The Wheel of Dhamma

April 13, 2006

The discourse we chanted just now, setting the wheel of Dhamma in motion, was the Buddha’s first sermon. The “wheel of Dhamma” in the title refers to the passage that goes through each of the four noble truths and three levels of knowledge. The four truths are dukkha, which means suffering and stress; the second one is the cause of suffering and stress; the third is the cessation of suffering and stress; and the fourth is the path to that cessation. In other words, the Buddha here is saying that suffering or stress are problems that can be solved. In fact, the four truths have often been compared to the way medicine was taught back in India. First you had the symptoms of the disease, and then you explained the cause, and then you explained the possibility of putting an end to the disease, and then finally setting out the cure. The three levels of knowledge with regard to each truth are, one, just knowing what to do, knowing what the truth is, and two, knowing what the duty with regard to that truth is. These aren’t just truths that you talk about; they’re things that you actually have to work with. The third level of knowledge is knowing that you’ve completed the duty. In other words, in terms of the first noble truth, the truth of suffering and stress, the duty is to comprehend it. First you know that this is suffering, this is stress, and then you know what you’ve got to do about it. This is probably the most interesting of all the duties. You have to comprehend it. Our most common attitude towards stress and pain is that we want to get rid of it. But that’s not the task. The task is to comprehend it. As for the cause of stress, the duty is to abandon it. The cessation, your duty is to realize it. And as for the path, the duty is to develop it. These duties, or tasks, work together. In other words, as you develop the path, you find that you do start comprehending stress more and more, and you’re letting go more and more of the causes of stress. This is particularly clear with the relationship between the first truth and the fourth. If you’re going to comprehend stress, you have to put the mind in a position where it’s willing to comprehend it. Because all too often, when stress, suffering, pain come, we feel trapped. And when you feel trapped, you just struggle. You try to push the stress away, or try to get out of the stress one way or the other, and oftentimes just make the problem worse. The idea, though, of just sitting there and trying to comprehend it sounds threatening. So what you’ve got to do is to give yourself a place to stand so that you’re not immediately swamped or overwhelmed by the stress of pain or suffering when it comes. This is why you practice concentration, to give the mind a place to stay, a more secure foundation. In other words, when pain comes up, either physical pain or mental pain, you don’t just go jumping right into it. You try to find the part of the body, try to find the part of the mind that’s not totally overwhelmed. At the very least, remind yourself, say, when stress comes into the mind, at least you have awareness. The stress is an object of awareness. The awareness and its object can be two separate things. But it often also helps to have a place in the body where you can go that’s not influenced by the stress, not influenced by the pain. So try to go there and learn to resist the temptation to go jumping back in, because our bodies are wired in such a way that as soon as there’s any problem on the horizon, any problem coming up on the radar screen, zap, that’s where we go. And it goes against our habitual behavior to not go. We do not immediately go there. But once you go there, you get sucked in. That doesn’t help. So you’ve got to remind yourself, you do have a separate place. You do have another place to stand. Try to make the breath as comfortable as you can in whatever part of the body. Find some part of the body that you can consciously keep relaxed and stay there. And then just practice staying there. And whatever ideas come up that would pull you back into the stress or the suffering, learn to say no to them. In other words, the stress doesn’t suck you in. You’re the one who goes sucking yourself into the stress. So just learn how to say, “No, no, no thanks. No thanks. Don’t make it a nasty note. Just no thanks. No need to go there.” Just try to stay as securely and solidly as you can with that spot, with the awareness of that spot, wherever it may be in the body. Make that your foundation. Once that foundation is solid, then you can start looking into the stress. And not feel so overwhelmed by it, because you always know that you have a place to go when it gets really bad. And this is the point where you actually can start trying to comprehend the stress. Actually, you’ve already learned something about it in the course of saying no. You’ve realized exactly what it was in the mind that would pull you in. That’s the beginning of the comprehension. That’s the Buddha’s analysis of stress that we chanted just now. He goes through all the different things about aging, illness, and death—not getting what you want, getting things you don’t want, being separated from what you love, being conjoined with things you don’t love, like cobwebs in the room. The analysis eventually comes down to something what he calls the five aggregates. There’s form, feeling, perception, fabrication, and consciousness. He says we suffer because we cling to these things. Form is the form, any physical form. It can be the form of your own body, the form of things that you’re attached to, items that you like, people you like. Feeling is just registering the sensation of pleasure or pain. It can be physical pleasure and pain, mental pleasure and pain, or times when there is neither pleasure nor pain, but we’re talking about the feeling tone. These are things we really like to hold onto. The problem is, though, when you start holding onto pleasure, pleasure turns into something else, and you find yourself holding onto pain. Then there’s perception. That’s the mental labels you apply to things, the names you have for things, so that you recognize them when you see them. Then you begin to realize that the perception is not an automatic part of your awareness. In other words, items don’t come with their names attached. You apply the name. This is especially true inside the body, where we don’t have a very good vocabulary in English for describing how the body feels from the inside out, how awareness feels from the inside. Then there’s fabrication, which is the mind’s habit of making thoughts, putting things together. There’s an intentional element here. Finally, there’s consciousness, which is the basic awareness of things at the six senses. We suffer because we cling to these things. The word “clinging” in some places is translated as “desire” and “passion.” The word “clinging” also in Pali means “sustenance.” In other words, you’re feeding on these things. You’re trying to get happiness out of them. You just can’t provide the happiness that you want. This is why you suffer. You cling to them either because you find them sensually attractive or because you don’t. What’s interesting about these aggregates is that they’re actually activities. Another way of clinging to them is believing that if you do something, you’re actually going to do things in a certain way that, in and of itself, is going to constitute happiness. It’s called clinging to precepts and practices. There’s clinging to views, and then there’s clinging to ideas about the Self. You identify with these things. So when you find yourself suffering, try to analyze the suffering in terms of, one, what the objects are that you’re clinging to, and then look for the clinging. Are you clinging to these things because you want sensual pleasure out of them, because you have particular views about them, or are you just saying that this is me and this is mine? Are you clinging in the sense of having habitual ways of behavior that are really not appropriate? This is what you look for. Where is the clinging? What kind of clinging is it? What are you clinging to? This is the way the Buddha has you analyze suffering. In terms of the practice, the important point is to have a place where you can stand, where you’re not getting sucked into the suffering, so you find yourself in the mood, finally, that you really do want to comprehend it. Because if you sit there trying to analyze it, but thinking, “How can I get rid of this? How can I get rid of this?” You can’t really analyze it. The other agenda gets too strong. But if you’re in a position where you don’t feel threatened by it, you can say, “Okay, let’s just sit here with this for a while and watch it to see where the clinging is. What’s the object of the clinging? What kind of clinging is it?” Once you see that the clinging is really causing the suffering, then you let go. Because you realize you have that option. You don’t have to hold on. Because the Buddha is giving you better things to hold on to. You hold on to your state of concentration. You hold on to that sense of being the observer, awareness itself. In other words, you learn to replace unskillful attachments with more skillful ones. Eventually, you’re going to have to let go of the skillful ones, but that doesn’t mean that you don’t hold on tight. In the meantime, it’s like climbing a ladder. You hold on to one rung, knowing that you’re going to have to let go of it eventually, because you’re going to go to a higher rung. Once you’ve grasped onto the higher rung, then you can let go of the lower one. So what we’re doing right now is trying to find this sense of foundation inside where the mind can be still, where it feels secure and unthreatened. This is a really important attachment to develop. As long as you keep in mind the fact that eventually you’re going to have to let go. But you’re going to let go because you get something better. Finally, you can climb the ladder all the way to the roof. You’re up there. You don’t need to hold on to the ladder anymore. Then you can be totally unattached. But in the meantime, keep finding better things to hold on to. You’ve got the choice. This is why we have meditation instructions, to make you realize that there are more ways of approaching just the bare facts of awareness, the bare facts of experience, than you might have thought. When you follow the Buddha’s analysis of experience, you realize how much you shape things. There’s a lot that’s shaped by the past, but there’s also an awful lot that’s shaped by what you’re doing, your intentions, right here in the present moment. So he’s giving you alternative ways of intending, alternative ways of putting new input in in the present moment, expanding your range of skills, expanding your imagination as to what you can do. So when you find that there’s suffering, you’re not just stuck there. You can pull yourself out. If it’s really strong, at the very least you’ve got a place to hold on to. So that you can weather the storm until the storm passes. When your foundation is more secure and you’re in a position where you can analyze things, he gives you ways of looking at suffering, taking it apart. So it’s not just one big mass. You see it as individual actions. You see the clinging, that feeling of clinging. When the Buddha motivates those actions, you see that the clinging is unnecessary. That’s when you can come to realize the end of suffering. So keep that Wheel of Dhamma in mind. There’s good reason why the Buddha made the Wheel of Dhamma. It’s the topic of his first talk. The Wheel, by the way, is an old Indian philosophy. If you had two sets of variables and you just went through all the permutations of the variables, that was called a Wheel. So just like just now, you know the truth, you know the duty with regard to the truth, and it goes through each of the truths, one by one. You know that this is the truth of suffering, the truth of suffering is to be comprehended, and the truth of suffering has been comprehended, and so on. That’s the Wheel. That’s why the wheel over there on the wall has twelve spokes, four times three. Keep that Wheel in mind, because everything in the practice, everything in the path, finds its place in that Wheel.

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