



TURNING *the*
WHEEL
of TRUTH

*Commentary on the
Buddha's First Teaching*

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Dedicated to Phra Rajasumedhacariya (Ajahn Sumedho). Single gratitude.

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Introduction: The Teaching and Its Background

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Credits

The Discourse That Sets Turning the Wheel of Truth (Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta) is one of the many texts that appear in what is known as the Pāli Canon. This Canon is a collection of texts pertaining to the Buddha's teachings that were composed in the Pāli language. Most of these texts were assembled within the first hundred years after the Buddha's decease by dedicated groups of monks who collected all the teachings and stories that they could find and put them into a form that suited oral recitation. Neither the Buddha nor his disciples wrote anything down. As they listened to his teachings, people would remember passages, phrases, or the gist of what the Buddha had said and would practice recitation to commit them to memory. In addition to traditional teachings, there were also expositions, verses, stories, profound utterances, and decisions about monastic conduct that the disciples also committed to memory. In collecting this wide range of teachings given over forty-five years, the early reciters decided to put them all into metaphorical "baskets" (*piṭaka* in Pāli), which are repositories much like computer folders. Eventually three baskets were created, while they wove the teachings into more coherent and fleshed-out forms in order to preserve the words of the Buddha and his chief disciples. The basket containing *suttas*, or formal discourses, was called Sutta Piṭaka. Another basket containing the decisions on conduct was called Vinaya Piṭaka (*vinaya* means "that which breaks up corruptions"). Finally, a third basket was created, called Abhidhamma Piṭaka, which contains a more scholarly classification of factors and aggregates and mind states.

To weave this material into a cohesive form meant standardizing the Buddha's language and experiences without compromising his teachings. The present *suttas* of the Sutta Piṭaka often have expositions, verses, and mythic material woven around a central "thread" of the teaching. A solid framework was also provided by locating the teachings in time and place. The framework was further stabilized by gathering the *suttas* in the Sutta Piṭaka into collections (or *Nikāya*) which the monks could learn by heart. The Sutta Piṭaka, as it now stands, is divided into many collections.

Two collections were compiled according to the length of the *suttas*—the Long Discourses (Dīgha Nikāya) and the Middle Length Discourses (Majjhima Nikāya). The Connected Discourses (Saṃyutta Nikāya) were arranged according to themes, so it contains *suttas* on groupings such as the aggregates or the factors of awakening. The Gradual Sayings (Aṅguttara Nikāya), is found in the collection according to the salient number in the *sutta*. So, for example, we have *suttas* on five hindrances in the Book of Fives. This collection is called such because it is ordered sequentially, extending its numerical factor one number at a time. Finally, the Lesser Collection (Khuddaka Nikāya) contains a great range of what probably started out as short bunches of discourses, but kept growing as the catch-all collection of texts that had been left out of the other collections. This is now the largest collection and it contains very early material such as Sutta-Nipāta, ver-

popular material such as Dhammapada, and also texts from much later time including legends and fables.

The methodology of creating the three baskets and the Sutta Piṭaka collections probably evolved over time, and they don't present the teachings in any step-by-step or chronological order. In fact, its lack of a single overriding order shows that its compilation was an effort made by many people. For example, an attempt at a chronological account of the early years of the Buddha's postenlightened life was placed in the Vinaya Piṭaka, whereas the narrative of the end of his life was put into the Sutta Piṭaka, in the middle of the Long Discourses.

The Buddha's first discourse, the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta, appears twice in the Canon. It is tucked away in the Sutta Piṭaka where it was placed as one of a group of suttas that contain the topic of the noble truths. (Specifically, it is found under Connected Discourses 56: Truths 11.) However, being a landmark event in the Buddha's life, it was also placed in the Vinaya Piṭaka, where it can be found in the chronologically-oriented first section of the Mahavagga. (Specifically, it is under Mahavagga 1: Discipline 3). These aren't the most readily accessible places in Pāli cannon—you might think, "Why not put the first sutta at the beginning of the Sutta Piṭaka?"—but the Canon wasn't composed as a literary document. Despite its placement, the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta is, however, one of the most commonly recited suttas in Theravada monasteries throughout the world, particularly on the day that commemorates the occasion when the Blessed One gave his first teaching.

Translations and Key Terms

The suttas that we find in the Pāli Canon are represented as core texts in all the schools of Buddhism, although it's only the Theravāda school that refers to them in their Pāli form—the Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna schools use Sanskrit, Chinese, Tibetan, and other translations. The work of collecting the Pāli texts and publishing them in Roman script began in the late nineteenth century with the foundation of the Pāli Text Society. Subsequent to that, the Pāli Text Society has systematically translated into English the major texts from the Sutta Piṭaka as well as the Vinaya and Abhidhamma Piṭakas. Some of these translations are quite old, and now and further research, as well as a couple of generations of established Buddhist practice in the West, has deepened the understanding of the meaning of much of the terminology. Although the overall meaning of the discourses is clear, translators will often use different English words to capture the fullest meaning and nuance of the Pāli. *Āsava*, for example, has been translated as "canker," "taint," "corruption," "effluent," "outflow," and "inflow."

The language of the discourses is full of metaphors and analogies that dramatically heighten the effect of the teachings. This is done, no doubt, with the intention to make subtle or unconscious areas of the mind stand out, and also to give them strong nuances that illuminate the Buddha's message. For example, the happiness of the senses is likened to the momentary relief a leper might get from cauterizing his sores. The four levels of absorptive concentration are, on the other

hand, likened to couches because of the ease that they bring to the mind. The effect carries through to individual English terms: we hear of *fetters* and *hindrances* on the one hand, and “the Blessed One” and “the Triple Gem” on the other. The language, much of which was spoken to men of the warrior caste, often alludes to aspects of martial struggle. Readers have to make use of this language without taking on the less encouraging nuances of moralizing or aggression that might get inferred. The words are a medicine—astringent at times—and are to be taken in doses as needed.

I have translated the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta as well as most of the extracts from the Aṅguttara Nikāya. In my rendering, I have attempted to present both a translation that is broadly consistent with other versions and new, elucidating. So the four truths (*ariya sacca*) are generally called “noble” truths, although one might also translate *ariya* as “precious.” *Dukkha* is often translated as “suffering,” but I have presented a few other ways in which we can understand this term: “difficult,” “painful,” “hard,” “hard to bear,” “stress,” “unsatisfactory,” or “giving no real satisfaction.” These various words may help to flesh out the many flavors of this term, which literally means something like “bad-made.” After a while, hoping that the reader has gotten a feel for the word, I’ve placed the Pāli word into the English text.

Another key term is *sankhāra*. This derives from the root word meaning “to do” or “to make,” with a prefix that indicates “together” or “conjoined.” Part of the difficulty of finding a suitable English word is that *sankhāra* refers both to the activity of making or conjoining, and to the result—a made pattern or form. Venerable Bhikkhu Bodhi often translates this as “formations” or “volitional formations,” both of which present the result as a mental tendency or pattern of activity. In a similar vein, other translators use the terms *fabrication*, *determination*, or *condition*. I often use *activities*, a term that places more emphasis on the creative aspect of *sankhāra*, and which is perhaps a more tangible word than the rather general *formations*. I also use *programs* to indicate how these activities are programmed, that they are conditioned energies and have the potential—like a computer program—to adjust, remove, or add further programs to the existing ones. The reader should bear in mind that these *sankhāra* are energies that form kamma; they are creative energies and are also patterned in our mind as results of previous kamma. It is the patterning of these *sankhāra* that generates the sense of a solid and continuing self. Through the very “personal” quality of these *sankhāra*, the sense “I am” keeps forming moment after moment.

Although this terminology can be difficult to grasp in abstract, it is revealing and relevant in meditation when we can more fully feel mental behavior and learn to unravel its compulsive knots. This is why and how the Buddha taught—not to establish a philosophy, but to place some landmarks and some equipment on the terrain of the mind. It is with like intent that this book is offered.

Abbreviations

I have abbreviated texts from the Pāli Canon as follows:

AN	Aṅguttara Nikāya (Numerical Discourses or Gradual Sayings)
DN	Dīgha Nikāya (Long Discourses)
MN	Majjhima Nikāya (Middle-Length Discourses)
SN	Saṃyutta Nikāya (Connected Discourses)
D	Dhammapada (from the Khuddaka Nikāya)
M	Mahavagga (from the Vinaya Piṭaka)
Su-N	Sutta-Nipāta (from the Khuddaka Nikāya)
U	Udāna and the Itivuttaka (from the Khuddaka Nikāya)

References to AN are to the book number and the sutta number.

References to DN and MN are to the sutta number followed by the section number.

References to SN are to the saṃyutta number, the theme, and the sutta number.

Publisher's Note: This book contains many Pāli diacritics and special characters. If you encounter difficulty displaying these characters, please set your e-reader device to publisher defaults (if available) or to an alternate font.

The Teaching and Its Background

This book is about a great teaching, a teaching that brings light into the world. It presents the first discourse given by the Buddha, who lived in India around twenty-five hundred years ago but whose experiential wisdom is still guiding people throughout the world today. The Discourse That Sets Turning the Wheel of Truth is still relevant because it focuses on a common feature of human life—the experience of trouble and stress and the search to get free of it. When freedom is achieved, it's like somebody switched the light on. It's that kind of teaching—it's not philosophical or of passing interest. It can reach out and bring blessings to all of us.

However, since the teaching was given so long ago in a culture different from our own, its wording and allusions can cause us modern readers to stumble. For starters, it's written in the Pāli language, which is an amalgam of various ancient vernacular Indian dialects. This language of the text is similar to Sanskrit, but is deliberately more colloquial. This is because the Buddha chose to teach in the spoken dialects of ordinary people in order to get his message across more readily—not that this helps the modern Westerner. Sanskrit was the literary language reserved for the upper caste, so by using ordinary language, the Buddha was making the point that his teaching wasn't philosophical or only for the learned. Instead, it is supposed to reach ordinary people, be matter-of-fact, and accessible. So I'd like to support the Buddha's intention by presenting his discourse in English and commenting on it using what I hope is conversational language. I also refer to my understanding of Buddhist practice to illustrate the timeless relevance of the teaching it presents.

This discourse can be found in a series of texts that make up the bulk of what is called the Pāli Canon.¹ The Pāli Canon was assembled within the first hundred years after the Buddha's death by his disciples who had committed his teaching to memory and who wanted to put them into a form that would suit oral recitation. At that time, writing wasn't that usual, and wouldn't have been used for religious material. Instead, the mode of transmission was through human memory and voice. When a group decides to learn something by heart in this way, it's very effective: if someone makes a mistake, the others correct him or her and it's unlikely that everyone will have the same lapse in memory. There's no paper or papyrus to decompose or get eaten by termites, and when something is recited, it really sticks in the mind. However, while oral recitation can be an effective tool for memorization, it's helpful to recognize that what we have here is an account, perhaps with embellishments for dramatic effect; it is an account that frames a consistent thread, or *sutta*, which is one of the many that form the tapestry of the Pāli Canon.

What follows then is a commentary on one discourse that the Buddha gave

among many throughout his teaching career of forty-five years. It was his first discourse after his enlightenment (or awakening)—an experience of the ending of delusion, which set him free from all trouble and stress. And many would say that this was his most important discourse because it established the basis of the teaching that he added to throughout his life—the teaching of “suffering and the cessation of suffering,” which he encapsulated in four great or “noble” truths.

The important thing to emphasize is that this teaching has to be put into practice, tested, and lived. It’s a guide, a manual, not a treatise. It occurs within the dynamic of our own mind as we access where we’re stuck or struggling or bruised—and decide to look into that experience rather than blame it on someone or cover it up. So when you take this teaching to heart, it sets you behind the steering wheel of an engine that’s been driving your life: the urge to be happy, fulfilled, at peace; the urge to get clear of depression, guilt, anxiety, and all that the Buddha summed up as *dukkha*, which means “suffering,” “trouble,” and “general unsatisfactoriness.” Although we all have this fundamental motivation for well-being, most of us don’t get the right instructions on how to fulfill it. This lack of know-how is what the Buddha referred to as “unknowing” or “ignorance” and this is precisely what his teaching directly addresses. As long as we don’t know our own mind and heart deeply, we can’t steer them. Then instead of directing ourselves to what is most immediate and personal, we try to steer the world. But with wise instructions, you have a powerful resource to steer your life with. These instructions are called *Dhamma* (Skt.: *Dharma*) *Dhamma* has a number of meanings, some of which are exclusive to Buddhism and some are not. In the Indian culture that gave life to this concept, it most broadly means “the proper order of things.” The Vedas, the ancient religious teachings that underlie that culture, teach that there is a unifying order in the cosmos, called *Dharma*. And within the society, rituals and sacrifices need to be performed in order to keep the human realm connected to that unifying order. This was the role of the priests, or brahmins. However, every person from king to slave, also had a duty to act in accordance with their status and responsibilities. That duty, that individual obligation, was also called *dharma*—the lowercase *d* is used by translators to distinguish a personal “proper order” from the “cosmic principle.” If a person’s duty was properly carried out, then harmony and prosperity would prevail. If not, the result would be chaos. Following this, a central theme in Indian culture is that it is people’s duty to live in accordance with their “*dharma*”—a concept that encompasses the responsibilities and observances of caste, clan, and family, as well as their “religious” observances. The uppercase word *Dhamma* then means something wider than religion or even spirituality—it is the correct, balanced way of things. The most fitting representation of *Dhamma* is a many-spoked wheel (which sits in the center of India’s present-day flag). As a wheel it carries the meaning of being complete, with an all-encompassing span. And as a wheel its structure and central hub is supported by a range of duties and practices (mental, physical, and social), by which it is turned through the living cosmos thus bestowing its order and balance on the created world.

Based on this idea during the Buddha’s time, every person had his or her

dhamma, which was maintained by proper action. The priestly caste called brahmins performed the rituals and recited the correct mantras for every situation so that births, marriages, deaths, and so forth, would all be in accordance with Dhamma and would have a positive outcome. Meanwhile, religious seekers (or *samanas*) were all trying to find a way to directly experience Dhamma in themselves, often through yogic practices or asceticism. And when they met, they questioned each other by saying, “What is your Dhamma?” This means, “What’s your experience of truth, or your way of realizing it?” So *Dhamma* can mean “cosmic law,” “order,” “truth,” or “teachings.”

In his teachings the Buddha generally referred to the values and meanings of the contemporary society, and tweaked them a little to suit his aims. In the Buddha’s presentation, *Dhamma* means either the teachings or “way” of the Buddha, or “the true order that the teachings reveal to those who practice the way.” The central principle of Buddha-Dhamma (the Buddha’s teachings) is that it is directly visible (that is, factual and realizable), timeless, inviting one to enter into it (meaning it attracts interest), accessible, to be realized in oneself, and to be known through discernment (as opposed to belief). And the one text that forms the axis of the Buddha’s “wheel” is the teaching in this Discourse That Set Turning the Wheel of Truth, the teaching of the four noble truths: suffering, its origin, its ceasing, and the way that leads to its ceasing.

The Buddha’s definition of Dhamma is dynamic: the four noble truths don’t just tell you where things hurt, but what to do about the pain. They present a brief analysis of where and how we suffer, what is the underlying origin of that pain, what brings around its ending, and how to bring that experience of release into our own lives. Because it’s going to a good place (and can take us with it), the Dhamma is the best wheel to ride. It rolls on down the bumpy road of life, to freedom, a freedom that isn’t just a temporary break, but a truth, a realizable actuality that you can live by. From the time when it was first set rolling, people have begun or fulfilled the ending of suffering and stress following its guidance. The teaching works; it brings light where there was darkness. Thus for many of us, it has set something powerful in motion.

The Background

Because the discourse is set in a particular time and place with specific characters, I’ll summarize what is known (or at least commonly agreed upon) in terms of history and geography, and also I’ll add a dash of biography. There are all kinds of stories and legends that people have made up over the centuries because neither the Buddha himself nor his early disciples thought his identity and early life was that important. To them, and to us, what really counts is the teaching. However, it does help to put his life and teaching in a temporal frame, just to emphasize that we’re talking about a flesh-and-blood human here. Moreover, an explanation of his cultural background may throw light on the concerns that the Buddha was addressing.

For starters *Buddha* is just a title, a way of addressing the man. It means “knowing,” “awake,” or “awakened.” Actually he was more often called Bhagava

(One Who Is Full of Blessings), or Tathāgata (One Who Has Become Such, True Thus-Gone, or Here-Come). These terms may seem strange; however, once he was enlightened, it was difficult to define this man—he was deeper and vaster than anyone could fathom—and yet, human. When was he born? Traditions vary, placing his birth date anywhere between 563 and 483 B.C.E. Modern research suggests 480 B.C.E. What is more commonly agreed upon is that he was born as the son and heir of Suddhodana, an elected chief of the Sakyan republic. The republic occupied a fragment of southern Nepal on the Indian border, and probably extended into what is now the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh. The boy was named Siddhattha Gotama (Skt.: Siddhartha Gotama). Although a lot is made in subsequent legends of his early life, the Buddha only referred to it a few times. The Sakyan republic was not a grand kingdom; it was a vassal state of another small kingdom occupying the northeast of Uttar Pradesh. So he was a nobleman in a small republic. In his teens he was bound into an arranged marriage for dynastic reasons. This marriage was anything but a love affair—it's unlikely that the couple had even laid eyes on each other before the wedding. However that was the way it was done in those days; the important thing was to bring forth a son as a guarantor for the future of the family. After thirteen years, the couple managed to do that, and so, after some protracted and painful negotiations, Siddhattha got permission from his family to take leave and pursue a spiritual quest as one "gone forth."² Siddhattha's departure meant that he gave up everything. He relinquished inheritance, statehood, livelihood, family network, friends, and caste—all the elements that in Indian society gave him a place in the cosmos—which included not only this world and life, but also a future birth. So with "going forth" he had put aside his ascribed place in the cosmic order to find a new one for himself. Relinquishment made life starkly simple—a "gone-forth" person had to survive on what he or she could glean, and put everything else aside to focus on developing his or her mind, soul, or spirit. Whatever you think of his domestic policy, you can't fault Siddhattha in terms of putting his life on the line. He wasn't entirely alone in this—there was a whole movement of samana seekers doing the same kind of thing—sometimes following a particular teacher and sometimes forming groups and adhering to an ethical code of harmlessness, celibacy, truthfulness, and renunciation. To be a true "gone-forth one," however, the essential factor was to wander free from the ties and comforts of home life. This was life with the veils and wrapping pulled off. It was life among wild animals, thieves, and outlaws—life lived on the hard earth at the roots of trees; seeking alms-food from villages; and looking for something to wear, often pulling the rag off the corpses whose jackal-chewed remains littered the charnel grounds. It was life held like a brief candle-flame in the vast stormy night of sickness, danger, and death. Only a few ventured into this way of life, some of dubious sanity, some quite saintly, but all were held in a mixture of fear and awe by the ordinary folk of town, clan, and family.

Among this ragged crew, there were a few teachers. We have records of some that the Buddha knew or knew of. The six that the Buddhist scriptures single out were Purāna Kassapa, Makkahali Gosāla, Ajita Kesakambalī, Pakudha Kaccāyana

Sañjaya Belatthaputta, and Nigantha Nātaputta. This last teacher was the leader of a sect now called Jains, and there are accounts in the Buddhist scriptures of various debates between the Buddha or his disciples and the followers of Nigantha, in which (surprise, surprise!) the Buddhists always come out on top. Actually Nigantha Nātaputta was the only one who advocated for living morally, but his views are presented as a rigid attribution of moral consequence to every action, intentional or unintentional. Scratching your body, for example, was considered to be a destructive action or *kamma* (Skt.: karma) that would have dire consequences and would keep your soul bound to a potentially endless series of rebirths. In his view, this kamma clung to the soul like a toxic creeper, and the best thing was to avoid any kind of action that would increase the infestation. This meant eating as little as possible, pulling out body hair to avoid having mites that one might then accidentally kill, and avoiding damaging creatures to the extent of sweeping the ground in front of you as you walked along.

How fairly the teachings of these six are represented isn't clear, but their teaching on kamma, on moral determinism, and on noncausality give some idea of what the samanas were looking at and thinking about. That is: "Why are we here? Is there such a thing as free will? Is there an eternal or deathless state? Why are we bound to aging, sickness, and death? Are we bound to these things because of our previous actions? Do we have a soul or self that has to endure all this, or can we be liberated from this scenario? Are we just organisms that live and die and have no soul and no purpose? In which case, why live ethically or in fact why do anything?" Accordingly some of these teachers lived in an animal or near-vegetable state of self-mortification and nonaction.

Other samanas responded to these questions and dilemmas about the nature of the soul, identity, and action in different ways. They generally chose to apply effort in one of two ways: to either transcend the body and earthly existence by going into states of formless mental absorption, or to suppress the sensory urges of the body by ascetic mortification. Through either one or both of these ways, the samanas aspired to liberate the soul, self, or atman from its bondage to a death-bound body. Siddhattha tried both of these methods, in a characteristically full and accomplished way.

First he took up the work of mental absorption. He had two teachers in succession: Ālāra Kālāma taught the way to the attainment of "the sphere of nothingness," in which sensory phenomena and mental activity cease and there is awareness that remains only perceives a vast empty nothing. Siddhattha excelled at this practice but remained dissatisfied with the attainment, considering that it was just a temporary release, like a hop into a netherworld, which was followed by a descent to the coarse realities of sickness, pain, and death. So he tried another teacher, Uddaka Rāmaputta, who took him a step further into an extremely attenuated form of awareness called the sphere of neither-perception-nor-nonperception. This essentially means you're barely here at all. Siddhattha had perfected access to this just as he had to the sphere of nothingness, but again in a temporary nature and strategy of diversion from earthly life left him dissatisfied.

So he went off without a teacher and kept companionship with five other

wanderers—to whom this discourse was later addressed. There was that bond that arises among companions in the struggle, and struggle it was. Their little group's main practice seems to have been asceticism—which the Buddha subsequently dismissed as “unprofitable.” But in keeping with his way of practicing, Siddhattha gave it everything he had at the time. He was the leader in denying the body, and so he went off on his own to a place called Uruvela (subsequently named Bodhgaya in memory of his awakening, or *bodhi*) to get really serious. Reducing his food to a few beans a day, his body grew so lean that when he scratched his belly, he could feel his spine. He even reduced his breathing to almost nothing. So you get some idea of this man's resolve—he could have been spending time out there in the state of neither-perception-nor-nonperception, but instead he wanted to really understand the cosmos through understanding the peace that he could directly know—his body, senses, and mind.

It turns out that the approach of asceticism didn't work—it made his body weak and at the same time offered no deep insights into the nature of his mind (which was the real source of the problem). In fact, asceticism merely locked his mind into a harsh attitude and behavior toward his body. He didn't have a practice that integrated body and mind; he only had ways of avoidance or suppression, neither of which took him to a free place. Fortunately for him and for us, he met a girl. Well, to put it another way, a local woman named Sujata saw this weird figure sitting under a tree and thought he couldn't be human, that he must be some kind of tree-spirit. Being of a pious nature, and hoping that a few offerings to the spirit would stand her in good stead with conceiving a child, she offered Siddhattha a bowl of sweet milk-rice at just the time when he was recognizing that the self-mortification practice was going nowhere.

This encounter marked the beginning of the “middle way” that the Buddha later laid out to his spiritual colleagues as “avoiding extremes of indulgence and self-mortification.” So, having put aside the “get out of your senses” approach of otherworldly states, and the sensory suppression program of asceticism, Siddhattha found balance. Then remembering the sense of pure ease that he had experienced when sitting in the shade of a tree as a child, he tuned in to that “no pressure” mode of being. And from there, grounded in the tremendous resolve that he had lived with for all these years, his mind unfolded, released its attachments and dark places . . . into awakening. This word may contain a variety of meanings for us, but for Siddhattha, a key part of his awakening was to realize the significance of action, or *kamma*.

He realized that *kamma* primarily meant action based on our choices and intentions—he saw that intentional actions produce results. So accidental treading on an ant is not *kamma*, but deliberately fostering ill-will in the heart is. Even the action of asceticism and avoiding action is an action that we choose. So why not be up front about it and make deliberate choices that are based on human welfare? Why not choose a way and a practice that will lead us to a better life? But rather than a life committed to sensual happiness, Siddhattha realized that the good life is lived through sustaining an intention that is moral and compassionate to others as well as himself. And that such a way of life leads to

acknowledging and relinquishing the biases, corruptions, and attachments that keep us from awakening. And without awakening, it's as if we are driving on and on without getting anywhere. The truth of the matter is that, rather than driving, we're being *driven*. And this drive goes through lifetimes.

It turns out that the driver of this whole traveling show (or *samsāra*) is the sense of being a permanent self or soul, of being someone who should be, or was be, or was *something*. But we only sense ourselves as being something through doing something such as thinking, feeling, acting, or suppressing. And doing can never arrive at simply, peacefully being. So who or what is behind all this *kamma*? After all the years of searching, Siddhattha realized that he couldn't find an lasting self. All he could find were psychophysical processes strung together around a need to be something solid. It was a need and a psychological hunger to be a separate self, either in control of experience or running away from it. On giving up that need and that compulsive doing, the entire cosmos of cause and effect ceased to hold him. Instead of a needy, dissatisfied self, there was clarity, truth, and peace. So this work, this action of penetrating the mind and clearing its sense of need, is the *kamma* that leads to the end of *kamma*.

However, as a practice-path aimed at clearing both harmful intentions and the need for intention, this understanding of skillful *kamma* lines up ethical living with the actions that give freedom from cause and effect, birth and death. It's quite an empowerment. We'll look at that more closely as we go through the text.

To continue the history—after spending weeks in the state of release, reviewing the way that consciousness operates, he was moved to share his realizations. The story is that at first he had doubts as to how to communicate what he'd seen, and whether, in fact, anyone would be interested. Luckily for us, a high divinity (*brahma*) implored him to teach out of empathy for those “with but a little dust in their eyes.” So who would that be? Immediately, he thought of his former teachers—good, sincere practitioners who had guided him and given him all the he had. But the divine beings broke the news: both of his former teachers were dead. The Buddha considered again: “What about my five ascetic buddies? Unbalanced though they seem now, they had commitment. Yes,” he thought, “I'll try to teach them.”

So he left Bodhgaya and started walking to Isipatana near Vāranāsi. It was a trek of a couple of weeks in those days, journeying through thick forests, faring for alms-food in villages, and sleeping under trees at night. There was time to think of how he could present what he wanted to offer. And he found out what didn't work. Somewhere on the trail he met another wanderer, Upaka, who, in the manner of wanderers of those days, asked him who his teacher was and what his Dhamma was about. The Buddha gave him a brief statement, a kind of spiritual business card:

I am an All-transcender, an All-knower
unstained by theories, relinquishing all,
liberated by terminating craving.
Who should I give credit to?

I have no teacher, and no-one like me
exists in the world. . . .

I'm going to Vāranāsi to set the wheel of the truth
in motion. In a blindfold world
I go to beat the Deathless Drum.
(M 1)

True enough, but there was nothing in that statement for Upaka to get hold of—no wheel to ride. And recognizing this, Upaka just shook his head and said, “May it be so, friend,” and departed.

Maybe the Buddha learned from that encounter. Liberation and its illumination are difficult things to talk about. And in the end, if the listener can't get on board with how to get there, then so what? At any rate, when the Buddha finally arrived at the Deer Park in Isipatana, where his five former colleagues were still mortifying themselves to their hearts' content, he had a few follow-up statements to his earlier declaration. The Group of Five wasn't very welcoming, feeling that he'd gone soft on the asceticism that was their standard. They even resolved not to greet him. But moved by his radiant presence, they found themselves offering him a place to sit, though they still didn't want to hear what he had to say. That all changed once the Buddha started speaking—he touched upon a theme that had immediate relevance to those seekers:

Listen, bhikkhus, the Deathless has been attained. I shall instruct you, I teach you the law. By practicing as you are instructed, you will, by realizing it yourselves, here and now through direct knowledge, enter on and abide in the supreme goal of the Holy Life.
(M 1)

Though still reluctant, the five were impressed by the clarity and confidence with which the Buddha spoke. So they listened and opened their hearts . . . and this is the point at which the Buddha's first discourse begins.

¹ See the note on the text, translation, and abbreviations for more information.

² Many fables that present the life of the Buddha tell of his marriage and sudden nocturnal departure in a highly dramatic way that was designed to emphasize the great renunciation of the young seeker. Most of us these days would view nocturnal departures as anything but renunciation, so unfortunately this legend has caused the Buddha to be seen more as a jerk than one who negotiated his way out of the jam that his parents had put him in. However, according to many accounts, after realizing Dhamma, the Buddha headed back to his home-town to teach his family, and he brought some of them to complete awakening.

This is how I've heard it: Once, the Blessed One was living at Vāranāsi, at Isipatana in the Deer Park. There he addressed the Group of Five bhikkhus. "There are two extremes, bhikkhus, that are not to be followed by one who has Gone Forth. What two? Getting bound to and following sense-pleasure, which is cheap, coarse, worldly, unworthy, and doesn't take you anywhere useful. There's also getting bound to self-mortification, which is painful, unworthy, and doesn't take you anywhere useful. Not going along with either of these extremes, the Tathāgata has awakened to the middle way; it conduces to seeing, insight, peace, deep knowledge, gnosis, and nibbāna.

"And what is this middle way that a Tathāgata has awakened to, that conduces to seeing, insight, peace, deep knowledge, gnosis, and nibbāna? It's the noble eightfold path, that is: right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. This is the middle way that a Tathāgata has awakened to.

"Bhikkhus, there is a noble truth with regard to suffering. Birth is difficult, aging is hard; dying is painful. Sorrow, grieving, pain, anguish, and despair are all painful. Being stuck with what you don't like is stressful; being separated from what you do like is stressful; not getting what you want is stressful. In brief the five aggregates that are affected by clinging bring no satisfaction.

"Bhikkhus, there is a noble truth concerning the arising of suffering: it arises with craving, a thirst for more that's bound up with relish and passion and always running here and there. That is: thirst for sense-input, thirst to be something, thirst to not be something.

"Bhikkhus, there is a noble truth about the cessation of suffering. It is the complete fading away and cessation of this craving; its abandonment and relinquishment; getting free from and being independent of it.

"Bhikkhus, there is a noble truth of the way leading to the cessation of suffering. It is the noble eightfold path: namely, right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration.

"There is this noble truth with regard to suffering: in this way, bhikkhus, vision, insight, wisdom, knowing, and light arose in me about things not heard before. This noble truth with regard to suffering is to be thoroughly understood: in this way, bhikkhus, vision, insight, wisdom, knowing, and light arose in me about things not heard before. This noble truth with regard to suffering has been thoroughly understood: in this way, bhikkhus, vision, insight, wisdom, knowing, and light arose in me about things not heard before.

"There is this noble truth concerning the arising of suffering: in this way, bhikkhus, vision, insight, wisdom, knowing, and light arose in me about things not heard before. This noble truth of the arising of suffering is that it is to be abandoned. . . . This noble truth of the arising of suffering is that it has been abandoned: such was the vision, insight, wisdom, knowing, and light that arose in

me about things not heard before.

~~“There is this noble truth about the cessation of suffering: in this way, bhikkhus, vision, insight, wisdom, knowing, and light arose in me about things not heard before. This noble truth about the cessation of suffering is to be realized. . . . This noble truth about the cessation of suffering has been realized: such was the vision, insight, wisdom, knowing, and light that arose in me about things not heard before.~~

“There is this noble truth of the path leading to the cessation of suffering. . . . This noble truth of the path is to be cultivated. . . . This noble truth of the path has been cultivated: such was the vision, insight, wisdom, knowing, and light that arose in me about things not heard before.

“As long, bhikkhus, as these four noble truths in their twelve aspects were not seen by me; not seen with the purest insight as they are, then I didn’t teach the world—with its devas, māras, and brahmas, its samanas and brahmins, its monarchs and ordinary folk—that I had fully realized complete awakening.

“But, bhikkhus, as soon as these four noble truths in their twelve aspects were seen by me; seen with the purest insight as they are, then I taught the world—with its devas, māras, and brahmas, its samanas and brahmins, its monarchs and ordinary folk—that I had fully realized complete awakening. The knowledge and the vision arose in me: ‘My release is assured. This is the last birth. There is no further becoming.’”

This is what the Blessed One said—and the Group of Five bhikkhus were gladdened and approved of his words. And while this exposition was being delivered, the untarnished and clear vision of Dhamma arose in the Venerable Kondañña: “Whatever has the characteristic to arise, all that ceases.”

When the wheel of Dhamma had been set rolling by the Blessed One, the devas of the earth raised the cry: “At Vāranāsi, in the Deer Park at Isipatana, the incomparable wheel of Dhamma has been set rolling by the Blessed One—and can’t be stopped by any samana, or brahmin, or deva, or māra, or brahma, or anyone whomsoever in the world.”

When they heard what the earth devas had said, the devas of the realm of the Four Great Kings cried out with one voice: “At Vāranāsi” And when they heard the cry of the devas of the realm of the Four Great Kings, then the devas of the realm of the Thirty-Three cried out with one voice. . . . When they heard the cry of the Thirty-Three devas, the Yāma devas cried out with one voice. . . . When they heard the cry of the Yāma devas, the Tusitā devas cried out with one voice. . . . When they heard the cry of the Tusitā devas . . . the Nimmānaratī devas cried out with one voice. . . . When they heard the cry of the Nimmānaratī devas, the Paranimmitavasavattī devas cried out with one voice. . . . When they heard the cry of the Paranimmitavasavattī devas . . . the devas of the retinue of the Brahma deities took up the cry: “At Vāranāsi, in the Deer Park at Isipatana, the incomparable wheel of Dhamma has been set rolling by the Blessed One—and can’t be stopped by any samana or brahmin or deva or māra or brahma or anyone whomsoever in the world.”

So in that instant, at that very moment, the word traveled up to the realm of the

high divinities. This ten-thousandfold world system trembled and shook and resounded, and a great measureless radiance, surpassing the shining glory of the devas, was made manifest in the world. Then the Blessed One uttered the pronouncement: "It is Kondañña who has seen deeply! Kondañña who has seen deeply." And so it was that the name of Venerable Kondañña became "Kondañña the deep seer."

A PATH THROUGH THE JUNGLE

This is how I've heard it: Once, the Blessed One was living at Vāranāsi, at Isipatana in the Deer Park. There he addressed the Group of Five bhikkhus: "There are two extremes, bhikkhus, that are not to be followed by one who has Gone Forth. What two? Getting bound to and following sense-pleasure, which is cheap, coarse, worldly, unworthy, and doesn't take you anywhere useful. Then there's getting bound to self-mortification, which is painful, unworthy, and doesn't take you anywhere useful. Not going along with either of these extremes, a Tathāgata has awakened to the middle way; it conduces to seeing, insight, peace, deep knowledge, gnosis, and nibbāna."

Most of the suttas begin with a brief description of the place where the sermon was delivered. The setting here is the Deer Park at Isipatana, known in modern times as Sarnath, India. Widely regarded as the place where the Buddha gave the First Sermon, Deer Park has been a Buddhist pilgrimage site for many years and is situated a few miles north of the ancient holy city of Varānāsi. It was the custom for kings to set aside groves and parks just outside major towns where seekers, ascetics, and sages could gather—and this was the place where Siddhattha Gotama (the Buddha's name before he became awakened) and his ascetic companions had been dwelling until he decided to withdraw from the others in order to practice in solitude. So naturally enough, it was here that Siddhattha Gotama returned as the Awakened One to begin teaching.

The Buddha addresses the discourse to his five former companions. They were ascetics but the Buddha addresses them as *bhikkhus*, which means "almsmen, mendicants," those who live on the free-will offerings of others. Nowadays *bhikkhu* just means a Buddhist monk but *monk* is a Christian word that doesn't quite fit. Rather than confined to a monastery, these bhikkhus were wanderers living on what turned up.

The five bhikkhus at Deer Park were named Kondañña, Vappa, Bhaddiya, Mahanāma, and Assaji. Kondañña was the eldest. Many years previously, as a novice brahmin, he had been invited to the palace of the raja Suddhodana along with seven of his peers to see the baby Siddhattha Gotama and give predictions as to his destiny. They all agreed that this baby would be either a great emperor or a Buddha; perhaps this was why he was named *Siddhattha*, which means "Accomplishes the Goal." Interestingly, it was Kondañña alone who reckoned that Siddhattha was destined for Buddhahood. Four of the brahmins who had been present at the palace later told their sons to keep their eyes on Siddhattha, as he was destined for greatness. These sons grew up to become the other four of the Group of Five.

The Buddha here is addressed as *Bhagavā*, which means “one who has great fortune” or “Blessed One,” sometimes translated as “Lord.” This term was generally used by the Buddha’s disciples, and it implies someone who has both a great deal of spiritual power to offer and the capacity to make it accessible to many. It is an inspirational and devotional honorific, a way of conceiving and focusing on someone who isn’t conceivable in ordinary terms, and whose teachings ask you to focus on what’s happening for you. Keeping in mind the Buddha’s blessed quality is helpful: it encourages us to maintain a compassionate inner focus by reminding us that our own witnessing, our “Buddha-potential” should be benevolent rather than judgmental. It’s vital to refer to the compassionate and peaceful witness rather than to the inner faultfinder when we meditate. That which continually criticizes you is a judge, not a witness!

Most people find an external reference, such as the example and image of the Buddha to be supportive. Visual images stick in our mind more readily than thought or an idea (particularly when we are dealing with abstract ideas like enlightenment) and for this reason, images of the Awakened One have been common for centuries. However, in the early centuries of Buddhism, the images most often used were a tree with an empty space under it, a throne with no one sitting on it, a parasol with no one under it . . . get the point? Later the imagery firmed up around giant stylized footprints, a stupa (a memorial containing funeral ashes or relics), or a Dhamma-wheel. Finally in approximately the first century C.E., the “Buddha” appears as an image, often stylized as a contemporary nobleman. (Hence the long earlobes—those noblemen wore heavy earrings.) Such images can help us connect with Buddhism: certainly in my teenage years, the initial arousing of interest in Buddhism came from seeing a picture of a Buddha with calm dignity and his evocative, gentle smile. That image reminded me of how one could be a balanced and free human being. And that there was a path that led out of the jungle, even at the age of sixteen, I could sense thickening around me.

I didn’t live in a jungle of dense vegetation and dangerous animals, but it was still a gloomy and tangled place. Personal uncertainty lurked in the shadows of the Cold War and the threat of a nuclear holocaust. Even at its best, the way of the world as I could sense it, was to push and struggle through an ongoing series of difficulties—the need to make a living, rather than enjoy being alive, seemed to be a life perspective that offered nothing more than material well-being. An advantageous though such a life might be, it was still marked by death, separation, grief, and pain. In this jungle, I didn’t know what track to follow—no that any of the religious or political or even dropout tracks offered a convincing or satisfying arrival. But the Buddha as I encountered him in images, and later in words, seemed to have already arrived. He exemplified a way that steered to peace in the present moment.

The Buddha’s Teaching Method

Although there is a path to that peace, the main track that the Buddha lays out in this first discourse is what the Buddhist path (or way) is *not*. In a way, the

“negative” approach is the most direct. In life, we’re always on one track or another. If we stop running down the wrong tracks, we’ll then be on the right track—and this track, or path, can be lived here and now. This approach is indicative of the Buddha’s realization of *Dhamma* (or truth of the way things are) as being directly knowable, not delayed in time, inviting one to investigate, and leading inward. It is also to be realized by the wise within their own experience—as indicated by the Buddha, who attempts to make his teaching relevant to the experience of the people he was addressing.

Sometimes the Buddha would respond with silence to people who were just tangled up in confused ways of thinking—it was a way of indicating that truth went beyond speculation. Sometimes he would answer a question with a counter-question to encourage the person to examine his or her own views and beliefs. Sometimes he would highlight an incident that had just occurred or a particular experience that a person was going through. He always tried to reach into where a person’s wisdom was established. In this sutta, addressed to a group who must have heard a whole range of ideas about the nature of existence and truth, but who manifested a strong commitment to seeing it for themselves, the Buddha concerned himself with talking about the means of their practice. He understood that how we apply ourselves determines where we arrive. So there was not much point in defining the place of arrival—that place is realized as a result of the way we travel.

In this way, his approach differed from that of the other samana teachers, who seem to have made proclamations and taught in metaphysical terms: that the self and the cosmos are the same, that they are different, or that the world is an illusion in which nothing has any reality. In this sutta, the Buddha focuses on the *experience* of the way rather than its notional goal. Liberation and salvation after death are only ideas and views in our mind; what can be directly known is how things are right now, at this time and place. Focusing on the means, the here and now of how our mind is set, its aims, its ethical mood, and its energies, brings us into the present moment and into a witnessing in which there is no view to defend or uphold. Then, direct seeing and knowing has the possibility to operate. This is the kind of process that the Buddha stimulated with his teaching.

For example, one time the villagers of Kesaputta asked the Buddha what they should believe in because so many people were giving them different ideas. His response was first to affirm their right to have doubts when given conflicting views. Then he appealed to their own understanding, in a dialogue that went something like this:

“If you act in ways that are cruel or mean, does that seem good to you or not?”

“No,” they replied, “we don’t think that’s a very good thing to do.”

“Then it’s best not to do that, isn’t it?” commented the Buddha. “And what about being calm and kind, is that valued by you or not?”

And they replied, “Well, we think it’s very good.”

(see AN 3:53)

In this way, the Buddha helped these villagers realize the value of concentrating on means rather than doctrines. Otherwise people are liable to get caught in the tangle of views; they stay in that jungle and come no nearer to truth. The Buddha's teaching asks us to reflect on what we already know or on our principles, then to verify them with people whom we respect and value, and to proceed from that intuitive sense of certainty.

But in the case of the Group of Five, the Buddha was addressing "those who had gone forth." They were *samanas*, "strivers": they needed no recommendation that truth was worth seeking or that they had to apply themselves to it. They just needed to have the means clarified. So here the Buddha addresses them with some advice on the cultivation of right means as an expression and experience of enlightenment itself. And he begins with affirming the view that the ascetic would already have adopted—that chasing after and getting hooked on sense-pleasure is unworthy and useless. He starts where they already are—where every path should start. Then he balances that out by negating the ascetic view: saying that getting caught up with self-mortification was also useless. He thereby cuts away the ground and leaves them dangling in the middle, saying that it is in this "no position" that peace is to be found.

Avoiding the Extremes

The Buddha's approach of "no position" is a way out of the jungle of views and dogmas. These two extremes of trying to get or get rid of represent the tracks that seekers might take if they are following the advice of a teacher who instructs in terms of a goal rather than a way. Their message is to have or get rid of something, and how to go about achieving that goal isn't important. At first glance, it seems obvious that anyone with a serious spiritual commitment would avoid such a position. However, avoiding this isn't as common as you might think. The very notion of a goal beyond conventional reality can encourage people to discard, sometimes with great vigor, all conventional restraints. This applies just as much to twenty-first-century seekers as to ancient ones—as anyone familiar with a spiritual network will know.

On one extreme, you have the pleasure seekers. Using sexual behavior or drugs and liquor can be viewed as a way to release ego-bound conditioning. But this is a risky approach, one prone to abuse at the best of times. What compounds the abuse is the fact that, in an intensely structured society, there is a lot of confusing conditioning in terms of guilt and shame and "freedom." When a sense of shame is appended to sexuality at the same time as it is being presented as blissful, exciting, and sophisticated, the heart gets twisted and divided in its impulses. You might be thinking, "Why hold back from what is most desirable? Won't achieving that bring happiness?" Well, after a while, people who follow that line of thought get to recognize that indulgence leads to addiction and abuse rather than release and happiness. The clearer way of release is to let go of both the guilt and shame and the myth that the sensory world can provide true and lasting happiness. In other words: to see, with insight, sense-pleasure as it really is—a brief exciting hi-

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