Timeless Practice

November 18, 2022

We just chanted the Buddha’s first sermon called “Setting the Wheel of Dharma in Motion.” People sometimes ask, “Where’s the wheel?” It’s in the section where the Buddha goes through each of the Four Noble Truths, states that he realized that he had completed the duty. That’s three levels of knowledge for each truth, four truths, twelve permutations. He goes through all the permutations. And in the West we would call that a table, but in India this time they would call that a wheel, because you go around all the possibilities. So that’s the dharma wheel. It emphasizes the fact that the four truths are not just four interesting facts. Each truth involves a duty. And as it states in other places in the canon, this is the main framework for all the Buddha’s other teachings. The footprint of an elephant can contain all the footprints of animals that walk on land. In the same way, the Four Noble Truths contain all the other skillful dharmas. So if you want to understand the Buddha’s teachings, you have to understand this framework. And then other teachings come in. The question is, where do they fit in? There are different kinds of suffering. And the word used in Pali, dukkha, can mean anything from gross physical suffering, gross mental suffering, really intense anguish, all the way down to just subtle levels of stress. Even in blissful states of mind that are fabricated, there’s going to be some stress, and there’s some dukkha there. So the word dukkha covers all of that range. It translated as stress. The basic meaning in everyday language in those days was pain. We usually translate it as suffering to emphasize the fact that compared to nirvana, everything you experience in the six senses is suffering. But the suffering, there’s two types of suffering that the Buddha talks about. He talks about the suffering of the three characteristics. The suffering of the three characteristics is simply the fact that things are fabricated, and there’s stress when you try to find happiness in things that are fabricated. The real suffering is the stress that comes from craving. And that’s not necessary. As long as there’s going to be samsara, there’s going to be fabricated things. But they’ve learned how not to suffer in the sense of the suffering in the Four Noble Truths. They don’t weigh their minds down. Because the suffering in the Four Noble Truths, the Buddha equates with clinging, clinging to the five aggregates. There’s something counterintuitive about that. We don’t like the things we cling to. And here’s the Buddha telling us, we’re suffering because of those things. The word for clinging in Pali, upadana, can also mean to feed. This gets even more counterintuitive. For most of us, a lot of our pressure in life comes from feeding not only physical food, but also any emotional food we get from other people, mental food that we get from other people. And here the Buddha is telling us that that’s the essence of suffering, which is one of the reasons why when he taught people, he didn’t start out with the Four Noble Truths. He started out with what’s called a step-by-step discourse, where he’d start with the topic of generosity, pointing out the goodness that comes from being generous, the happiness that comes from being generous. He’s talking specifically about the generosity that comes voluntarily. A king once came to see the Buddha and asked him where a gift should be given. And the Buddha said, give where you feel inspired, where you feel it would be good, would be well used. So encourage his voluntary giving. Because it’s the goodness of the heart that comes. It nourishes that and also gets nourished by the act of giving. And when he talks about this, he’s talking about things that people have encountered in their lives. He doesn’t start out with abstractions. There are other passages in the canon where they describe the teachings of other people in the time of the Buddha. And they always start out with pretty abstract ideas about the nature of the cosmos, or saying that human action is totally useless, powerless. And the Buddha says, no, human action makes a difference. Being generous makes a difference. The same with the second topic in the step-by-step discourse. Virtue makes a difference. It’s good for your heart, good for your mind, when you abstain from harm. And you really do make a difference. It’s a choice that you have to make. The goodness and generosity comes from your attitude while giving, before giving, while giving, after giving. But it’s the attitude that’s the important thing. With virtue, it’s your intention. You intend not to harm. The third topic in the step-by-step discourse was heaven. You intend to be generous in and of itself, being virtuous in and of itself, but to have long-term benefits. This is where he first broaches the topic of how karma has an effect on rebirth and how there are many levels that are possible. Although it’s interesting, there are lots of passages in the canon where the Buddha talks about generosity, lots of passages where he talks about virtue, very little about heaven. Just that it’s very pleasant. But then he goes on to point out the drawbacks of sensuality. You go to heaven and you get lazy, you get complacent. Not every deva gets complacent, but a lot of them do. As the Buddha said, the number of devas who, when leaving heaven, go to a good destination is very small. Many of them fall. Fall hard. It’s almost as if some sorrow is a sick joke. You work hard to move your way up, and then you get up onto the top, and you get lazy, you get complacent. You stop doing the goodness that caught you there, and then you fall. That’s when the Buddha said you’d be ready to realize the joys of renunciation. Renunciation would be a good thing. Renunciation here means not depriving yourself, but it means looking for happiness in something besides sensuality. When he had gotten his listeners to this point, then he would teach them the Four Noble Truths. Because the Four Noble Truths are basically a problem-solving approach to this problem. Why is it that the good things we do can lead to rewards that actually harm us? How do we get out of that? It’s the how and the why. That’s why the Four Noble Truths carry duties. The duty with regard to suffering, the clinging to the aggregates, is to comprehend it. It means understanding to the point where you have no passion, aversion, and delusion about it. You abandon it. That’s the cause of suffering. You abandon the cause. The cessation of suffering, the Third Truth, is basically the act of abandoning the cause. Suffering stops. And the way you do that is to follow the Eightfold Path. That’s something you develop. You realize the cessation of suffering by developing the path. That’s what we’re doing right now. That’s where we focus our attention. We focus on the right view, and it goes through right resolve, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration. These are things we try to develop. And in the course of developing them, we learn how to comprehend suffering, and we learn how to abandon craving. So the focus is on the doing of the path. And the first talk was the path. You may notice he doesn’t start with the Four Noble Truths; he starts with the path. Then, in the context of the path, he discusses the Four Noble Truths basically under right view, the first factor of the path. This, too, is something to be developed. So we’re here developing. We focus on abandoning unskillful qualities in the mind and developing skillful ones in their place. And when we realize to do this well, we have to be very mindful. That’s how we establish mindfulness: focusing on the breath, focusing on the body, focusing on the thirty-two parts of the body, the breath. There are lots of topics we can focus on. But you want to stay with the body in and of itself, or feelings in and of themselves, mind states, mental qualities. So right now we’re choosing the breath that’s part of the body in and of itself. We’re putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world. Any thoughts that relate to the world right now? Just put them aside. And if they come up again, you put them aside again. They come up again, you put them aside again. This is what the developing is all about. You’re changing your habits. You’re developing a new state of mind. If you think of the mind as a committee, you’re developing a new member of the committee. But the important thing is that you develop a sense of well-being with this focus. You do that by being, as the Buddha said, ardent, alert and mindful. Mindful means keeping things in mind. The ardency is trying to do this well. It’s basically right effort in the context of right mindfulness. So you’re not just watching things arising and passing away and saying, “Oh, things come and things go.” That’s not the kind of discernment the Buddha is talking about. As he says, when mindfulness is a governing principle in your mind, you’re mindful that there are skillful qualities that you haven’t given rise to yet. You do what you can to make them come into being. When they’re there, you make sure they don’t go away. So instead of watching things come and go, you’re trying to make sure that good things come and try to make sure they don’t go. That’s the developing. And when you do that, then the mind has a place to settle down with a sense of ease. Letting it settle down like this requires two qualities of mind, as the Buddha pointed out. It requires tranquility and insight. Tranquility and finding a sense of feeling at home here with the breath. You’re able to settle in, your mind can gather together and get unified. And there will be pleasure that comes with this. And this is a good pleasure to have, because this is one of the reasons why the path is so effective. It’s effective at dealing with craving, because it gives you an alternative pleasure to sensuality. As for the insight, you have to understand the mind, what it’s doing, why it’s going after things that would destroy your concentration. This is where that five-step program comes in. If something is eating away at your concentration, you look at when it comes, why is it coming, what causes it to come. And then you see that it does pass away on its own. After all, it is in constant stress, well, not self. But then you pick it up again. Then the question is, why do you pick it up? And this is where you have to look into the allure. What do you find appealing about this thought, this mind state that’s pulling you away? And this requires a lot of honesty, because there are a lot of unskillful things that go on in the mind that we’re not all that proud of. And sometimes we don’t even admit to ourselves why we like them, or that we like them. There’s another reason why we practice concentration, to give the mind a sense of stability, a sense of learning how to trust itself, to be willing to trust itself. To look into some of its unskillful habits, admit them for what they are, and learn how to see through them. Because once you see the allure, then the Buddha says, look at the drawbacks of that particular state of mind. And when you see that the drawbacks really outweigh the allure, and it really hits home, this is not just an intellectual exercise, portraying what in Pali is called citta. It’s not just an intellectual exercise, portraying what in Pali is called citta. It’s an intellectual exercise, which means both heart and mind. It’s part of the heart that says, why have I been doing this? You see how much suffering you’ve been causing yourself. And that’s the escape. This kind of insight is what helps get the mind in concentration. And then the concentration, of course, gives you more solid states of mind, where you can see things more subtly. You can see things more precisely. So it’s this combination of tranquility and insight based on concentration. That’s what’s going to undercut the cravings that cause suffering. So we work on getting the mind to settle down. And the course is getting the mind to settle down, developing mindfulness, developing concentration. We begin to abandon some of our cravings. We begin to comprehend some of our suffering, comprehend our clinging. This is how the duties of the Four Noble Truths help one another along. So this is the framework for understanding what we’re doing, what we’re here right now. We are working on developing something. We’re not just saying, well, I’ll be good with whatever comes up. The Buddha never taught that. Everything falls under those duties of the Four Noble Truths. There’s work to be done. It’s good work. Sometimes it seems really daunting, because after all, there’s something about the Four Noble Truths that really go against the grain. We want to get back from our clings and our cravings, the things we really like, to see that they are causing suffering, and to realize there’s something better that comes when we can drop these things that we like. It’s as if we’ve been eating the wrong kind of food for a long time. And the doctor tells us, okay, you’ve got to stop eating all that cholesterol, stop eating all that fat, stop eating all that sugar, whatever. It doesn’t have you starve. After all, there is the food of concentration. And there’s the food of well-being that comes when you see things clearly. The analogy breaks down where the Buddha is going to get you to a point where the mind doesn’t even need to feed at all. It’s so strong. It’s all of its sources of food. But in the meantime, work on developing good food for the mind. And John Fung was never the sort of person who liked to talk about controversial points in the Dharma. But there was one point that he brought up, which is that some people say that the path is all about letting go, letting go, letting go. And he said, that’s not the case. We’ve got to do some developing. After all, that’s a duty with the Four Noble Truths. That’s the Fourth Noble Truth there. So work on developing your concentration. Work on developing your tranquility and insight. They all go together. And that’s the basic message of the Four Noble Truths. There’s work to be done. There’s a problem. The problem is suffering. But it can be solved. And this is how it’s done.

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