The First Sermon

March 3, 2012

The sutta we chanted just now is the setting of the wheel of Dhamma in motion. It’s said to be the Buddha’s first sermon. He set out his important teachings, and you notice that at least his part of the teaching there falls into four parts. First, he explains why the teaching is important, what it can do. As he said, it leads to calm, it leads to awakening, it leads to direct knowledge, it leads to total release. That part of the sutta is to give us some motivation. This is why we’re here. It’s why we’re following this path of practice. We want something. And it’s not bad to want something like this. Sometimes you hear that as you meditate you’re not supposed to have any desire at all. But there has to be the underlying desire that you want true happiness. You’re doing this for the sake of true happiness. Of course, your understanding of what that happiness is going to be is going to change as you practice. It’s going to develop, it’s going to get more refined, it’s going to get more skillful. But there is an underlying desire, there’s an underlying purpose and motivation here. And it’s important to keep that in the back of your mind. Because if you go away from this path, where are you going? Into one of those two extremes that the Buddha said just leads to more suffering. Either you head for sensual desires or you head for self-affliction. Those things don’t go anywhere aside from just going around and around and around. So the Buddha starts off with a motivation, and it’s important to keep that in mind. Then he sets out the framework of the Four Noble Truths. This, as he said, in other places, covers everything. Sariputta, I guess, was the one who said that just like the footprint of the elephant can contain all the footprints of the other animals on earth, in the same way the Four Noble Truths cover everything in the teaching. This is the framework we want to keep in mind. There’s stress, but there’s also a cause for stress. Because there’s a cause and because something is happening, right in your own mind, it means there’s something you can do about it. And then the Buddha mentions the fact that it is possible to put an end to stress. And then he tells the way to do it. Some people wonder why the Third Truth doesn’t switch places with the Fourth. In other words, he’s talking about what you can do and then the results you’re going to get at the end. But the way the Buddha talks is like the way a doctor talks. These are the symptoms of the disease you have, and these are the causes of the disease. The next question is, is it possible to put an end to this disease? In this case, the answer is yes. And then he tells you how to do it. What’s important about the framework is not just its four different ideas. It’s a framework for looking at things so that you can figure out what to do. Each of the truths carries a task or a duty. Stress is something you want to comprehend. And comprehending it means watching it, which is something we usually don’t do with stress or pain. We push it away. We try to run away from it. But as with any problem, if you just run away, run away, run away, you’re never going to solve the problem. It’s going to keep hounding you. You’ve got to turn around and look at it. And when you do, you can see the cause. There’s the craving. Craving for sensuality, craving for becoming, which means wanting to take on a particular identity and a particular world of experience, which we either do on the outside level or we do in our thoughts, again and again and again. Or you have a particular identity and you’re in a particular world and you don’t like it. You want to destroy it. That can bring on stress as well. These are things you want to abandon when you see them happening. As for the cessation of stress, that’s something you want to realize. And the way you realize it is by developing the path. In fact, developing the path is what helps you with those other two duties as well. Because an important part of the path is getting the mind at a right concentration. The first seven factors of the path, as the Buddha said, are requisites for a right concentration. They’re the things that help the concentration become right. An important part of the concentration is mindfulness, getting the mind to stay steadily with a particular frame of reference, like 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. Staying with this until you arrive at a good state of concentration where the mind feels at ease, either with a sense of pleasure or rapture or equanimity. You need to make the mind feel safe and secure so that it’s willing to turn around and look at the stress. Otherwise you feel too threatened by it and you want to run away. At the same time, this security gives you a really solid point of view from which you can look at things and see them very precisely. If your mind is moving and everything else is moving, then it’s hard to tell who’s moving in which direction, who’s moving how much. You’ve got to be as still as possible. The sense of well-being that comes with concentration also helps abandon the craving that causes stress. All too often we take our cravings as our friends. As the Buddha said, most of us go through life with craving as our companion. You travel with your craving over there. You want that over here. You travel with your craving over here. You just keep wandering around from place to place to place with craving as your guide, craving as your companion and friend, the person you trust more than anybody else. You can read in those personal ads, “I would like someone who’s like this, like this, like this.” And you think that by getting somebody who fits your list of wishes and wants, you’re going to find somebody who’s going to make you happy, as if your wants could be trusted. But they do have their appeal, and that’s why you need something that’s even more appealing. And I think that’s another reason why we develop concentration, develop a sense of well-being, inner nourishment, rapture, fullness, bliss, equanimity. Try to breathe in a way that feels really good, deep down inside, and maintain that sense of well-being as much as you can. Because that’s going to give you something to hold on to when you turn around and look at your cravings and they seem awfully appealing. You realize you’ve got something better here. Because, as you notice, even though the cravings seem appealing, there’s a lot of tension involved in them. And they do come along with stress. And when you can see the connection, you can realize, “Okay, if I let go of that craving, the stress will go.” If I focus instead, for example, on the breath, try to get the breath really comfortable, and then breathe in ways that can help relax the tightness that may build up, say, in your hands or your feet. Start out at your extremities and go inside, into the center core of your torso. Allow the energies in the body to feel nourishing, to feel gratifying. And then ask yourself, “Which place would you rather go?” And not always will the cravings lose out, but you’re giving yourself a much better position to stay. You’re changing the balance of power. So it’s in this way that developing the path helps with the duties of the other three truths. You begin to comprehend stress to the point where you develop real dispassion for it. That’s the whole purpose. We keep going after it again and again and again, thinking that there’s going to be something good there. Like the man eating a basket full of peppers and crying and crying and crying because they’re so hot. And someone asks, “Why are you eating those peppers?” And he says, “There must be a sweet one in here someplace.” So as you find something really sweet in the concentration, that gives you a much better position from which you can withstand the appeal or the stories the mind creates about itself. “Well, maybe the next craving will be satisfying. Maybe the next craving will be gratifying.” You put yourself in a better position, you’re much less likely to fall for those stories. So this is why the Buddha has four noble truths, because there are four different activities that are appropriate for the truths. Then he went on to say that it was only when he’d completed those duties that he gained full awakening. In other words, it’s only when you’ve completely comprehended stress, completely abandoned craving, completely realized the cessation of stress, and completely developed a path that’s when you really know things for what they are. You see for yourself what’s of value and what’s not. You also see, as the Buddha’s first disciple, when you see that the mind is in a position where it can see everything that’s caused, but it also sees something that’s not caused, that’s when you’re totally free. If you think in terms of the Dhamma wheel, this is the spot at the middle that doesn’t turn with the wheel, where all the other factors converge. So that, again, is part of the Buddha’s reminding us of why it’s good to learn to take these four noble truths as our guide. Because there’s total freedom that comes when you follow the duties that are appropriate to them. So it’s not that the Buddha’s just setting out four truths. He’s reminding you of what these four truths tell you to do and then why it’s a good thing to do those things in order to keep you motivated. There’s always a desire that underlies the path, the desire for true freedom. And it’s good to nurture that. Then you take the four noble truths as your guide in how to take that desire and make it skillful so that it really does lead to the freedom you want. So it’s always good to remind yourself that this is a possibility, this is something human beings can do. Then you look at your life and say, “It wouldn’t be good if part of my life was that I was able to follow this path and get the results.” You can’t determine that you’ll live long enough or it’ll all work out the way you want, but at least you’re headed in the right direction. And that’s what’s important, because the right direction can build up momentum that carries over not only in this lifetime but in future lifetimes as well. That’s part of the perspective that the Buddha has on things, that this isn’t the only time around. And that moment of gaining what he calls the Dhamma I is when you realize that it’s really true. This is not the only time you’ve got. But if you fritter away this part of your life, you never know when you get the chance to practice again. So you want to develop the habits. It’s an interesting combination. On the one hand, it’s easy to think about future lifetimes and become complacent, but that’s not how the Buddha wants you to take that teaching. Because there are dangers. You never really know what kind of bad karma you’ve got from the past. So you want to be active now, focused now, heedful now, but with the same sense of hope. It comes from the Buddha’s guarantee that the effort that’s put into the path is never wasted. So the desire for true happiness is something you want to really respect. This is one of the reasons why we bow down to the Buddha, because he wants us to bow down to something in ourselves that’s really worthy of respect, i.e., our desire for true happiness. Don’t let the world tell you anything else.

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