SN 56.11 — SN 56:11 Setting the Wheel of Dhamma in Motion | Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta

English translation by Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu.

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Text

Setting the Wheel of Dhamma in Motion

Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta (SN 56:11)

According to Mahāvagga I.6, this was the Buddha’s first discourse after his awakening.

* * *

I have heard that on one occasion the Blessed One was staying near Vārāṇasī 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. Which two? That which is devoted to sensual pleasure in connection with sensuality: base, vulgar, common, ignoble, unprofitable; and that which is devoted to self-affliction: painful, ignoble, unprofitable. Avoiding both of these extremes, the middle way realized by the Tathāgata—producing vision, producing knowledge—leads to stilling, to direct knowledge, to self-awakening, to unbinding.

“And what is the middle way realized by the Tathāgata that—producing vision, producing knowledge—leads to stilling, to direct knowledge, to self-awakening, to unbinding? 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 stilling, to direct knowledge, to self-awakening, to unbinding.

“Now this, monks, is the noble truth of stress1: Birth is stressful, aging is stressful, death is stressful; sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, & despair are stressful; association with the unbeloved is stressful, separation from the loved is stressful, not getting what is wanted is stressful. In short, the five clinging-aggregates are stressful.2

“And this, monks, is the noble truth of the origination of stress: the craving that makes for further becoming—accompanied by passion & delight, relishing now here & now there—i.e., craving for sensuality, craving for becoming, craving for non-becoming.3

“And this, monks, is the noble truth of the cessation of stress: the remainderless fading & cessation, renunciation, relinquishment, release, & letting go of that very craving.

“And this, monks, is the noble truth of the way of practice leading to the cessation of stress: precisely this noble eightfold path—right view, right resolve, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration.4

“Vision arose, insight arose, discernment arose, knowledge arose, illumination arose within me with regard to things never heard before: ‘This is the noble truth of stress’ … ‘This noble truth of stress is to be comprehended’ … ‘This noble truth of stress has been comprehended.’

“Vision arose, insight arose, discernment arose, knowledge arose, illumination arose within me with regard to things never heard before: ‘This is the noble truth of the origination of stress’ … ‘This noble truth of the origination of stress is to be abandoned’5 … ‘This noble truth of the origination of stress has been abandoned.’

“Vision arose, insight arose, discernment arose, knowledge arose, illumination arose within me with regard to things never heard before: ‘This is the noble truth of the cessation of stress’ … ‘This noble truth of the cessation of stress is to be realized’ … ‘This noble truth of the cessation of stress has been realized.’

“Vision arose, insight arose, discernment arose, knowledge arose, illumination arose within me with regard to things never heard before: ‘This is the noble truth of the way of practice leading to the cessation of stress’ … ‘This noble truth of the way of practice leading to the cessation of stress is to be developed’ … ‘This noble truth of the way of practice leading to the cessation of stress has been developed.’6

“And, monks, as long as this—my three-round, twelve-permutation knowledge & vision concerning these four noble truths7 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 devas, Māras, & Brahmās, in this generation with its contemplatives & brahmans, its royalty & commonfolk. But as soon as this—my three-round, twelve-permutation knowledge & 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 devas, Māras, & Brahmās, in this generation with its contemplatives & brahmans, its royalty & commonfolk. Knowledge & vision arose in me: ‘Unprovoked8 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 in the Blessed One’s 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 cried out: “Near Vārāṇasī, in the Deer Park at Isipatana, the Blessed One has set in motion the unexcelled Wheel of Dhamma that cannot be stopped by contemplative or brahman, deva, Māra, or Brahmā, or anyone at all in the cosmos.” On hearing the earth devas’ cry, the Devas of the Four Great Kings took up the cry… the Devas of the Thirty-three… the Devas of the Hours… the Contented Devas… the Devas Delighting in Creation … the Devas [Muses?] Wielding Power over the Creations of Others… the Devas of Brahmā’s Retinue took up the cry: “Near Vārāṇasī, in the Deer Park at Isipatana, the Blessed One has set in motion the unexcelled Wheel of Dhamma that cannot be stopped by contemplative or brahman, deva, Māra, or Brahmā, or anyone at all in the cosmos.”

So in that moment, that instant, the cry shot right up to the Brahmā worlds. And this ten-thousand-fold cosmos shivered & quivered & quaked, while a great, measureless radiance appeared in the cosmos, surpassing the effulgence of the deities.

Then the Blessed One exclaimed: “So you really know, Kondañña? So you really know?” And that is how Ven. Kondañña acquired the name Añña-Kondañña—Kondañña who knows.

Notes

1. The Pali phrases for the four noble truths are grammatical anomalies. From these anomalies, some scholars have argued that the expression “noble truth” is a later addition to the texts. Others have argued even further that the content of the four truths is also a

later addition. Both of these arguments are based on the unproven assumption that the language the Buddha spoke was grammatically regular, and that any irregularities were later corruptions of the language. This assumption forgets that the languages of the Buddha's time were oral dialects, and that the nature of such dialects is to contain many grammatical irregularities. Languages tend to become regular only when being used to govern a large nation state or to produce a large body of literature: events that happened in India only after the Buddha's time. (A European example: Italian was a group of irregular oral dialects until Dante fashioned it into a regular language for the sake of his poetry.) Thus the irregularity of the Pali here is no proof either for the earliness or lateness of this particular teaching.

2. For further discussion of the first noble truth, see DN 22, MN 109, SN 22:48, SN 22:79, SN 38:14, AN 6:63.

3. For further discussion of the second noble truth, see DN 22, SN 12:2, SN 12:64.

4. For further discussion of the fourth noble truth, see MN 117, SN 45:8.

5. Another argument for the lateness of the expression "noble truth" is that a truth—meaning an accurate statement about a body of facts—is not something that should be abandoned. In this case, only the craving is to be abandoned, not the truth about craving. However, in Vedic Sanskrit—as in modern colloquial English—a "truth" can mean both a fact and an accurate statement about a fact. In this case, the "truth" is the fact, not the statement about the fact. The fact of craving is to be abandoned, not the statement about it. Thus the expression is not necessarily late.

6. The discussion in the four paragraphs beginning with the phrase, "Vision arose...." takes two sets of variables—the four noble truths and the three levels of knowledge appropriate to each—and lists their twelve permutations. In ancient Indian philosophical and legal traditions, this sort of discussion is called a wheel. Thus, this passage is the Wheel of Dhamma from which the discourse takes its name.

For other discussions of the duties listed in this wheel, see MN 149, SN 22:23, SN 38:14, and SN 56:30.

7. Scholars who believe that the term "noble truth" was a later addition to the early parts of this sutta ignore the fact that the term reappears here in a perfectly regular way, and that it would be hard to make sense of this passage without the term. Thus there is no reason at all to believe that "noble truth" was a later addition here.

8. On the meaning of "unprovoked," here, see MN 29, note 3.

Publisher references (not part of the sutta)

See also: MN 9; MN 28; MN 141