

The Challenge of Right View

October 17, 2005

Right view is not just a statement about how things are. There's an imperative built into it. The sutta we chanted just now, *Setting the Wheel of Dhamma in Motion*, points out those imperatives. In fact, imperatives are part of the wheel. Back in ancient India, in the philosophical texts or the legal texts—although it's hard to call them texts, because they were things that people memorized—when they had sets of variables, they would go through all the permutations and call it a wheel. There's a wheel in the Buddha's first sermon. He talks about the four noble truths and how each noble truth has three levels of knowledge associated with it. He goes through all the permutations: Three times four is twelve. That's why the Dhamma wheel on the wall over there has twelve spokes.

The first level of knowledge is knowing the noble truth—in other words knowing suffering, knowing the cause of suffering, knowing the cessation of suffering, knowing what the path to the cessation of suffering would be.

Second level is knowing the duty appropriate to each. In terms of suffering or stress, you have to comprehend it. In terms of the cause, you have to abandon it. In terms of cessation, you have to realize it or witness it. And as for the path, you have to develop it. Knowing these imperatives is the second level of knowledge.

The third level is knowing that you've completed the duty for each truth. You've done all the work that has to be done. You've totally comprehended suffering. You've totally abandoned the cause. You've totally realized the cessation of suffering. And you've fully developed the path.

So that's the wheel of Dhamma. And notice that in the content—even just the first level, knowing what suffering is, knowing its causes, etc.—there's an imperative built in. Suffering is something you want to put an end to. You can't let it stay there. Something's got to be done. The Buddha once said that people's normal reaction to suffering is twofold. On the one hand, you're bewildered. Why is this suffering happening? On the other hand, you search for someone else who may know something about how to put an end to the suffering. The bewilderment is caused by the fact that suffering is based on all kinds of factors that can interplay in some very complex ways. There's no one formula that can cure every form of suffering. That's why the path has so many factors.

The problem with this bewilderment and search is that when you get bewildered, you search in the wrong places. You end up trying out all kinds of weird ideas about putting an end to suffering. But basically there is that

imperative that underlies the search: What can we do to put an end to suffering? In the four noble truths, the Buddha is taking that bewilderment and that desire to search, and pointing it in the right direction so that you can actually use it to your advantage.

And it's interesting: This was the first issue he raised in his very first talk and it was the main theme all the way through his teachings. He said that it was the only thing he taught. All he taught was suffering and the end of suffering. If he just taught about suffering and left it there, it wouldn't be much help. He taught about in such a way that it helps put an end to it. He points first to the cause of suffering, which is craving. And where is craving? The craving is inside our mind. It's an unskillful way of dealing with suffering because it creates more.

What that means is that we have to learn to be more skillful, to follow the other path, which is a path to the end of suffering. No one else can make us skillful. We have to develop skill on our own.

The Buddha once said that there are two sources for awakening. One is the voice of another person, the advice you get from someone else. The other is appropriate attention. That's your internal factor. But even if you get good advice from somebody else, it can't make you skillful. You have to use your own ability to attend to things appropriately, which is basically asking the right questions, asking questions in terms of these four noble truths: What right now is the suffering or stress that you're feeling, and what's the cause?

Part of the reason for why the mind is suffering right now is something in the present moment. There are causes coming in from the past that may make you feel pain either in the body or in the mind, but how you react to them is something you're doing right now. And that's important. This determines how we do the meditation—this one fact right here.

The Jains, another contemplative order at the time the Buddha, believed that all the pleasure and pain you're experiencing now is a result of past actions. As a result, the cause of suffering is something you did in the past. You can't go back and undo it, so it's inevitable that you have to suffer. Their only cure was that you just sit there and try to be very equanimous in the face of the pain so that you don't create any new karma. When there's no new karma, the old suffering just burns itself out. That's the end.

The funny thing is that that teaching is promoted as a Buddhist teaching nowadays, that you burn off the suffering simply by enduring it. But that's based on a wrong understanding of where suffering comes from. It's not just from the past. In fact, it's primarily from actions in the present moment. The cause of

suffering is something you're doing right now—and not only are you doing it, you also have a passion for it. That's why you do it.

So the path is aimed at putting an end of that passion, showing you that you're striving for things that are actually hurting you. The end of passion comes from understanding. You don't just sit there and watch. Some things you can just sit there and watch and they'll go away. But with other things, that doesn't work. You've got to understand them. As Buddha says, you have to apply the process of fabrication in order to undo these unskillful fabrications.

The main fabrications in meditation are directed thought, evaluation, and perception. You direct your thoughts at a particular object, you evaluate it, and then you see which perception you can apply to it that's going to be helpful. As in concentration: All the stages of concentration up to dimension of nothingness are all called perception attainments—as when you're focusing the body right now. Learn how to perceive the sensations of the body as breath sensations and view how they relate to one another in that sense. All the way down to the little physical sensations: See them all as breath, look at their breath aspect, make that the perception you focus on. As you apply the perception of breath, it'll actually highlight the breathy side of every sensation in the body—if you apply it consistently enough, if you apply it thoroughly enough. That's one way of applying perception.

The other way is that once the mind is settled in, you can start applying what the commentaries call the three characteristics, although I discovered recently that term three characteristics is found nowhere in the Canon. The Buddha himself never used the term. When he talked about inconstancy, stress, and not-self—*anicca, dukkha, anattā*—he called them perceptions. You apply the perception of inconstancy. You apply the perception of stress. You apply the perception of not-self, first to any of the distractions that would pull you away from concentration and ultimately to the state of concentration itself. And in applying those perceptions, you find that you run into a lot of other perceptions that you've been holding on to in your mind.

This is the purpose of this path: to dig up those issues. Exactly where can you claim this body here as yours, or those thoughts as yours? Well, one way to get around it is to see that they really are inconstant, and they really are stressful. And if they're stressful and inconstant, why would you want to hold on? Well, you find some advantage in holding on. We don't hold on to things without some idea that they're going to do us some good. Simply telling us that these things are empty of self-essence is not going to overcome our attachment to them.

Say that you're attached to food, and someone tells you that food is empty of any self-nature, food is empty of any inherent existence. Does that overcome your attachment to food? No. You're not attached to food because of its inherent existence. You're attached to it because it tastes good and it fills you up. Whether it has inherent existence or not is not the issue. But if you find out that the food that you've been eating and enjoying was actually poisonous, was actually harming your system, then you'd be more inclined to let go. And if you saw that it didn't really fill you up at all, you'd be even more likely to let go.

So the Buddha has you apply these perceptions of inconstancy, stress, and not self to see where you'll run into other perceptions you've been holding on to consciously or unconsciously, saying, basically, "This is me, this is mine, this is something really worth holding on to." This is why it's called exerting a fabrication: You really have to push, push, push those perceptions to see what they dig up in the mind.

It's like developing goodwill. When you spread thoughts of goodwill, it's not as if you're spreading marshmallow cream over everything. If you really are serious about developing goodwill for all beings, you have to remember that you're sure to run into people for whom it's hard to feel goodwill. The whole purpose of the practice is to dig through your entrenched dislikes and to ask yourself: "How can I feel goodwill for that person? They've done this. How can I feel goodwill for a person who's done that?" Well, you have to keep reflecting: What does it mean to feel goodwill? It doesn't mean you have to like people or to approve of what they've been doing. All it means is that you wish that they could find true happiness inside. If they could find true happiness inside, they wouldn't keep on doing those horrible things.

Reflecting this way helps change your attitude toward a lot of people. It makes it easier to deal with people you don't like, in a way that's not harmful to yourself or harmful to them.

In the same way, you can reflect on what you gain from ill will. You don't really gain anything at all from the desire to see other people suffer. When you see that, and you begin to realize that whatever pleasure you get out of that type of thinking is really self-destructive, it helps you let it go.

So all these perceptions that the Buddha has us apply to things are meant to dig up unskillful attitudes, help us loosen our passion for the things in the present moment that are causing suffering. We're not here trying to burn away our old karma by sitting and very patiently enduring pain. We're trying to figure out what it is right now that we're attached that's causing suffering. When you see the

connection between the suffering and stress on the one hand, and the cause on the other, then you can let go.

This understanding of karma—that what we're experiencing right now in terms of pleasure and pain is a combination of past actions and present actions, or past intentions and present intentions—is crucial for understanding why we're meditating the way we do. We use the processes of fabrication—directed thought, evaluation, perception—to dig out the causes of stress, and to learn how to develop dispassion for them. When there's dispassion for them, you let go. You stop creating them—and that's the end of suffering and stress.

This is why this understanding of causality, this understanding of karma, is so important, because it directs your attention to the right spot: right here right now, what's going on in the mind, trying to understand what's going on in the mind, not just enduring, but understanding, seeing through your craving, seeing through your ignorance.

That's the imperative contained in the noble truths, the imperative contained in right view: Look at what you're doing right now that's causing stress, and if you understand it from the right perspective, you can stop suffering.

That's the challenge that the Buddha has set out for all of us. And it's up for each of us decide whether we're up for that challenge or not.