

Skills of the Dhamma Wheel

November 10, 2009

Every time we chant the Sutta on Setting the Dhamma Wheel in Motion, I like to look at the Dhamma wheel up on the wall, the one my father made years back: It's going on 13 years now. It's got twelve spokes, which symbolize one of the passages in the sutta where the Buddha goes through the four noble truths and the three types of knowledge for each truth: knowing the truth, knowing the duty appropriate to that truth, and then knowing that you've completed that duty. Four truths, three levels of knowledge, three times four is twelve: That's the wheel in the Dhamma wheel. And it should form the basic frame for the way we look at our practice. It's how we should frame our attention to things.

The Buddha never taught bare attention. He talked about only two kinds of attention: appropriate and inappropriate. When you attend to things, it's not really bare. The fact that you're noticing something, paying attention to something, means you have a purpose in mind. Even if you decide that you're going to pay attention to whatever pops up, regardless, there are still subtle choices going on. With many things happening all at once, you can't help but pay attention to one thing rather than another, and you can't help doing something about what you're paying attention to. There is a purpose, there is an intention, there is an activity that goes along with your attention. It's important, as a meditator, that you be very clear about this. Otherwise, if you think you've reached bare attention and you're told that that's a taste of awakening, a taste of the deathless, a taste of the unconditioned, you stop looking. You don't dig deeper to see, "Wait a minute, what's going on here? Is there an element of intention here? Is this fabricated or is it not?"

In one of Ajaan Maha Boowa's Dhamma talks he tells you to test everything, to be willing to destroy everything that comes up, because whatever is really true and really unconditioned is not going to be touched by your efforts to destroy it. Now the word "destroy" here means that you learn how to take it apart, question it, see if you can figure out how it's formed, how it can be made to come and how it can be made to go. This goes for everything, including the act of attention itself.

There's always going to be an element of intention in the act of attention. When the Buddha places attention in the series of conditions in dependent co-arising, it's under the category of "name," mixed up with contact and intention and perception and feeling, and all of these factors have fabrication underlying them. So there's a lot going on even when you think you're just giving bare attention to something. One of your tasks as a meditator is to notice that, to ferret it out and to learn how to apply *appropriate* attention to what's going on. What makes it appropriate is that the perceptions related to it are framed in terms of the four noble truths and the duties appropriate to those truths—or, you might say, the skills appropriate to those truths.

That's because they're the activities the Buddha encourages you to apply to the different truths. Stress or suffering, he said, is something that you have to comprehend. To comprehend means to know it so thoroughly that you develop dispassion for it. We usually don't think that we're passionate for stress and suffering, but we really are. The things we generally are passionate about carry a lot of stress with them, but we just choose to ignore that fact. So an important part of the practice is to make the effort to see how these things we love, these things we're passionate about, have that side to them: that stressful, suffering side. Then we keep focusing on that stressful side until we can develop a sense of dispassion for it.

The duty with regard to the cause of stress is to let it go. Letting go is also a skill. You don't just toss things out willy-nilly. You look to see: Where is the craving, where is the ignorance that underlies that stress? As you do this, you have to learn how to discern which desires you want to hold onto for the time being, and which ones you want to let go of—because the path includes desire as part of right effort, and that's something

you should develop. The path is something you want to develop until it's served its function, and then you let it go. That requires discernment.

The duty with regard to the cessation of stress and suffering is to realize it, to verify it, to bear witness to it, i.e. to directly experience it. In other words, you experience what it means to let go of craving, to develop dispassion for craving. This, too, is a skill. You have to learn how to watch yourself let go of a particular craving and notice that it really does take a burden off the mind. For the most part, we don't notice these things. When we drop one craving, we're quick to go to another one. In fact, that's usually why we drop the first one: We think we've found something better to crave, something more interesting, something new, something intriguing. You get tired of what you've been holding onto, and so you go grabbing at something new. There's very little time to stop and notice: What is it like to let go of craving? In what way does it decrease suffering?

At the same time, there are things to develop. That's the path, starting with right view and going on through right concentration. And although there is a stage at the very end of the practice where you let go of the path as well, you've got to develop it in the meantime.

The purpose of looking at things in this way is to have a framework for how you're going to understand your life, and how you can use that understanding to free yourself from suffering. The Buddha wants you to drop the framework where you're looking at yourself, yourself, yourself all the time: what's me, what's mine, what I've got that I don't like, what I've got that I do like. He asks you to put those concepts aside and use these other concepts as a way of framing things, because the two frameworks have different imperatives. If there's a "me" that you have to shore up, that you have to look after, then it carries the imperative of figuring out how to feed this me, how to choose food for it, how to make sure you have a good store of food, and how to make sure that that store of food is going to last. These are all imperatives of getting, getting, and getting. When the world goes well, everything is smooth, the teeth on that "getting" aren't too sharp or too vicious. But when things get really difficult, when resources get scarce, you've got to watch out because the imperative to feed—physically and emotionally—is not always a friendly one.

If that's the framework for our attention and the imperatives that we're acting on, things can get pretty nasty. So the Buddha says to look at things simply as stress, its cause, its ending, and the path of practice leading to its ending. Learn to depersonalize everything. That carries a different set of imperatives, a friendlier set of imperatives. Instead of trying to push away your sufferings, you try to understand them. When you can't understand them, you develop the path to make the mind really quiet, still, alert, until it's in a position to see the difference between the stress and the cause of stress, so you can apply the appropriate duty.

It's like going into a room where there's a lot of smoke. You don't put out the smoke. You try to put out the fire that's causing the smoke. If you go around putting out the smoke, the fire just keeps churning out more and more smoke all the time, and you never come to the end of it.

The same with the mind: One of our problems is we don't really understand what to do with stress. We try to abandon it, and it just won't be abandoned. The more we try to shake it off, the more firmly it sticks to us, burning us all the time. We have to work our way through the smoke to find the fire: That's what you put out. That's what you let go of: the cause of stress. So focus on learning how to distinguish these things, in the same way you have to distinguish between the kind of craving that causes stress and the kind of craving or desire that develops the skillful factors of the path.

All of this requires skill. In fact, one way of translating ignorance, *avijja*, is "lack of skill." The knowledge that replaces it, *vijja*, is skilled knowing, which comes from having developed the skills. Note that there is a doing and a gradual perfection, a gradual mastery, of these different imperatives. When you've got the framework firmly in mind, then when things come up, you can perceive them in terms of that framework, and that way you know what to do with them. As you keep trying to do the right duty, you get better and better at it, until you have it completely mastered.

In many ways, even though it's all too often overlooked, the most essential passage in the sutta, the heart

of the sutta, is the wheel. Back in the Buddha's time, that's what they would call the combining of two variables: not a table, but a wheel. You see this in the legal texts, like the Vinaya. There would be many possible factors for an offense, so they'd run through all the various permutations, around the circle to show the verdict in each possible case. In this case, there are four truths and three levels of knowledge, so the sutta just goes around the list, one by one by one, until it's gone through all the twelve permutations. This is why it's called the Dhamma wheel, and why we have the wheel of Dhamma with twelve spokes on our wall. It's also a convenient symbol to make you think about the circle that goes around the rim of the wheel. It's the framework for how we want to perceive things, and to understand what you've got to do once you understand. When you have an experience, you know where to put it in the framework of the four noble truths, so you know what to do with it.

This is the kind of attention we're trying to develop. The Buddha would often say at the beginning of a Dhamma talk: Pay careful attention. This didn't mean just to listen carefully. It also meant to bring the right framework, the right framework of thought and questioning, to see how you can get the most out of what he has to say. Then you take that framework and apply it to your practice.

For instance, as you're sitting here right now: Where in the breath is stress? What quality of mind can you bring to the breath to alleviate that stress—to help put an end to it, to undercut the cause of stress? Even just thinking in these very basic terms of how you deal with the breath is the beginning of the framework for the four noble truths.

Then as you work with the breath, as you get more and more skilled at it, you can take the skills and turn around and start applying them to the mind, to the different events in the mind. You find that this framework will take you far. That's why the Buddha said that the most important internal quality for awakening is appropriate attention.

So see if you can bring this way of looking at things to bear right here, right now, at the breath. Start getting some practice in mastering those skills.