Spokes in the Dhamma Wheel

July 18, 2010

The passage we chanted just now is setting the wheel of Dharma in motion. The question always comes up, “Where is the wheel?” And it’s in that passage where the Buddha talks about the four noble truths, the duties of each truth, and the fact that he completed the duties. That’s what completed the wheel. It’s back in ancient India, when they talked about several sets of variables set against one another. For instance, in legal texts or in philosophical texts, going through every permutation, that was called a wheel. So in this case, there are four noble truths, three types of knowledge for each truth, so there are twelve permutations. That’s the wheel. The Buddha’s wheel is complete. It has all twelve spokes. When you look at your mind, how many spokes do you have in your wheel? For a lot of people, it’s just a hub and a rim. And a wheel like that can’t go anywhere. So first you want to know what the noble truths are and what the duties are with regard to them. And then your wheel can begin to turn. Even though it may not have twelve spokes, have eight spokes can get you along the path. So when the Buddha talks first about suffering, dukkha is the Pali word for suffering, stress. Instead of giving a formal definition, he gives examples. Aging, illness, death, separation from things we love, having to stay with things we don’t love, not getting what we want. And then he sums it all up in the five clinging aggregates. The aggregates are not things, they’re activities. There’s the activity of the physical world, which is rupa, form. And then there’s the activity of feeling, perceiving, fabricating, cognizing things. And we cling to these things. And when we cling to them, that’s what the suffering is. So that’s basically telling us where to look and to understand that we’re suffering in these particular activities. As for the cause of suffering, the cause for those clinging aggregates, it’s craving. Either we crave sensuality, which means our sensual desires. It’s interesting that the Buddha here doesn’t talk about sensual things as being the problem. It’s our desires for them, the way the mind keeps harping on the idea that it wants this pleasure, it wants that pleasure. If it can’t get this pleasure, it wants that one. We’re attached to our desires for things more than we’re actually attached to the things themselves. There was a book written a couple years back saying that desire is okay as long as you’re not attached to the objects. But that’s a program for a serial sex offender. You have a desire for this, you can’t get that, we go for the next one, then the next one, then the next one. It’s kind of backwards. The problems are not the objects, the problems are the desires themselves. That’s one kind of craving. It leads to suffering. And there’s a craving for becoming, to take on a particular identity and a particular world of experience. It’s something we do all the time. We have our basic identity, the fact that we have this body and this personality in this particular world. But this world is up for grabs. All of us are sitting here in the same room, but we’re in different spaces. Some things attract our attention, other things don’t. The things that attract our attention are the ones that are relevant to our particular desires at any one time. And so our sense of the world keeps changing, our sense of ourselves keeps changing. And it’s in taking on these identities, wanting these identities, that causes suffering. Or, say, you’ve got an identity you don’t like anymore. You want it to be destroyed. That’s also a cause of suffering. So that’s the Buddha’s definition of the cause of suffering, these three kinds of craving. Notice he doesn’t say desire in general is a cause of suffering. It’s three specific types of craving. They cover a lot, but it doesn’t cover every desire. Because, as we’ll see in a minute, there’s a desire that’s part of the path. The third noble truth, though, is the cessation of suffering. The cessation is dispassion for and the cessation of the craving that leads to suffering. In other words, you attack the problem at its cause. And then finally there’s the path to the cessation of suffering, which is formed of eight factors. Right view, which sees things in terms of the four noble truths. Right resolve, which is the resolve once you see the causes of suffering in the mind. You want to resolve to renounce sensuality, renounce ignorance, renounce the will, renounce cruelty, the desire to harm. That’s the wisdom aggregate, or the discernment aggregate. The virtue aggregate comes next. That’s right speech, right action, right livelihood. Right speech means not lying, not speaking divisively. Sometimes it’s called slander, but that’s not really what the Buddha’s talking about. You may actually be saying true things, but you’re saying them in a way that’s going to cause people to break apart. Harsh speech, and then idle chatter. You want to avoid all these things. Right action is not killing, not stealing, not having illicit sex. Right livelihood is the one that the Buddha doesn’t define in very specific terms. It’s rather vague. It basically comes down to any livelihood which involves giving rise to greed, aversion, and delusion in your mind or in the minds of other people. This is where virtue begins to shade into the training of the mind, because you’re looking at the way you gain your livelihood for its effect on the mind. We do have this tendency, if we eat in a certain place, we don’t like to think about the harm that our way of eating causes. Or if our life depends on causing harm in a particular way, we find ways of excusing it. So the Buddha wants to point our attention precisely to this. To what extent does your livelihood cause suffering for other people? To what extent does it give rise to unskillful states of mind, either in yourself or in others? And with that we move into the training and concentration. Right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration. The phrasing for “right effort” is interesting. It’s generating desire, upholding your intent to get rid of any skillful qualities that have already arisen, to prevent unskillful qualities from arising, to give rise to skillful qualities, and then once you’ve given rise to them, to maintain them and let them grow to their culmination. There’s a desire that’s an essential part of this. This is why we said that not all desire comes under the Second Noble Truth. The desire to do well is part of the path. Sometimes you hear it said that if you have a desire to be skillful, it’s a cause of suffering, so you should let it go. Well, that keeps you from getting on the path to begin with. As Ananda once told a Brahmin, once you’ve reached the end of the path, then your desire to get to the end just disappears. It’s the same way that if you want to go to a park and you get to the park, where is your desire to go to the park? Well, it’s served its function and now it’s let go. In the same way, the desire that’s part of the path here is something that you need while you’re on the path. It’s that raft that everybody talks about abandoning once you get to the other side, but you can’t abandon it while you’re crossing over the river. And even when you do abandon it on the other side, the Buddha talks about having a sense of appreciation for it. How useful this raft is, the man says, has gotten me over to the other shore. He appreciates it, but then he doesn’t carry it around. It’s the same with the desire here. The desire is important, and it’s got to fuel everything you do. In one of his talks, Ajaan Mun said that the soldier that does battle with defilement is this desire not to come back and suffer again. Of course, he says not to come back and be the laughingstock of the defilements. So this desire is an important part of right effort, and then understanding which effort is appropriate at any one time. That’s where right view informs your effort. And following that is right mindfulness. The word mindfulness itself means keeping something in mind. As the Buddha says, it functions to keep reminding yourself. You want to develop right view and let go of wrong view. You want to develop right resolve and all the way down through all the factors of the path. So it’s not just a passive acceptance or a nonjudgmental attitude. It’s actually the reminder to help you judge wisely. But here are the three things the Buddha wants you to keep in mind. The body in and of itself, or feelings in and of themselves, or the mind in and of itself, or mental qualities in and of themselves. Being not only mindful but also alert and ardent. Ardent here means carrying on the duties of right effort, and alert means watching what’s actually going on, specifically to see what you’re doing that’s skillful and what you’re doing that’s not. Now, as mindfulness becomes well-established in any one of these four frames of reference, that becomes the basis for right concentration. Sometimes you hear that mindfulness and concentration are two radically different practices, but that’s not what the Buddha taught. Concentration grows out of mindfulness. In fact, the four frames of reference are the themes of your concentration. In the beginning, part of right concentration is to focus on, say, the breath, which is one of the topics of right mindfulness. You think about the breath and then you’re alert to what’s going on. You’re aware of the breath. Is it coming in? Is it going out? And you evaluate it. Is it comfortable or not? If it’s not comfortable, you can change. When there arises a sense of comfort, then you can spread it through the body. Think of the breath not as air coming in and out of the lungs, but as the flow of energy throughout the body. And you want to be aware of it throughout the body as well. The images the Buddha gives when he describes right concentration are all images of full body awareness. You’re not aware of it, but you’re totally aware of the body. It becomes the one object of your awareness. When your awareness and the body are at ease with one another, there’s a sense of rapture, a sense of fullness. As you’re not planning to use the body for anything, just allow it to be there and breathe in, breathe out, be bathed in the breath. There’s a sense of fullness. It seems to grow and expand in different parts of the body, and it can spread. It’s almost like every cell feels full and complete. That’s the beginning of right concentration. So those are four spokes right there, your knowledge of what the four noble truths are. But it’s not just knowledge about these things. You want to see your experience in terms of these truths. So notice which part is the suffering, which part is the cause, which factors when they arise in the mind, which are helping you put the path together, and in the moments in the mind when there’s no craving. Can you see those? Because most of the time we don’t. We’re looking for one thing that we crave and then we drop that. When we drop that, it’s because we’ve got something else we crave. We don’t notice the space in between. So you want to look for these things. And once you see them, the reason you’re dividing your experience up into these four factors is because each one has a different duty. You want to comprehend the suffering. Most of us don’t try to comprehend it. We try to push it away, or try to run away from it, or do whatever we can to get rid of it. But that’s not the duty. The duty is to comprehend it until you develop dispassion for this fabrication. Because all those aggregates, as I said, are actually activities. And the reason we do the activities is because we have passion for what we want to get out of them. So we’re continually intending our suffering. That’s not our purpose in acting, but that’s what the action creates. So the Buddha wants you to look at these types of action to see what you get out of them and begin to realize that the energy that goes into them is not worth it. When there’s no more passion driving it, that’s what undercuts all the fabrication that creates suffering. Now, as you’re trying to comprehend the suffering or the stress—and we’re talking here about the mental suffering—you begin to realize that craving is what drives this passion for these activities. So wherever you see that craving, you try to let it go, to remind yourself that the objects of craving aren’t worth it. Now, to do this requires very strong powers of mindfulness and concentration, because otherwise the mind is hungry. And if you try to tell it to let go of the activities where it’s been passionate, it’s like telling it to starve. So you’ve got to give it something to feed on, which is why we practice right concentration. The Buddha talks about right concentration as the ideal food for the mind. It’s totally blameless. When he was doing his austerities and began to realize that austerities were not going to work, the question arose in his mind, “Is there another path, or is there a true path to awakening?” He remembered a time when he was a child and had gotten into the first jhana. He asked himself, “Why am I afraid of that pleasure?” Because after all, for six years he’d been very careful not to give in to pleasure of any kind. But what about this pleasure? Is there anything blameworthy about it? It’s interesting that he used that word “blameworthy.” In other words, it doesn’t harm himself, and it doesn’t harm other people. It’s not the kind of passionate pleasure that gets you intoxicated. And it doesn’t cause anyone any harm. Sometimes you hear about the dangers of jhana, but the only danger, the Buddha tells you, is that you might get content with it and not move further. But it’s a lot safer than the dangers that come from allowing sensuality to take over the mind. So you want to develop it. That’s the duty with regard to all the factors of the path. If you try to develop these qualities, they’re things you’ll work at. They don’t just happen on their own. You don’t sit there and watch them come and go and say, “Oh, I’m practicing equanimity.” After all, with right effort, you have to generate that desire. You really want to become skillful at these practices. You want to develop these qualities of mind. So those are the four duties—to comprehend stress and suffering, to let go of its cause, to realize its cessation, and to develop the path that leads to its cessation. Now your wheel has eight spokes, and it becomes complete. When you’ve completed all these duties, you realize you’ve totally comprehended suffering. You’ve totally abandoned its cause because you’ve fully developed the path. And that’s when the realization of the cessation of suffering is complete as well. As for nirvana, that’s outside of the wheel. The wheel gets you there. But even the cessation of suffering, as Ajaan Mann once said, there’s an activity associated with it. But in total release, there’s no activity at all. The mind is totally free from fabrication, totally free from suffering. So we’re working to fill in the spokes on our wheel. And then the wheel takes us to where we really want to go, to our happiness. As the Buddha said, that’s the ultimate. Nirvana is not equanimity. Sometimes they talk about the factors of awakening as being the factors that determine what it is to be awakened. Well, those are actually the factors that lead you there. So the awakening factor, which is equanimity, is part of the path that leads you there, part of the right concentration practice. But as for nirvana, it’s the ultimate happiness. It lies outside the aggregates. It’s not an activity. That’s what the Buddha says. Now it’s up to you to prove whether he’s right or not, if you’re interested. The Buddha’s teaching is like a challenge. He’s saying it is possible through human effort to find true happiness, the happiness that doesn’t change, the happiness that’s not dependent on conditions. He’s not saying that simply as an idle fact. Everything he said is true, beneficial, and timely. It’s a truth, and it’s also a beneficial truth to know these things, to realize there is this possibility in human life. It’s a challenge. So the question as you practice is, are you up for the challenge? And if you are, you want to start working on those spokes. At the very least, try to have eight spokes, because that’s enough to keep you on your way.

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