

# **1                    The Dhammacakkapvattana Sutta**

## **Introduction**

According to tradition, the Dhammacakkapvattana Sutta (The Discourse of Setting in Motion the Wheel of the Dharma) is what the Buddha said in his first sermon following his enlightenment. It is a foundational Buddhist discourse, for it introduces fundamental concepts of the Buddha Dharma like the Middle Way and the Four Noble Truths.<sup>1</sup>

This primer describes the storyline of the sutra, its structure and main teachings, and practices that follow from these teachings. A copy of the sutra is appended to the primer.

## **The Storyline of the Dhammacakkapvattana Sutta**

According to much repeated Buddhist tradition, the Buddha, known then as Siddhartha Gautama, left his wife and child, and a life of luxury, at the age of twenty-nine to seek enlightenment.<sup>2</sup> For the first six years of his seeking, he chose a life of hardship and asceticism along with five companions, the ascetics Kondanna, Bhaddiya, Vappa, Mahanama, and Assaji. Finally realizing that neither the way of ease and indulgence nor the way of hardship and asceticism was the path to liberation he sat under the Bodhi tree (literally the tree of awakening) by the Nerajara River in Bodh Gaya resolving not to arise until he attained what he was seeking. After attaining enlightenment, he, now Shakyamuni Buddha, stayed near the Bodhi tree for forty-nine more days deciding how he could present what he had learned to the world, for he realized that few people were prepared at the time to believe or understand him.<sup>3</sup>

The Buddha finally decided to rejoin his old companions who were now in a deer park at Isipatana (now Sarnath), a small town in central India. After rejoining them, he

gave the teaching now known as the Dhammacakkapvattana Sutta. After the sermon, the Buddha continued teaching the Dharma until his death at the age of eighty, forty-five years later.

### **The Structure of the Dhammacakkapvattana Sutta**

The Dhammacakkapvattana Sutta is a short sutra of only 894 words in the version used here (see the copy at the end the primer).<sup>4</sup> For review purposes, it has been divided into seven sections.

**Section 1:** Section 1 introduces the sutra, starting with the customary “Thus have I heard,” followed by the place where the sermon took place (the deer sanctuary near Benares), and ending with a mention of who was attending the discourse (the five bhikkhus, in this case the five ascetics).

**Section 2:** The second section names two extremes of living, the extreme of a devotion to sense-pleasures and the extreme of a devotion to self-mortification. The Buddha states that those who go forth from worldly life to seek nirvana must avoid these two extremes. This is the Buddha’s Middle Way.

**Section 3:** Section 3 names the Noble Eightfold Path (right understanding, right thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration) that the Tathagata (the Buddha) followed once he understood the value of the Middle Way for practice. After avoiding the two extreme, the Buddha found that the Eightfold Path “produces vision, produces knowledge, and leads to calm. penetration, enlightenment, nibbana” (nirvana).

**Section 4:** This section names and describes each of the Four Noble Truths: the Noble Truth of Suffering (in the appended example of the sutra, “of ill”), the Noble Truth

of the Origin of Suffering the Noble Truth of the Cessation of Suffering, and the Noble Truth of the Path leading to the Cessation of Suffering, which is the Noble Eightfold Path mentioned above.

**Section 5:** Section 5 describes three ways of regarding each of the Noble Truths in contemplation and meditation: (1) **recognition** (for example, This is suffering) (2) **encouragement** (Suffering should be understood), and (3) **realization** (Suffering is understood). When these three ways of regarding each Truth have been applied to each of the Four Noble Truths, twelve ways of contemplating and meditating on the truths are obtained.<sup>5</sup>

**Section 6:** In the sixth section the Buddha says that “So long ... as my knowledge, and vision of reality regarding these four noble truths, in three phases and twelve ways, was not fully clear to me, I did not declare to the world ... that I understood incomparable, perfect enlightenment.” The Buddha ends the section by saying that “But when ... as my knowledge, and vision of reality regarding these four noble truths, in three phases and twelve ways, was fully clear to me, I declared ... that I understood incomparable, perfect enlightenment.” The section ends with the Buddha saying, “This is the last birth, now there will be no birth.”

**Section 7:** The last section of the sutra affirms that these are the words of the Buddha and that his audience rejoiced in hearing these words.

### **The Heart of the Teachings of the Sutra**

According to Thich Nhat Hahn, “three points characterize this sutra.”<sup>5</sup> The first is the teaching of **the middle way** or path (Skt: madhyama-pratipad). As mentioned above, the middle way in Buddhism refers to a spiritual path of moderation. The goal for home-

leavers is to purposely avoid any extreme that might disrupt their practice, such as indulgence in mind altering substances that dull one's mind. Two extremes are mentioned in the sutra: devotion to sense pleasures and devotion to austerities.

The second point is the teaching of **the Four Noble or Wonderful Truths**. These truths were the Buddha's way of conveying his insight in a manner that people at the time could easily understand. **The first Truth** states that life for most people is difficult and at times painful, which is denoted in Sanskrit by the word *dukkha*. The word *dukkha* is most often translated as 'suffering' in English, though it is generally agreed that it refers to something less severe, such as difficult or unsatisfactory. **The second Truth** maintains that *dukkha* is most often the result of craving for pleasurable sensations and experiences. And **the third Truth** stresses that 'suffering' can have an end, which is nirvana.

**The fourth Truth** is the eightfold path, which when each of its eight practices are practiced wholeheartedly together aids us in refraining from doing the things that cause us to suffer. The eight practices are right view, right thinking, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right diligence, right mindfulness, and right concentration. To elaborate on each practice using a variety of common :

**Right Understanding (View):** accept (at least in early stages along the Path) basic Buddhist teachings like the Four Noble Truths; work to gain direct knowledge of the Four Noble Truths through practice.

**Right Intention (Resolve, Thinking):** work to have a positive outlook; give up selfish attitudes that lead to suffering; strive to bring happiness to all; direct the mind in meditation to arrest solely on the object of meditation (nibbana, for example), so that correct understanding arises.

**Right Speech:** strive to always speak words that are positive and beneficial to others; avoid harming with what you say; avoid slanderous, harsh, negative, and frivolous speech.

**Right Action:** avoid doing harm with what you do; keep the precepts; seek to help and protect others; abstain from the three wrong physical actions of killing beings, of taking what is not given, and of sexual misconduct.

**Right Livelihood:** avoid professions that can harm others, such as the selling of arms, human beings (slavery), meat, liquor, and poison.

**Right Effort (Diligence):** continually strive to be aware of what is arising in your mind; strive to not arise unwholesome states and to arise wholesome states of mind; direct the mind toward spiritual goals.

**Right Mindfulness:** be at all times mindful of what you are doing, thinking, and feeling; be mindful at all times of Four Foundations of Mindfulness, mindfulness of the body, of feelings, of consciousness, and of the Dharma; strive to make your everyday activities a form of meditation.

**Right Meditation (Concentration):** make your mind sharp and free of distractions and dullness; train the mind to achieve the state of focused attention necessary to enter the meditative trances (Pali: Jhana); samatha meditation and vipassana meditation are usually mentioned as ways of training the mind to reach these trances.

The eight understandings of the eightfold path are often placed in three groups: 1-2 relate to insight (Prajna), 3-5 to morality (sila), and 6-8 to meditation (samadhi).

The third point is, as expressed by Nhat Hanh, is “engagement in the world.” As always, the teachings of the Buddha were not intended to isolate seekers from the world,

but to more fully engage in the world and in ourselves as participating members of that world. Clear examples in this sutra are right speech and right livelihood. As often emphasized, the sutra is filled with joy and hope, not gloom and withdrawal.

### **Practices That Follow From These Teachings**

When teaching, the Buddha constantly countered peoples' habit of simply believing what he said by stressing the necessity of direct insight into his teachings gained through the practice of meditative concentration (the eighth practice in the eightfold path). In early Buddhism and later Theravada Buddhism, the practice generally starts with a calming practice (samatha meditaion) followed by vipassana or insight meditation, which leads through time to the direct verification of the truth of the Buddha's teachings.<sup>6</sup> Examples for everyday practices for people who are not monks are: "Begin to notice the patterns of when you make an effort in your life and when you do not"; "Take a little tine to contemplate the experience of suffering in your life. Choose one painful incident in particular and either write or think about it."; "Pick one simple everyday action and use this one action in particular to try to train yourself to remember what you are doing."<sup>8</sup>

Meditations by monks are generally much more involved. The Satipatthana Sutta in Chapter 2 of this book introduces some of the core meditations that monks following the Buddha's early teachings engage in.

### **Notes**

1. For the teachings of early Buddhism, see Nhat Hanh (1998) and Ruhula (1974).
2. There are many descriptions of the life of the Buddha. For examples, see Armstrong (2001) and Prebish and Keown 2006: 26-42).
3. The name Shakyamuni Buddha (Sage of the Shakya Clan) is used where necessary to separate this Buddha from other buddhas.

4. Copies of the sutra are available in various versions on the Web and in numerous books, such as Rahula (1974: 92-93) and Nhat Hanh (1998:257-261). The version at the end of the primer is a Pali Text translation, with an introduction by Soma Thera (1960) (accessed from the Web on 03/16/2019). According to Bronkhorst (...) this “first sermon is recorded in several sutras, with important variations (p. 22, note 6). Some versions do not contain the Four Noble Truths or the “twelve insights.” It is possible “that the discourse was identified as the first sermon of the Buddha at a later date (p. 29), perhaps because it contains the very essence of the Buddha’s enlightenment, after that essence was decided on.
5. Thich Nhat Hahn (1998: 28-31) considers each of the three ways of regarding a Noble Truth a turning of the wheel of the Dharma, for twelve turnings in all.
6. Nhat Hahn (1998:7).
7. For descriptions of these meditations, see as examples Nhat Hanh (1998: 64-83), Weisman and Smith (2010), Silananda (2002), and Gunaratana (2011).
8. These examples are taken from Weisman and Smith (2010).

## **Bibliography**

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## **The Dhammacakkapvattana Sutta**

Thus have I heard,  
 Once when the Blessed One was staying in the pleasure of Isipatana, the deer sanctuary near Benares, he spoke to the group of five bhikkhus:  
 “These two extremes, bhikkhus, should not be followed by one who has gone forth from worldly life: sensual indulgence, low, coarse, vulgar, ignoble, unprofitable, and self-torture, painful, ignoble, unprofitable.  
 Bhikkhus, the middle way, understood by the Tathāgata, after he had avoided the extremes, produces vision, produces knowledge, and leads to calm, penetration, enlightenment, nibbāna.  
 What middle way, bhikkhus, understood by the Tathāgata, produces vision, produces knowledge and leads to calm. penetration, enlightenment, nibbāna ?  
 Only this noble eightfold path, namely,  
 right understanding—Sammā Diṭṭhi

right thought—Sammā Saṅkappa

right speech—Samma Vācā

right action—Sammā Kammanta

right livelihood—Sammā jīva

right effort—Samma Vāyāma

right mindfulness—Samma Sati

right concentration—Samma Samādhī

Truly bhikkhus, this middle way understood by the Tathāgata produces vision, produces knowledge, and leads to calm, penetration, enlightenment, nibbāna.

This, bhikkhus, is the noble truth of ill: birth is ill, decay is ill, disease is ill, death is ill, association with the unloved is ill, separation from the loved is ill, not to get what one wants is ill, in short the five aggregates of grasping are ill.

This, bhikkhus, is the noble truth of the source of ill: the craving which causes rebirth is

accompanied by passionate pleasure, and takes delight in this and that object, namely sensuous craving, craving for existence and craving for annihilation.

This, bhikkhus, is the noble truth of the cessation of ill: the complete cessation, giving up, abandonment of that craving, complete release from that craving and complete detachment from it.

This, bhikkhus is the noble truth of the way leading to the cessation of ill; only this noble eightfold path namely, right understanding, right thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration.

With the thought: “This is the noble truth of ill”, there arose in me, bhikkhus, vision, knowledge, insight, wisdom, light, concerning things unknown before.

With the thought, “This is the noble truth of ill, and this ill has been understood,” there arose in me, bhikkhus, vision, knowledge, insight, wisdom, light, concerning things unknown before.

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With the thought, “This is the noble truth of ill, and this ill has been understood”, there arose in me, bhikkhus, vision, knowledge, insight, wisdom, light, concerning things unknown before.

With the thought, “This is the noble truth of the source of ill”, there arose in me, bhikkhus, vision, knowledge, insight, wisdom, light, concerning things unknown before.

With the thought, “This is the noble truth of the source of ill, and this source of ill has to be abandoned”, there arose in me, bhikkhus, vision, knowledge, insight, wisdom, light, concerning things unknown before.

With the thought, “This is the noble truth of the source of ill, and this source of ill has been abandoned”, there arose in me, bhikkhus, vision, knowledge, insight, wisdom, light, concerning things unknown before.

With the thought, “This is the noble truth of the cessation of ill”, there arose in me bhikkhus, vision, knowledge, insight, wisdom, light, concerning things unknown before.

With the thought, “This is the noble truth of the cessation of ill, and this cessation of ill has to be realised”, there arose in me, bhikkhus, vision, knowledge, insight, wisdom, light, concerning things unknown before.

With the thought, “This is the noble truth of ill, and this cessation of ill has been realised”, there arose in me, bhikkhus, vision, knowledge, insight, wisdom, light, concerning things unknown before.

With the thought, “This is the noble truth of the way leading to the cessation of ill”, there arose in me, bhikkhus, vision, knowledge, insight, wisdom, light, concerning



things unknown before.

With the thought, “This is the noble truth of the way leading to the cessation of ill, and this way has to be developed”, there arose in me, bhikkhus, vision, knowledge, insight, wisdom light, concerning things unknown before.

With the thought, “This is the noble truth of the way leading to the cessation of ill, and this way has been developed”, there arose in me bhikkhus, vision, knowledge, insight, wisdom, light, concerning things unknown before.

So long, bhikkhus, as my knowledge, and vision of reality regarding these four noble truths, in three phases and twelve ways, was not fully clear to me, I did not declare to the world with its devas and māras, to the mass of beings with its devas and humans, that I understood incomparable, perfect enlightenment.

But when, bhikkhus, as my knowledge, and vision of reality regarding these four noble truths, in three phases and twelve ways, was fully clear to me, I declared to the world with its devas and māras, to the mass of beings with its devas and humans that I understood incomparable, perfect enlightenment.

Knowledge and vision arose in me. Unshakable is the deliverance of my mind; this is the last birth, now there will be no birth.

Thus spoke the Blessed One and the group of five bhikkhus glad at heart approved of the words of the Blessed One.