

Setting in Motion the Wheel of the Dharma

Dhammacakkappavattana sutta

In the first discourse following his enlightenment, the Dhammacakkappavattana sutta¹ (“Discourse Setting in Motion the Wheel of the Dharma”), the Buddha set forth one of the core tenets of his teachings, the Four Noble Truths. These he illustrated in the form of a medical diagnosis, proceeding from effect to cause: describing the symptom (suffering) and identifying its cause (craving), and teaching the cure (cessation of craving) and its cause (the Eightfold Path).

Like virtually all texts claiming to be discourses of the Buddha, the sutta (Skt. sūtra) opens with Ānanda’s declaration, “Thus have I heard,” thereby asserting that he had been present at the sermon and could vouch for the authenticity of what follows as the words of the Buddha. In its repetitions (indicated here by ellipses points) and use of set phrases, the discourse—which was captured in writing only several centuries after the event—is clearly not a transcription of natural speech. Like all such texts, it is the product of a long history of oral recitation and chanting, in which the message has been recast in standardized formulas to aid in memorization. The sutta also displays the Buddhist penchant for organizing doctrines in numerical categories.

Oddly, this first discourse did not include the other cardinal tenet of the Buddha’s teachings, the doctrine of anātman, the nonexistence of a permanent, transmigrating element in each of us. That revelation is found in the Anattalakkhaṇa sutta (“Discourse on the Mark of Nonself”), which the tradition holds was delivered five days later.

Thus have I heard. On one occasion the Blessed One was staying at Varanasi in the Deer Park at Isipatana. There he addressed the group of five monks:

"There are these two extremes that are not to be indulged in by one who has gone forth [from the life of a householder into that of one who renounces the world in order to pursue enlightenment]. Which two? That which is devoted to sensual pleasure with reference to sensual objects: base, vulgar, common, ignoble, unprofitable; and that which is devoted to self-affliction:² painful, ignoble, unprofitable. Avoiding both of these extremes, the middle way realized by the Tathāgata³—producing vision,

¹ This is the text of the first sermon as it was understood and transmitted in the Theravāda tradition. The text was written in Pāli, the canonical language of that school but not the language spoken by the Buddha. Clearly an early work, it was transmitted orally for several centuries following the death of the Buddha and was not committed to writing until perhaps the first century BCE, by which time, obviously, it had undergone significant redaction in order to aid in memorization and chanting.

² That is, practices of extreme asceticism. The Buddha himself had adopted some of these in his quest for enlightenment but abandoned them when he became aware of their futility.

³ An epithet for the Buddha. The “Thus Come One” or “Thus Gone One” (the term admits both meanings, depending on how it is analyzed morphologically), referring to the Buddha as one who has “gone beyond” (adopting the latter reading) this world into enlightenment.

producing knowledge—leads to calm, to direct knowledge, to self-awakening, to *nibbāna* (Skt. *nirvāṇa*)⁴.

"And what is the middle way realized by the Tathāgata that—producing vision, producing knowledge—leads to calm, to direct knowledge, to self-awakening, to *nibbāna*? Precisely this Noble Eightfold Path: right view, right resolve, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration. This is the middle way realized by the Tathāgata that—producing vision, producing knowledge—leads to calm, to direct knowledge, to self-awakening, to *nibbāna*.

"Now this, monks, is the noble truth of suffering: Birth is suffering, aging is suffering, death is suffering; sorrow, lamentation, pain, affliction, and despair are suffering. To be united with what is unloved, to be separated from what is loved is suffering; not to obtain what is longed for is suffering. In short, the Five Groups of Grasping⁵ (Pāli, *khandha*; Skt., *skandha*) are suffering,

"And this, monks, is the noble truth of the origination of suffering: the craving that makes for further becoming—accompanied by passion and delight, relishing now here and now there—i.e., craving for sensual pleasure, craving for becoming, craving for non-becoming.

"And this, monks, is the noble truth of the cessation of suffering: the remainderless fading and cessation, renunciation, relinquishment, release, and letting go of that very craving.

"And this, monks, is the noble truth of the way of practice leading to the cessation of suffering: precisely this Noble Eightfold Path—right view, right resolve, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration.

"Vision arose, insight arose, discernment arose, knowledge arose, illumination arose within me with regard to things never heard before:⁶ 'This is the noble truth of suffering.' Vision arose, insight arose, discernment arose, knowledge arose, illumination arose within me with regard to things never heard before: 'This noble truth of suffering is to be comprehended.' Vision arose, insight arose, discernment arose, knowledge arose, illumination arose within me with regard to things never heard before: 'This noble truth of suffering has been comprehended.'

"Vision arose . . . with regard to things never heard before: 'This is the noble truth of the origination of suffering'. . . 'This noble truth of the origination of suffering is to be abandoned' . . . 'This noble truth of the origination of suffering has been abandoned.'

⁴ *Nirvāṇa* represents the goal of Buddhist religious life, emancipation from the cycle of birth and death and thus from the suffering (*dukkha*) that characterizes unenlightened existence.

⁵ The five constituents that together comprise personality. Because in our ignorance we mistakenly take the *skandhas* for a permanent "Self," and thus engender attachment and clinging to things that are "mine," the *skandhas* are often referred to as the "Five Groups of Grasping."

⁶ In this and the next three paragraphs the Buddha relates how, during the meditations leading to his enlightenment, he cognized each of the four truths as a threefold knowledge, (1) as a recognition of the truth, (2) as an awareness of what is to be done, and (3) as an affirmation of his having done so. Further down in the *sutta* he refers to this as his "three-round, twelve-permutation knowledge and vision."

"Vision arose . . . with regard to things never heard before: 'This is the noble truth of the cessation of suffering' . . . 'This noble truth of the cessation of suffering is to be directly experienced'. . . 'This noble truth of the cessation of suffering has been directly experienced.'

"Vision arose . . . with regard to things never heard before: 'This is the noble truth of the way of practice leading to the cessation of suffering'. . . 'This noble truth of the way of practice leading to the cessation of suffering is to be developed'. . . 'This noble truth of the way of practice leading to the cessation of suffering has been developed.'

"And, monks, as long as this—my three-round, twelve-permutation knowledge and vision concerning these four noble truths as they have come to be—was not pure, I did not claim to have directly awakened to the right self-awakening unexcelled in the cosmos with its deities, Māras, and Brahmās,⁷ with its contemplatives and brahmans, its royalty and commonfolk. But as soon as this—my three-round, twelve-permutation knowledge and vision concerning these four noble truths as they have come to be—was truly pure, then I did claim to have directly awakened to the right self-awakening unexcelled in the cosmos with its deities, Māras and Brahmās, with its contemplatives and brahmans, its royalty and commonfolk. Knowledge and vision arose in me: 'Unprovoked is my release. This is the last birth. There is now no further becoming.'"

That is what the Blessed One said. Gratified, the group of five monks delighted at his words. And while this explanation was being given, there arose to Ven. Kondañña the dustless, stainless Dhamma eye: Whatever is subject to origination is all subject to cessation.

And when the Blessed One had set the Wheel of Dhamma in motion, the earth devas (deities) cried out: "At Varanasi, in the Deer Park at Isipatana, the Blessed One has set in motion the unexcelled Wheel of Dhamma that cannot be stopped by brahman or contemplative, deva, Māra or Brahmā, or anyone in the cosmos." On hearing the earth devas' cry, the devas of the Four Kings' Heaven⁸ took up the cry. . . the devas of the Thirty-three. . . the Yama devas. . . the Tusita devas. . . the Nimmanarati devas. . . the Paranimmita-vasavatti devas. . . the devas of Brahmā's retinue took up the cry: "At Varanasi, in the Deer Park Refuge at Isipatana, the Blessed One has set in motion the unexcelled Wheel of Dhamma that cannot be stopped by brahman or contemplative, deva, Māra, or Brahmā, or anyone at all in the cosmos."

So in that moment, that instant, the cry shot right up to the Brahma worlds. And this ten-thousandfold cosmos shivered and quivered and quaked, while a great, measureless radiance appeared in the cosmos, surpassing the effulgence of the devas.

⁷ Māra is a force of evil, the personification of worldly temptation and thus an antagonist of the Buddha. During the Buddha's final meditations before his enlightenment, Māra both tempted and threatened him in an attempt to disrupt his concentration and deny him liberation. In a scene that is one of the favorite subjects of Buddhist iconography, Māra calls on his armies of desire, aversion, hunger, and thirst to vouch for his power, then asks the Buddha who will witness for him. The Buddha reaches down and touches the earth with his right hand, calling on it to vouch for the incalculable eons he has spent perfecting himself. The earth shakes in response, and Māra, defeated at last, withdraws, and the Buddha attains enlightenment.

The god Brahmā figures in Buddhist sources as a protector of the Dharma.

⁸ These and the following are deities in the various heavens of Buddhist cosmology.

Then the Blessed One exclaimed: "Koṇḍañña has indeed understood! Koṇḍañña has indeed understood!" And that is how Ven. Koṇḍañña acquired the name Aññā- Koṇḍañña — Koṇḍañña Who Knows.

[translated from the Pāli by Thanissaro Bhikkhu]