Comprehending Pain

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The Wheel of the Dhamma has twelve spokes. Back in the time of the Buddha, when they would explain things in sets of variables, instead of making a table, they would just go down the list. And since it went around the list and went around all the possible permutations, they called it a wheel. You see a lot of these in the Vinaya, where they explain all the different factors that would be related to a particular offense. And then they combine all the lists. They call them wheels. And it’s the same in the Buddha’s first sermon, the first Dhamma talk. It talks about the four noble truths, and each of the noble truths has three types of knowledge related to it. The Noble Truth of Stress There’s the simple knowledge that this is what stress is. Then there’s the knowledge of the duty appropriate to stress, which is to comprehend it. And there’s finally the knowledge that you have totally comprehended it. With regard to the second noble truth, the truth of the origination of stress, the first knowledge is knowing that the three forms of craving, combined with clinging—craving for sensuality, craving for becoming, craving for non-becoming—just knowing that these are the things that give rise to stress. That’s the first knowledge. The second knowledge is knowing that you should abandon these things. And then the third knowledge would be knowing that they have been totally abandoned. The third noble truth is the cessation of suffering or stress. The first knowledge is knowing that it’s dispassion for the cessation of those three kinds of craving. In other words, you attack the problem at the cause. And the duty here is to realize this. What would it be to have all stress and suffering end? And then finally you realize that you have realized that. That’s the third knowledge. As for the fourth noble truth, the path to the end of suffering, that’s the yet full path, starting with right view and ending with right concentration. Knowing that is the first knowledge. The second knowledge is knowing that these factors should be developed. You try to develop right view, right resolve, right speech, right action, right livelihood. You develop right effort, you develop right mindfulness, and you develop right concentration. Knowing that you have to develop these things, that’s the second level of knowledge. And the third is knowing that they have been fully developed. So the Dhamma Wheel is complete at the moment of awakening, as the Buddha said when he had his knowledge of these four noble truths. There are three rounds, and twelve per minute. The three rounds have to do with the three types of knowledge, and the twelve permutations mean going all the way around the Wheel. That’s when you can claim to be awakened. Two of these duties are particularly interesting. One is that stress has to be comprehended. We don’t usually react to stress or pain by trying to comprehend it. We more try to get rid of it. We don’t like it, we don’t want to have it around, we want to be done with it. Either we try to snuff it out, or we try to run away from it. But that doesn’t put an end to it. You’ve got to comprehend it, which means knowing it to the point of dispassion. We don’t think that we’re passionate for stress, but we’re passionate for things which entail stress. We have passion for forms and feelings, perceptions, thought constructs, passion for sensory consciousness. In our passion for these things, that’s what gives rise to stress. So we’ve got to cut through that passion by comprehending what’s actually going on. The other interesting duty is that we have to develop right concentration. If we’re going to sit here and watch the pain until you can really comprehend it, you need strength. You need a support. You can’t just jump into the ring with a boxer without having had some sort of training, some sort of regimen that gets you strong enough so you can fend off your opponent. This is why we have to develop right concentration. It’s not simply a matter of watching concentrated states coming and saying, “Oh, there’s concentration,” and watching them go and saying, “Ah, I’ve gained insight into inconstancy or impermanence. These things come and these things go.” It’s like trying to travel from one city to another, and a bus that’s going to take you there comes by. You say, “Oh, here comes the bus.” There goes the bus. You never get on the bus. It’s not going to take you there. Even though the bus goes there, it’s not going to take you there because you don’t get on it. Same with right concentration. You have to try to develop it. When it comes, you try to maintain it. If it’s not there, you try to give rise to it. This involves work. There’s going to be effort. That’s why we have right effort as one of the factors of the path. That has to be developed as well. The effort to abandon unskillful mental qualities that have arisen and then to prevent unskillful qualities that haven’t yet arisen from arising. Wanting to give rise to skillful qualities and wanting to maintain them once they’ve arisen. So the path involves effort, and it’s the right concentration that gives you the strength that rewards your efforts so you can keep on working at the path. The right concentration has a sense of ease and well-being, rapture and refreshment. So you want to learn how to recognize these qualities as they come. That’s the first knowledge with regard to the path. It’s not just knowledge of these are the names of these things. You have to notice these qualities as they’re present. The problem with the ease and refreshment of right concentration is that when they first come, they’re very weak. You may miss them. You may not even notice them, especially when you read in the texts about all the extreme forms that rapture can take—waves coming over the body, a sense of tingling that fills the body. They can get pretty extreme. So you sit here waiting for the extreme forms to come, and what you miss is the seeds of these things. John Lee translates pitti, or rapture, as a sense of fullness. You ask yourself, “Which parts of the body seem full and content right now? Where is the blood flowing well?” Focus on those parts. That’s the beginning of this feeling of fullness and refreshment that’s going to come. Then allow them to have that nice feeling all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out-breath. Notice when you place tension on them, you tighten them up, and then relax, relax, relax. That’s how you learn how to give rise to the sense of fullness, and you try to maintain it and allow it to grow. That’s one way of doing it. That’s another way of getting into right concentration. You’ve got to find some part in the body that feels pleasurable and then learn how to maintain that feeling of pleasure all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out-breath. Then allow it to spread. As you get better and better at this, you gain more and more confidence in staying in the present moment without feeling threatened by any feeling of pain or stress that comes up. You’ve got the strength of concentration as your support. And it’s from this sense of support that you can actually start looking into stress. You’ve already had some experience as you’re working with the breath, noticing little patterns of tension and learning how to work through them. It’s that skill that you’re going to use to deal with the other, deeper, more blatant forms of stress. But the comprehending here doesn’t mean that you get rid of them. You learn how to sit with them and watch them. What is this feeling of pain? Say you’ve got a feeling of pain in your knee or in your hip. Does it move? Does it change? Look for the ups and downs and the movings around the pain. Then look to see what the mind is doing in response to the pain, or how it’s shaping your sense of the pain through its perceptions. Because notice, as the Buddha said, the cause of suffering, or the actual suffering itself, is clinging to the different aggregates. It’s creating something, it’s behaving, it gets located on something. It develops passion and delight for that thing, which is the same thing as clinging. And then it lands on a particular form or feeling or perception. So when you’re looking at the pain, you’ve got those five things to look at, all five aggregates. How does the feeling of pain relate to the form of the body? Are they the same thing or are they not? How does it relate to your perception of the body? How does it relate to your perception of the pain? How does it relate to your perception of who you are in relationship to the pain? If you see yourself as the victim, it’s like seeing people shooting at one another out in the street, and you get out in the street to be right in the line of fire. Of course it’s going to hurt. So you want to look at what the perceptions are that surround the pain. If you can perceive yourself as someone who wants to comprehend the pain, that totally changes the relationship. And you can look at the stories. These are the metal formations or metal fabrications around the pain. It’s very easy when you’re sitting here pained by something to start thinking about other times you’ve been pained and how unfair it all is, or whatever. And that adds more suffering on top of the pain. It doesn’t have to be there. And then there’s finally the consciousness of the pain. Is the consciousness of the pain the same thing as the pain itself, or is it an awareness that’s separate? Separate here doesn’t mean that they have to be in different places. They actually be in the same place, but it’s a different level of activity, a different type of activity. So the teachings on the aggregates are there. They’re there for you to start taking this big glob of pain and analyzing it into various strands. When the pain gets analyzed into various strands, it doesn’t seem quite so overwhelming. You begin to see that it’s not just a given, a raw fact that you’re stuck with. But the mind, as soon as there’s any kind of sensation, starts fabricating thoughts around it, having perceptions. You might want to take the perception of form. You’ve got, what is form? Form is the four physical elements or the physical properties, earth, water, wind, fire, or solidity, coolness, warmth, energy. Those things are all form. Now the actual feeling of the pain, that’s something else. If you can notice a sensation that’s warm, that’s form. That’s not the pain. Or a sensation that’s cool, that’s not the pain. The energy and the solidity, they’re not the pain. The pain flits around among these things. It’s almost like they’re the lattice through which the pain slips and climbs and dives, moves around. But they’re one type of sensation. The pain is another type of sensation. The perception, the mental image you have of the pain, that’s something else. Your perception of yourself in relationship to the pain, your perception of the form in relation to the pain, your perception of just simple awareness in relation to the pain. You might want to test and see exactly what these perceptions are. One way of doing that, of course, is to just change the perception. Is the pain in your knee? Is it in the hip? Is the hip pained? The hip doesn’t know anything about pain. It’s just bones and muscles. It’s the awareness that knows the pain. And it’s the clinging to all these things that’s the suffering. So you want to pull out all these different strands to see how they contribute to whatever suffering there is around the pain. That’s how you comprehend it. Again, the purpose is not to make the pain go away. You want to understand the pain. And sometimes when you do understand it, it will go away. Other times it won’t go away, but your awareness isn’t pained by it, because you’ve changed the perception. You’ve changed the story that goes around it. To do this requires that your mind be very still, but also very inquisitive, solid, and alert. That’s why we develop the factors of the path. So you can see exactly what it is that’s contributing to the pain. When you see clearly that a particular movement of your mind is making things worse, you can drop it. And as you drop those causes, then you realize, “Okay, this is how the pain ends. This is how the suffering ends.” Even though the pain may still be there, the suffering is gone. That’s how you develop these knowledges with regard to the Noble Truths and how you perform the duties with regard to the Noble Truths. It’s all very practical. When we first learn about the Four Noble Truths, if you learn about Buddhism in school, the first lesson is that the Buddha taught that there are four Noble Truths. It doesn’t give you any idea of why there are four, why there are not five or three, what’s noble about them, what’s true about them, what their purpose is. It all sounds very abstract, very foreign. But then you realize he’s talking about something extremely intimate, your experience of suffering and what you can do to put an end to it. Then it becomes very concrete and very practical. It’s that old principle, if you want to solve a problem, you don’t solve it at the problem, you solve it at the cause. It’s amazing that the Buddha was able to take this topic of suffering, and he made it the number one topic of his teaching, because he’s always the number one issue in people’s lives. And from there, he’s able to use this very ordinary experience as the basis for awakening. It’s an ordinary experience, but it’s also bewildering. We’ve been dealing with pain for who knows how long, and it keeps running our lives. We want to do something about it, but we can’t. Without the proper guidance, we do all the wrong things. We just keep piling more and more pain, more and more suffering on ourselves. This is why we’re bewildered by it, because it is complex, all these different strands interacting. But their interaction is right here. It’s in a place where we can watch it, when you get the right concepts and the right ideas in mind and turn them from concepts and ideas into skills. That’s when you begin to see how useful this teaching is, how universal it is. It’s not just something that somebody thought up for Indians 2,500 years ago. It’s this Dharma wheel that keeps rolling all over the world.

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