The Wheel of Dhamma

June 4, 2007

The sutta we chanted just now is the Buddha’s first discourse. It’s called “Setting the Wheel of Dhamma in Motion.” Did you see the wheel in the discourse? It turns out that the term “wheel” is a technical term. Back in the Buddha’s time, in philosophical texts or in legal texts, when they were going over various permutations—say they put two variables against each other and then go through all the permutations of those variables—that was called a wheel. The wheel in the discourse, as that passes, is where the Buddha talks about the realization that this is suffering. This noble truth of suffering is to be comprehended, and then realizing that he had comprehended that noble truth of suffering. So on down with the cause of suffering, the cessation of suffering, and the path to the cessation. You’ve got four noble truths and there were three levels of knowledge with regard to each truth. First, knowing the truth. Second, knowing the duty appropriate to that truth. And then finally, knowing that he totally completed the duty. He said once he had completed that whole wheel, only then would he claim full awakening. This is why the Dhamma wheel on the side of the wall here has twelve spokes. Four noble truths, three levels of knowledge. Four times three is twelve. There’s a good reason why the Buddha started his teaching with the four noble truths and the duties appropriate to them, because that’s the whole framework of our practice. It may sound abstract. You may wonder, “Why are there four noble truths? Why aren’t there five or six or three?” They’re not truths about something so much as they are categories of how you think. When something happens in your life, you want to think in these terms if you want to put an end to suffering. And the reason there are four of them is because it comes down to two other variables. On the one hand, there’s suffering and lack of suffering, and then there’s cause and effect. The things you do that lead to suffering, then the things you can do that lead away from suffering. That’s the basic framework. That’s why there are four truths. And then from there you go on to the duties with regard to each of those. Suffering is something you want to comprehend. For the most part, we don’t like to comprehend it. We want to run away from it. We want to snuff it out. We don’t want to take the time to really look at it, to understand it. And because we don’t understand it, we don’t see its cause. When we don’t see the cause, there’s no way we’re going to be able to abandon the cause. So your first duty there is to try to understand when there’s suffering in the mind. It can be anything from really heavy suffering to just simple stress. What is it? How does it come? How does it go? When you see it come, when you see it go, what else comes and goes along with it? That’s when you begin to catch sight of the cause. Again, the cause is not something outside. It’s something that’s going on inside in the mind, a craving. Specifically, there are three types of craving. One is craving for sensual desire. Notice, it’s not so much sensual objects as we like sensual desire. We really like the rush that comes with desiring something. Then there’s the desire to be something, to give rise to something. Then there’s the desire to destroy things that are there. The Buddha is not saying that all desire is bad. In fact, there’s a kind of desire that’s part of the path. But these three kinds of craving, they do really cause stress and suffering in the mind. When you can watch the stress and suffering come and go, then you begin to notice these things coming and going. Your duty here is to abandon them. The best way to see these things is to develop the path. That’s the fourth truth. He puts it after the third truth. The third truth, the cessation of suffering, is to remind you that it is possible to put an end to suffering. What we’re trying to do here is to realize that truth. But to do that, you have to work on the path. That’s the duty with regard to the path elements, is to develop them when concentration hits the mind. Sometimes it seems to come without your knowing how it came, but you want to try to develop it. To do that, you have to understand that, too. You have to watch that come and go. But not just passively. When it comes, you want to understand why it’s coming so that you can foster those causes again. Make it something you can master, something you can rely on more and more consistently. So those are the truths and the duties with regard to the truth, each of them. Now, how does this relate to our meditation? It’s very closely related to meditation. When you’re focusing on the breath, the very first question is, “Is the breath comfortable or not?” That’s asking you to see, “When does the comfort come? When does it go?” In what ways, what kind of desire to make it comfortable is actually going to make it less comfortable? In what ways do you focus the desire to make it comfortable and work with that desire so that it actually does get results? That’s where the skill comes in in the practice, learning to distinguish between these things. Right at the very start, just in simple areas of the breath, that same principle carries you through all the way. In fact, the principle starts even before you sit down and meditate. The Buddha once said that wisdom starts with the question, “What, when I do it, will lead to my long-term harm and suffering? What, when I do it, will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?” That’s getting you to think in terms of the Four Noble Truths right there, noticing that what you do is going to be a cause, and it can lead either to harm and suffering or to welfare and happiness. That’s got the framework of the Four Noble Truths right there. The focus, again, is on what you’re doing and the results that you’re getting. When the Buddha first taught his son, that was the first teaching he gave him. Look at your actions and see where results you’re actually getting. If you see that you’re getting bad results, well, don’t repeat that action again. If you see that you’ve gotten good results, take pride in the fact that you’re training. You’re progressing in the training. The progress here means that you get more and more sensitive to the results that you’re getting and the actions and the connection between those results and the causes that actually brought them about. So what starts out? Sometimes something like a really basic principle that you teach a child is getting you already on the right path. You just want to carry it through consistently. It’s like when the mind attains a state of concentration. The first thing you realize is, “Okay, what is concentration? Where does it fit on this map?” Well, it fits under the path. It’s something to be developed. So you try to maintain it. Try to maintain that focus as consistently as you can, that sense of ease and comfort as consistently as you can. To maintain it, you have to enjoy it. This is where the desire comes in. You have to want to do it. You have to enjoy it. So the Buddha says, “Indulge in it.” When the breath is really comfortable, don’t be afraid of liking it. Don’t be afraid of getting attached to nice states of mind, because they’re your path. Again, you don’t latch onto them as the end in and of themselves, but you do hold onto them as your path. If you let go of the path, what have you got? You’ve got nothing. That’s why you don’t want to go straying off into choiceless awareness. That doesn’t appear on the path anywhere. Because all these things you’re doing, you are making choices. You choose to stay with an object, your concentration object, and then after all, you want to watch it carefully. Because even these concentration objects are composed of those five aggregates, and as you feed on them, you’re clinging to them. You’re clinging in a skillful way, but there’s still going to be an element of stress there. You want to look for that. You look for it once you’ve really gotten solidly established in that state of concentration. You say, “Okay, where is the element of stress here?” The only way you’re going to see it is seeing it coming and going. It’s going to flicker, even in the steadiness of the concentration. Concentration is not totally steady. It’s got its ups and downs, even though they may be very subtle. But once you see them, then you notice, “Okay, there must be something I’m doing that’s different when there’s stress and when there’s not.” So you look for that. When you see what you’re doing, then you can drop it. Again, you’re learning to look at things in terms of the map of the Four Noble Truths. They’re categories for looking at things. You don’t want to go beyond that, thinking in metaphysical terms, “Is this emptiness? Is this whatever?” The only metaphysical issue the Buddha addressed is this issue of the reality of action. Action is a truth. Results are truths. The connection between them is a truth. So what you’re doing is learning how to take that principle and apply it to this big question, “Why is there suffering? Is there any way you can put an end to it?” That’s all the interpretation you want to apply to things. When you go beyond that, you’re spinning off into more and more fabrication, more and more views, clinging, more suffering. So even though there may be an element of stress in the path, you’re trying to keep it at a minimum by looking at things in these terms. Once you figure out what you’ve got—is this stress? Is this the path? Is this the cause of stress?—then you know what to do with it. The Buddha’s teachings are all very pragmatic. The Four Noble Truths are not just some sort of philosophical structure. They’re a training. They give you the framework for looking at things and judging, “Is this working or not?” So you want to apply it to every level of the path. In the very beginning, the whole question of “Is it good to be generous or is it not? Is it good to be virtuous or is it not?” Generosity and virtue are part of the path. You want to develop them. And as you develop them, you begin to see that suffering falls away. The suffering of being stingy, of having a narrow mind, of not being true to your principles. Then you see the results of your actions more and more clearly, that when you change the pattern of your actions, there’s going to be a change in your life. Then you apply that same principle to your meditation practice, and it’ll carry you all the way through. So the Four Noble Truths are not some sort of quaint aspect of the Buddha’s teachings that are not directly relevant to what you’re doing. They’re precisely what you’re doing. They’re a framework that you should be using to look at what you’re doing so you can figure out a way to cause less and less stress and suffering. That’s why the Buddha started his teaching with these truths. He said, “This is a training. These are the principles of the training. You apply this in every area.” Yes, Sariputta said one time that the Four Noble Truths encompass the entire Dhamma, and they encompass the training. They are a very practical, pragmatic teaching. So take that pragmatic approach. When something comes up in your meditation, the question is, “What can you do with this? What’s this good for? Is this stress, or is this the cause, or is this the path?” Then you apply that task appropriate to that category. When you finally get to awakening, you realize you don’t have to ask any more. No more questions, no more tasks at that moment. That’s when the truths have done what they’re supposed to do, because you’ve used them in the way they’re supposed to be used. So remember, the question always is, when something comes in your meditation, “What’s this good for? How does this fit into that framework?” Just thinking in those terms makes the path a lot clearer right there.

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