not futile. This one really takes you someplace you’ve never been to before. As the texts say, to see what you’ve never seen before, to attain what you’ve never attained before, to realize what you’ve never realized before. This particular pursuit really goes someplace. Although, technically speaking, once you get there, you realize it’s not a place, but it doesn’t matter. Once you’ve realized that what the Buddha taught really is true, there really is an end to suffering, there really is a deathless, that’s the end of all issues. So imagine that. Keep that in mind as you practice, because that’s your compass.

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