Setting the Wheel of the Dhamma in Motion

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Bhante Bodhidhamma · 24:53

Greetings, peace and joy. I trust you had a fruitful day. I do not say happy, though I also wish you did have a happy day.

Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammasambuddhasa. Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammasambuddhasa. Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammasambuddhasa. Homage to the Buddha, the Blessed Noble, and fully self-awakened one.

Can I just say that if you've emailed me some questions and I haven't answered them, could you do me a favour and email them again? I've probably archived them carelessly or whatever. And don't feel afraid to ask a question that you think is silly. There are no silly questions. And I don't have to mention your name anyway, so it can be quite anonymous. And if you have a personal problem which you want to talk to me about, I'm quite happy to Skype. And I'll ask your permission if I can discuss it publicly. Of course, I don't have to mention your name at all, so it remains completely anonymous.

So we were still answering this question about the Four Noble Truths and slowly making our way to the Eightfold Path. And yesterday we talked about the Buddha's first efforts to teach there, meeting that wanderer and not really impressing him, and then finding his five companions not really wanting to speak to him, being rude, thinking he'd gone soft, and very slowly opening up with his question of, "Have you ever heard me speak like this before?"

And now I want to follow that through with the discourse called the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta, which is translated as Setting in Motion the Wheel of the *Dhamma*. So here the teaching is more formalised. It was put together obviously later, but it's still understood traditionally to be his first talk given to the five companions.

Before I go on with that, I just want to tell you a story which illustrates hagiography, how people build up in their imagination somebody whom they think is saintly, just through passing messages from one to another, what is called Chinese whispers. I'm not so sure that's PC anymore, but that's what we call it. I think in the States they call it telephone or something. And of course, the same happens with anybody. If you talk about somebody, they pass it on to somebody else. Before you know it, they're either a criminal or a saint.

So it so happened I was up in Kandy and went to visit Bhikkhu Bodhi up there. Occasionally, very occasionally, I would go up and visit him. And there was a Danish monk with him, whose name, of course, I'd forgotten, whom I hadn't known. And what had happened was that he was living in the forests in Sri

Lanka, in a three-sided hut. I mean, he was living there with a three-sided hut. That means that one side was completely open to tarantulas, snakes, et cetera, et cetera. And he's very well known for that. And I do believe there are other monks now living in a similar way.

When he was coming back from almsround, which would have been in the morning, early morning, I suppose, from the local villages, an elephant suddenly shot out and ran over him. Now, if an elephant wants to kill you, I'm told, they will definitely kill you. But in this case, it seems they just wanted to shock him or something. But unfortunately, one of its feet landed on this monk's hip and shattered it, of course. And when I saw him, his leg was still up in the air. He'd been to hospital. They tried to do their best. Hopefully he's had it better seen to. Who knows?

Anyway, I had visited Colombo just before this. It was on my way up. So I used to stay at the International Buddhist Center there, which was established by the Bandranayakas, who were both prime ministers at that time of Sri Lanka, especially built for the Mahāsi Sayadaw when he visited in about 1956 or something, maybe a bit later, who knows. And there was a Swedish monk whom I knew there, a friend. And again, I've forgotten his name. And he told me a story about this Danish monk.

He said, "Have you heard about it?" I said, "No." He said, "Well, he was sitting in lotus under a tree meditating, and a she-elephant passed with a baby elephant. And the baby elephant was drawn to this figure under a tree and approached it and tried to sit in lotus, fell over and broke his hip."

So you can see what happens when stories are passed along the lines. As the story goes, he actually lay there all night. It was only in the next morning that the villagers recognised he hadn't turned up for almsround and went looking for him. So quite a telling story there about the way we build stories around things.

So putting that aside, let me start this particular discourse. And as I go through, I'll try and make some comments.

"Thus have I heard." Remember, these were all remembered by his attendant, Ananda, who became an Arahant just before the meeting, the big meeting that happened after he died. "And it says that on one occasion, the Blessed One was dwelling at Vārāṇasī in the deer park of Isipatana." So this is the place near present-day Vārāṇasī on the Ganges there, in the deer park at Isipatana. I think it's now known as Sarnath. "There, the Blessed One addressed the *bhikkhus* as a group of five, thus."

So he's now with his companions, his old companions. He says, "These two extremes should not be followed by one who has gone forth into homelessness. What two? The pursuit of sensual pleasure, of sensual happiness in sensual pleasures, which is low, vulgar, the way of worldlings, ignoble, unbeneficial. And the pursuit of self-mortification, which is painful, ignoble and unbeneficial. Without veering towards either of these extremes, the Tathāgata has awakened to the middle way, which gives rise to vision, which gives rise to knowledge, which leads to peace, to direct understanding, to enlightenment and to Nibbāna."

Now, these two extremes—"by one who's gone forth into homelessness"—so he's obviously talking to people who are wandering mendicants, but here we can translate this as anybody who's on a spiritual path. This isn't just for monks and nuns. This is for anybody who is on a spiritual path wanting to be released from all suffering.

So what two? He says, "The pursuit of sensual pleasure, sensual happiness in sensual pleasure." So remember, it's not the object itself that we want. It's not the good food, the sex, drugs and rock and roll. It's how we personally feel happy, excited when we have those things. He says this is low, vulgar, the way of worldlings, ignoble and unbeneficial. So we have to stop it. That's the message there. In fact, it's more than unbeneficial. It produces addiction, doesn't it? That's the problem with depending on sensual pleasures in order to make ourselves happy. They become a dependency.

And the next one is "the pursuit of self-mortification, which is painful, ignoble and unbeneficial." Now, this self-mortification is really about blaming the body. It refers, I think, specifically to the practice of those days. The Jain leader was well known for this practice, and he was an elder contemporary of the Buddha. And there's some suggestion that the Buddha might have spent some time, or at least visited him or whatever, but he was definitely practising self-mortifications for years, it's said.

And the main thing, of course, was to draw the body down. Draw the body down, not indulge in any of the senses. He said he got so thin he could hold his spine through his stomach. So if you try that, you can see he's very, very, very thin. And the understanding was that it's the body that's at fault. You wouldn't have lusty thoughts if you didn't have eyes. You start blaming the body for your problems. You wouldn't be greedy if the body didn't have appetite. So you start working with the body to draw down its sensual pleasures. And that way you stop these reactions which lead you to more suffering.

But he, of course, found this to be painful. Well, it's painful, of course, yes. Ignoble, so it wasn't leading on the spiritual path. Whenever the word *ariya* is used, it's always about the spiritual path. And it was unbeneficial. He didn't get anything from it. In fact, he said it was just more suffering.

There was, of course, a philosophy that underpinned this idea. And that was that the body itself was your *kamma*. And that if you could just let go of the body, just let it go, the soul would rise naturally to an eternal heavenly place. And this definitely is true. The philosophy that underpins Jainism—and a saint in Jainism is one who stops eating, basically, and often very elderly people will do so with that understanding. So the Buddha didn't think that was beneficial.

Now, when he says the middle path, it's not in between sensual pleasure and self-mortification. It's not you can have a bit of sensual pleasure and a bit of self-mortification and you'll find the way out. No, it's above. It's transcendent of it. The middle path has nothing to do with either the path of self-indulgence or the path of self-aversion. So this word "middle" has to be understood as a path which is transcendent of these other two unbeneficial paths.

And then he says, "Well, what is the middle way awakened to by the Tathāgata?" Remember that the word Tathāgata translates as "thus gone," which isn't particularly helpful. It's transcendent. He's gone, in his own words, he's gone beyond.

So he says, "What is that middle way awakened to by the Tathāgata which leads to Nibbāna? It is this Noble Eightfold Path: right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration. This is the middle way awakened to by the Tathāgata, which gives rise to vision, which gives rise to knowledge, leads to peace, to direct understanding, to enlightenment or awakening, and to Nibbāna."

And then now he gives us just these basic definitions of the Four Noble Truths, which are just worth reading through and also understanding how we should approach them.

So the first one is: "This is the noble truth of suffering." So remember that word *dukkha* has a whole meaning going from the smallest dissatisfaction, irritation, to the highest and most terrible sufferings that we're capable of. And it's also an existential suffering, which comes to us when death approaches. "So birth is suffering. Ageing is suffering. Illness is suffering. Death is suffering. Union with what is displeasing is suffering. Separation from what is pleasing is suffering." So having to deal with something that we don't like and not being able to get what we do like—these are sufferings for people, for those who are committed to trying to find some sort of permanent happiness in this life form. "And then finally, not to get what one wants, of course." So we've done that. "And the five aggregates subject to clinging are suffering."

Now, we haven't got time to go into the five aggregates this evening, but some other time. So these five aggregates really refer to what we would call the psychophysical organism. And this is what we identify with. And that identity is, of course, the root cause of our suffering.

"Now, this is the noble truth of the origin of suffering or the cause of suffering. It is this craving that leads to renewed existence, accompanied by delight and lust, seeking delight here and there. It is the craving for sensual pleasures, craving for becoming, craving for annihilation."

So our general motivation is to keep living. Like we want to wake up tomorrow morning, for instance. And we're chasing this business of pleasure and trying to get rid of what is unpleasant. And that's what this whole desire is concerned with.

So the word *taṇhā* translates as desire or sometimes craving, which is a bit strong. It can be a craving, of course. But there's no English word which gets across the idea of a desire which is constantly unwholesome. And that's what *taṇhā* refers to. There is another word for desire, *chanda*, which can be either good or bad. But *taṇhā* is a specific word which refers to those desires that are unwholesome for us, whether we're wanting or not wanting.

And so the more fundamental desire, of course, is to keep living, to keep becoming, to keep being me. And

the desire to exterminate or to commit suicide, basically, is the opposite of that. In a more gentle way, the desire to become is always to put myself first, to make sure that I'm okay. That's how it manifests. And the desire to annihilate can be as simple as not being able to handle something and just falling asleep. And some of the problems of dullness and lethargy we get in our meditation is based upon that attitude, not wanting to be with anything that's painful or upsetting. So you fall asleep. So sleep becomes a way of suppressing it, keeping it out of consciousness. So that's the second noble truth.

"The third noble truth is the cessation of suffering. It is the remainderless fading away and cessation of that same craving. The giving up and relinquishing of it, freedom from it, non-reliance on it."

So that craving, that *taṇhā*, that unwholesome wanting, that unskilful wanting, not wanting, that's what has to go. And a word for it would be reactivity, just reacting to things, not responding from wisdom, not responding from a position where we understand, but always reacting from this deluded place. Now, we don't do that always, obviously, but often we do. And what we're doing is reinforcing an old habit. It's so easy to fall into old habits. Old habits die hard. But in a sense, that sounds so simple, just get rid of this wrong desire. But of course, what we discovered is that that is quite a challenge. It's more than a lifetime's work, if you believe in rebirth.

"And finally, the noble truth of the path leading to the cessation of this suffering is the Eightfold Path."

And just quickly before we begin, because I want to do the Eightfold Path finally tomorrow, I'm absolutely determined. The Noble Truth of Suffering, he says, having stated what it is, he says this is what has to be fully understood. You have to understand it. And it's not just basic intellectual understanding, of course, but a direct understanding through personal experience. And part of that is the process of meditation, *vip assanā*. And then he says, "As far as I'm concerned, this has been fully realised, fully understood."

The noble truth of the origin of suffering, he says, has to be abandoned. This is what we have to abandon completely. And then he goes on to say that he has, in fact, abandoned it. The noble truth of the end of suffering has to be realised, a direct personal experience of a Nibbānic moment. And he says that, of course, he has actually experienced that too. And then, of course, the path itself is something that is to be developed. And, of course, he goes on to say that this has been developed. So that's the process of becoming fully liberated from suffering.

So what I would like to do, I've just got time, I'd like to skip over to the ending of this discourse, which then shows you how it's built up into these wonderful images of other worlds, other gods, et cetera, et cetera.

"So long, *bhikkhus*, as my knowledge and vision of these four noble truths as they really are in their three phases and twelve aspects"—that's what we've just been through—"was not thoroughly purified in this way, I did not claim to have awakened to the unsurpassed perfect enlightenment in this world, with its devas, gods, Māra and Brahmā"—those are the higher gods—"and in this generation of ascetics and Brahmins, its devas and humans." Devas are the beings around us.

"But when my knowledge and vision of the Four Noble Truths, as they really are in their three phases and twelve aspects, was thoroughly purified in this way, then I claim to have awakened to the unsurpassed perfect enlightenment in this world. Unshakeable is the liberation of my mind. This is my last birth. Now there is no more renewed existence."

"This is the knowledge and vision that arose in me. This is what the Blessed One said and elated the *bhikkh us* of the group of five, delighted in the Blessed One's statement. And while this discourse was being spoken, there arose in the Venerable Koṇḍañña the dust-free, stainless vision of the *Dhamma*: Whatever is subject to a beginning is subject to an end. Everything arises and passes away."

When the wheel of the Dhamma had been set in motion by the Blessed One, the earth-dwelling Devas raised a cry: "At Varanasi, in the deer park of Isipatana, the unsurpassed wheel of the Dhamma has been set in motion by the Blessed One, which cannot be stopped by any ascetic or Brahmin or Deva or Mara or Brahma or anyone in the world."

Having heard the cry of the earth-dwelling Devas, the Devas of the realms of the four kings raised the same cry. And from there to the Tavatimsa Devas and the Yama Devas, the Tusita Devas, the Nimmanarati Devas, and the Devas of the Brahma's company raised the cry: "At Varanasi, in the deer park at Isipatana, this unsurpassed wheel of Dhamma has been set in motion by the Blessed One, which cannot be stopped by any ascetic or Brahmin or Deva or Mara or Brahma or anyone in that world."

Thus, at that moment, at that instant, at that second, the cry spread as far as the Brahma world, and this ten-thousand-fold world system shook, quaked and trembled, and an immeasurable glorious radiance appeared in the world, surpassing the divine majesty of the Devas.

Then the Blessed One uttered this inspired utterance: "Kondanya has indeed understood. Kondanya has indeed understood." And in this way, the Venerable Kondanya acquired the name Anya Kondanya - Kondanya, the one who knows.

So that's a lovely poetic remembrance of the effect of turning the wheel of the Dhamma for us poor human beings.

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