A Dhamma Map

August 19, 2008

The sutta we chanted just now, setting the wheel of Dhamma in motion, sets out a map for our practice. It points out four things we should notice. Dukkha, which can be translated as stress or suffering, its cause, the fact that it can cease, there is a cure to suffering, and then the path of practice that you actually follow to put an end to suffering and end to stress. The wheel of the Dhamma there is the part that goes through each of the four truths and describes three levels of knowledge about each truth. One, knowing what the truth is. Two, knowing what your duty is with regard to it. Now, the duty here is not something that some outside force has placed on you. Simply, if you want to find true happiness, this is what you’ve got to do. In the case of stress, you want to comprehend it. You want to be able to watch it so that you understand it to the point where you develop dispassion for it. That’s comprehending. As for the cause, once you see the cause in action, you want to let it go. The cessation of suffering is something you want to realize, and the path is something you develop. Knowing those duties, that’s the second round of knowledge. And finally, ultimately, there’s the point in your practice when you realize you’ve completed all of these duties. You’ve comprehended suffering to the point of dispassion. You’ve fully abandoned the cause, you’ve fully realized its cessation, and you’ve fully developed the path. So that’s four noble truths, three levels of knowledge for each. Then, as you notice, the passage went through each of the truths and went through each level of knowledge. That putting together of two lists like this and just working out all the permutations, in ancient India that was called a wheel. It just ticked off all the permutations of these different lists of variables. In this case, there are twelve. So that’s the Dhamma wheel. They say that in that sutta, the Buddha set the Dhamma wheel in motion, set it out into the world. The image of a wheel in motion like that is a symbol of power that the Buddha is teaching and conquering all other teachings that were available at the time. Not in the sense that it wiped them out, but it was simply better than they were. It was particularly better at putting an end to suffering, which the Buddha pointed out is the whole purpose of his teaching. So you look at that wheel and ask yourself, “Has it gained power in your life yet? Or is it just sitting there?” For it to gain power, you actually have to try to figure out which experience in the present moment corresponds to which of the four categories of the Noble Truths, and then you figure out what to do in response to whichever truth you’re focusing on. Some people think that because suffering comes first, that’s your first duty. You’ve got to comprehend suffering before you do anything else. It doesn’t work that way. Actually, at the very beginning of the sutta, the Buddha mentions the path before he mentions the issue of suffering. So the path is what you’ve got to start out with, as we’re doing right now. We’re working on the factors of concentration, which include right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration. Right effort is trying to give rise to skillful qualities and to abandon unskillful qualities that have arisen. But it’s not just that. It’s giving rise to the desire to do these things. This is the area where desire has an essential role in the path. It’s not the case that you’re going to come to the end of suffering simply by dropping desire. You learn how to use desire skillfully first. Then, once you’ve gotten to the point where you want to go, that’s when the desire is dropped, because it’s been fulfilled. So you try to generate the desire to follow this path. And for a lot of people, that’s the beginning of the big obstacle right there. They have lots of other things they would like to do in their lives. This path to the end of suffering is long and worrisome. And they may decide, “Well, I’d just rather do something else, something that gives quicker results.” Of course, the paths that give quicker results also lead to a happiness that’s quicker to fade. That’s why it’s really worthwhile to stop and think about what kind of happiness you want in life. What would you really like to have? Would you like things to just come and then turn on you? Or would you like a happiness that stays with you, a happiness that doesn’t depend on conditions, something, as the Buddha says, you can touch with your whole body? That’s the kind of happiness he states is the result of this path. So if you can think in these ways, you find yourself generating the desire to follow through with this path of developing and abandoning. So we try to develop skillful mind-states around this factor of right effort. This is what develops into right mindfulness. In right mindfulness, you take right effort. The Buddha calls it ardency in the context of mindfulness practice. And you surround it with two other mental qualities, mindfulness and alertness. Like right now, you’re mindful of the breath, i.e., you’re keeping the breath in mind. You try not to forget. So even as you breathe in and breathe out and breathe in and breathe out, and the mind says, “This is getting boring,” you say, “Nope, we’re going to stay right here. We’re not going to forget it.” And you let the mind play its usual tricks, i.e., when it wants to do something else, it’ll run a curtain down on what you’re doing. You lose your bearings, and then when the curtain goes up, you’re someplace else entirely. You’ll notice that when the mind switches from one thought to another thought, there’s going to be a moment of blanking out like that. You’ve got to prevent that if you want to develop a good, solid concentration, a good, solid state of well-being. So you’ve got to be very careful not to allow the mind to run the curtain down that way. So each time you breathe in, you remind yourself, “I’m going to stay here with the breath.” And then you’re alert to make sure that you actually are doing this. You’re alert to how the breath is going. You’re alert to how the mind is going. Otherwise, if the mind doesn’t feel comfortable with the breath, you can say, “Well, change it. Make the breath deeper. Longer. Heavier. Lighter.” See how that feels. If you don’t like that one, then you can make it shorter or shallower. See how that feels. There are lots of different ways you can breathe. So explore them. See what feels best right now. You can watch the feeling of the breath anywhere on the body. The Buddha never laid down any rules that you had to watch it here or there. He simply said, “Bring mindfulness to the four. Bring mindfulness to the four.” Which means you want to be very clear about what you’re trying to keep in mind and not let yourself forget. As you work with the breath using these three qualities—mindfulness, alertness, and ardency—they develop into right concentration. As your mindfulness is really solid, it turns into what’s called directed thought, where you just stay with thoughts about the breath. Alertness turns into evaluation, where you evaluate how the breath feels. Where is it comfortable? Where is it uncomfortable? Where can you change it if it’s uncomfortable? If it is comfortable, how do you maintain it? Try to listen to the needs of the body. What kind of breathing would feel really good right now? What kind of breathing is it hungering for? If you’re feeling tired, maybe some good, heavy breathing would feel good. If you’re feeling tense, maybe something lighter. If you’re feeling tense, think of the breath coming in and bathing the body. As it goes out, it dissolves the tension away. Then it comes in again and dissolves some more away, washing away the tension with each breath. If you find that you tend to tense up as you breathe in, notice where you’re tensing up and then tell yourself very consciously, “I’m not going to tense those muscles the next time the breath comes in.” Then you find that even though you’re not tensing them, the breath still can come in. You may have thought that the breath wouldn’t come in if you weren’t tensing them up, but then you realize that’s not the case. This is how you begin to see there’s a lot of unnecessary tension, even in just the way you breathe. Of course, that’s going to build up and have an effect. It’s going to have an effect on the body as a whole. So if you’re going to do any thinking, think about the breath. Evaluate the breath. Allow the breath to feel really good coming in, really good going out. And when there is that sensation of really good, let it spread through the body. Try to notice which areas of the body it will spread through and which areas seem to resist. You don’t have to push it against the ones that resist. Just think of it seeping through like melted butter. It will ooze through any part of the body where there’s an opening, and after a while it begins to dissolve away some of those resistant areas. You don’t have to push it. You don’t have to squeeze it. Just let it dissolve things away. Then you find that there’s a greater and greater sense of well-being that comes just sitting here breathing. The mind is willing to settle down with one object. That’s when you’ve entered right concentration, a strong sense of oneness. This is the only thing you’re thinking about, the only thing you’re interested in, the only thing you’re paying attention to. There will still be other sensations in the body, the sound of the crickets, but you don’t pay them any mind. Those things are all in the background. Remember, keep mindfulness to the fore. Keep in mind the fact that you just want to be with the breath. If there’s going to be any chatting in the mind, chat about the breath. Try to develop an interest in this energy flow in the body that keeps you alive and can keep the body healthy, if it’s allowed to be healthy, if you’re not squeezing it and forcing it in unnatural ways. So here’s something to explore, how the breath energy feels in the body right now. This is one way of getting absorbed in the meditation, playing with the breath, experimenting with the breath. And it’s in this way that you develop the factors of the path. It’s not the case that you sit here and just let everything pass away. Some people think that it’s all letting go, letting go. John Furman once said that’s common misperception. But the path also involves developing. You’re trying to develop right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration. And even little moments of right effort, right mindfulness and concentration, try to notice when they come. Even if it seems hard for the mind to settle down, it’s not going to be totally out of bounds. It’s totally resistant. There will be some moments when it does settle down and it’s clear. Treasure those moments. Try to notice how they come and then notice what you do that makes them go away. Try to understand them in this way and you find that you gain more and more control of the mind. Even though there are a lot of things in the mind you can’t control, you can make up your mind that you’re going to stay mindful right here as much as possible. And the more you can control where the mind is focused, how it’s focused, the more use you get out of it. Think of it as a tool, a tool that you’ve been playing with but you haven’t really put to any good use, or put to some good use but to a lot of just playing around, like a little kid going down into a woodworking shop. Instead of using a hammer to make something, you just play with a hammer. That’s where our thoughts tend to be. We just play around with our thoughts and don’t get any real use out of them. But once you learn what a hammer is for, it’s for pounding nails. Then you start using the hammer to get some use, get some benefit out of the hammer. So we’re learning how to get more use out of the hammer. Get more use out of our thoughts, this quality of the mind that can think about things and ask questions, look for answers. Take this faculty and put it to good use so it does become part of the path, something you develop. So you can develop that sense of ease and well-being that are an important part of right concentration. Focusing on the breath fits into that larger map that the Buddha presents. We’re cultivating, we’re developing the factors of the path so that we can learn how to comprehend suffering better and better. The more concentration, the more discernment we develop, the clearer the issue of suffering is going to be. We understand why we’re suffering. It’s not because of things outside. It’s qualities in the mind itself. It may seem discouraging, “Here we are causing ourselves suffering. We don’t like to hear that.” But, on the other hand, it’s good news. If our suffering were caused by other people, we’d realize their actions are beyond our control. There’d be no way we could put an end to suffering. But because it’s an issue that comes from within, it is within our power to change our mind. So no matter what the conditions are outside, you don’t have to suffer. That’s what’s so good about the Buddha’s path. It leads you to a suffering that doesn’t depend on things having to be a certain way at all. Because you find a basis for happiness that’s beyond the touch of conditions. That’s the part of the Dhamma that’s off the charts, it’s off the map. Even the teaching on the cessation of suffering goes only as far as that first moment of realizing nirvana. But nirvana itself is something that lies totally beyond any map. There’s no way of containing it in any thought at all. As the Buddha once said, it’s like the tracks of birds as they fly through the sky. There’s no way you can trace them. But when you attain it, you know it. And you know that nothing can touch it, nothing can destroy it. It’s that reliable. So even though the Buddha was not in a position to impose the duties of the four noble truths on us, when you stop and think and realize what are the different kinds of happiness you can find in the world, there’s nothing that could possibly compare with the happiness that the Buddha promises as a result of following his teachings. So it’s simply up to you to decide whether you want that happiness or not.

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