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A Discourse on the Wheel of Dhamma

Author & Corresponding Author*

1. Thich Nguyendinh*

Affiliation:

1. Department of Buddhist Philosophy, Vietnam Buddhist University, Vietnam.

Email: thich_nguyendinh@gmail.com

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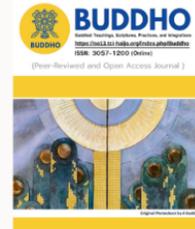


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A Discourse on the Wheel of Dhamma

Thich Nguyendinh*

Abstract

The Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta, commonly known as the Discourse on the Wheel of Dhamma, is considered the first sermon delivered by the Buddha following his enlightenment. Presented at the Deer Park in Isipatana to his five former ascetic companions, this seminal discourse introduces the foundational teachings of Buddhism, including the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path. The discourse emphasizes the Middle Way, advocating a balanced path between self-indulgence and self-mortification. By setting the Wheel of Dhamma in motion, the Buddha established a transformative framework for overcoming suffering (Dukkha) through understanding its cause (Samudaya), realizing its cessation (Nirodha), and practicing the path (Magga) leading to enlightenment. The sermon's profound influence marked the beginning of the Buddha's teaching mission and the establishment of the Buddhist community, guiding practitioners toward liberation and the cessation of the cycle of birth and death (Samsara).

Keywords: Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta, Discourse on the Wheel of Dhamma

Introduction

The Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta, commonly known as the Discourse on the Wheel of Dhamma, holds a pivotal place in Buddhist teachings as the first sermon delivered by the Buddha following his enlightenment (Nanamoli & Bodhi, 1995). Presented at the Deer Park in Isipatana to his five former ascetic companions, this discourse is regarded as the foundational teaching that set the Wheel of Dhamma in motion, marking the commencement of the Buddha's teaching mission (Harvey, 2013). The sutta introduces two core doctrinal elements of Buddhism: The Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path, which together provide a comprehensive framework for understanding and overcoming suffering (Dukkha) (Rahula, 1974).

The Four Noble Truths articulate the nature of suffering, its origin, the possibility of its cessation, and the path leading to its cessation (Gethin, 1998). Complementing this, the Noble

Eightfold Path offers a practical approach to ethical conduct, mental discipline, and wisdom, guiding practitioners toward liberation and enlightenment (Keown, 2000). Additionally, the Buddha's advocacy of the Middle Way in this discourse underscores the importance of a balanced approach, avoiding both self-indulgence and extreme asceticism (Thanissaro, 1993).

This study aims to explore the key teachings of the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta, examining its philosophical and practical implications within the broader context of Buddhist thought and practice. By analyzing this discourse, the study seeks to highlight its enduring significance in guiding practitioners toward the ultimate goal of liberation from Samsara, the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth.

Discourse on the Wheel of Dhamma

The "Discourse on the Wheel of Dhamma" is an important and foundational teaching in Buddhism, traditionally attributed to the Buddha. It is known as the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta in Pali and is often regarded as the first sermon delivered by the Buddha after his enlightenment. The sutta lays the foundation for the teachings of the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path, which are the core principles of Buddhist practice and philosophy.

1. The setting The Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta, or the Discourse on the Wheel of Dhamma, was delivered in the Deer Park at Isipatana, a historical site now known as Sarnath, near Varanasi in India (Harvey, 2013). This setting holds profound historical and spiritual significance, as it marks the place where the Buddha first shared his enlightenment experience with others, initiating the spread of his teachings (Dhamma) to the world.

The Buddha addressed the discourse to five ascetics—Kondañña, Vappa, Bhaddiya, Mahanama, and Assaji—who had previously been his companions during his six-year period of intense ascetic practices (Nanamoli & Bodhi, 1995). These ascetics had initially abandoned the Buddha when he renounced extreme austerities in favor of the Middle Way, believing he had strayed from the path to liberation. However, upon seeing the profound transformation in the Buddha after his enlightenment, they were open to hearing his teachings. In the discourse, the Buddha emphasized the futility of both extreme self-indulgence and severe asceticism, advocating instead for the Middle Way, which balances these extremes and leads to spiritual awakening. The choice of Isipatana for delivering this sermon was not coincidental; it had long been a place where sages and hermits sought spiritual insight, making it an ideal setting for the Buddha to introduce his revolutionary teachings.

The delivery of the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta at this sacred site not only established Isipatana as a major pilgrimage destination but also symbolized the Buddha's compassionate resolve to share the path to liberation with all beings. Moreover, the setting reflects a turning point in Buddhist history, as the five ascetics who received this teaching became the first members of the Sangha (the Buddhist monastic community), with Kondañña attaining the state of stream-entry (sotāpanna), the first stage of enlightenment.

2. The Wheel of Dhamma The Wheel of Dhamma, or Dhammachakra, is a powerful symbol representing the Buddha's teachings and the transformative impact of his first sermon, the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta. The term Dhammacakkappavattana literally translates to "Setting the Wheel of Dhamma in Motion," signifying the initial dissemination of the Buddha's enlightened wisdom to the world. The Dhamma Wheel is traditionally depicted as a wheel with eight spokes, symbolizing the Noble Eightfold Path, which forms the practical guide to liberation from suffering (Dukkha) (Keown, 2000). The wheel's circular form represents the completeness and perfection of the Buddha's teachings, while its motion indicates the dynamic and unending nature of the Dhamma, continuously guiding beings toward enlightenment. When the Buddha "turned the wheel of Dhamma," he initiated the propagation of the Dhamma (Gombrich, 2006). This act not only set the spiritual path into motion but also symbolized the breaking of ignorance and the establishment of a new era of wisdom and compassion.

The motion of the wheel reflects the ongoing nature of the Dhamma, which continues to inspire and lead beings toward enlightenment across time and space. The Buddha declared that the wheel he set in motion could not be stopped by any force, highlighting the timeless and universal truth of his teachings (Harvey, 2013). The turning of the Dhamma Wheel also marked the formation of the Sangha, the community of monks and nuns. With Kondañña, one of the five ascetics, attaining stream-entry (sotāpanna), the monastic community began, serving as a vehicle to carry the Dhamma forward. The Dhamma Wheel has transcended cultural and geographical boundaries, becoming a symbol not only in Buddhist art and architecture but also as a reminder of the path to liberation for practitioners worldwide. It is often seen on flags, temples, and religious texts, symbolizing the continuous journey towards Nirvana, the ultimate cessation of suffering.

The Wheel of Dhamma embodies the dynamic nature of the Buddha's teachings and their enduring relevance. By setting this wheel in motion, the Buddha established a tradition of wisdom, ethics, and mental discipline that continues to guide individuals toward spiritual liberation. The symbolic wheel not only commemorates the historic moment of the Buddha's first sermon but also serves as a timeless reminder of the transformative power of the Dhamma.

The Four Noble Truths

The central part of this discourse is the revelation of The Four Noble Truths (Cattāri Ariyasaccāni in Pali) form the cornerstone of the Buddha's teachings, first expounded in the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta. These truths offer a comprehensive framework for understanding the nature of suffering (Dukkha) and the path to liberation (Nirvana). The Buddha presented these truths as a diagnostic model, identifying the problem (suffering), its cause, the possibility of a cure, and the prescription for healing.

The Four Noble Truths which are

1. The Truth of Suffering (Dukkha) The first noble truth acknowledges that life in the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth (Samsara) is characterized by suffering, dissatisfaction, and impermanence Dukkha encompasses not only physical pain and mental distress but also the inherent unsatisfactoriness of life, even in pleasurable experiences, due to their transient nature. The Buddha identified several dimensions of Dukkha, including:

- Ordinary Suffering: Physical and emotional pain, aging, illness, and death.
- Suffering Due to Change: The anxiety that arises when pleasant experiences end.
- Suffering of Conditioned States: The subtle dissatisfaction from the impermanence and insubstantiality of all phenomena.

By recognizing Dukkha, practitioners develop a realistic understanding of life, leading to the motivation to seek liberation.

2. The Truth of the Origin of Suffering (Samudaya) The second noble truth identifies the root cause of suffering as craving (tanhā), often translated as thirst or desire This craving manifest in three primary forms:

- Craving for Sensual Pleasures (Kama-tanha): The desire for pleasurable experiences through the senses.
- Craving for Existence (Bhava-tanha): The attachment to life, identity, and continued existence.
- Craving for Non-Existence (Vibhava-tanha): The desire to escape or annihilate the self.

Craving leads to attachment (upādāna), which perpetuates the cycle of Samsara and reinforces ignorance (avijjā) about the true nature of reality The Buddha emphasized that this ignorance obscures the understanding of Anicca (impermanence), Dukkha, and Anatta (non-self).

3. The Truth of the Cessation of Suffering (Nirodha) The third noble truth offers hope and liberation by asserting that the cessation of suffering (Nirodha) is attainable (Rahula, 1974). The end of suffering is achieved by extinguishing craving, which leads to a state of Nirvana a profound and unconditioned peace, beyond birth, death, and suffering. Nirvana is described as:

- The Extinguishing of the Fires of Greed, Hatred, and Delusion: Leading to freedom from desires and attachments.
- The Unconditioned State: Transcending all dualities and concepts, embodying ultimate liberation.
- Blissful and Peaceful: Not in a hedonistic sense, but as an abiding state of mental equanimity and clarity.

Achieving Nirvana involves profound insight into the nature of reality through meditation, wisdom, and ethical.

The Truth of the Path Leading to the Cessation of Suffering (Magga)

The fourth noble truth outlines the practical path to Nirvana, known as the Noble Eightfold Path (Ariya Atthangika Magga). This path is a holistic approach that integrates ethical conduct, mental discipline, and wisdom, structured into eight interconnected factors:

1. Right View (Samma-ditthi): Understanding the Four Noble Truths and the nature of Karma.
2. Right Intention (Samma-sankappa): Cultivating intentions of renunciation, non-ill will, and harmlessness.
3. Right Speech (Samma-vaca): Speaking truthfully and avoiding harmful speech.
4. Right Action (Samma-kammanta): Engaging in ethical behavior and avoiding actions that harm others.
5. Right Livelihood (Samma-ajiva): Earning a living in a way that supports ethical and spiritual development.
6. Right Effort (Samma-vayama): Developing wholesome mental states and abandoning unwholesome ones.
7. Right Mindfulness (Samma-sati): Maintaining awareness of body, feelings, mind, and mental phenomena.
8. Right Concentration (Samma-samadhi): Developing deep meditative absorption.

The Noble Eightfold Path is often categorized into three core practices:

1. Sila (Ethical Conduct): Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood.
2. Samadhi (Mental Discipline): Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, Right Concentration.
3. Panna (Wisdom): Right View, Right Intention.

By following this path, practitioners gradually reduce craving and ignorance, leading to the cessation of suffering and the attainment of Nirvana. The Four Noble Truths provide a clear and methodical approach to understanding the human condition and offer a practical path to liberation. These truths not only form the foundation of Theravada Buddhism but also influence all major Buddhist traditions. Through deep understanding and disciplined practice, the Four Noble Truths guide practitioners from the recognition of suffering to the realization of ultimate freedom.

The Middle Way

In the discourse, the Buddha also teaches the importance of avoiding the extremes of self-indulgence and self-mortification, which he had experienced in his previous life as a prince and as an ascetic. He advocates the Middle Way, a balanced approach to practice that leads to enlightenment (Thepa, 2022). The Middle Way (Majjhima Patipada in Pali) is a central teaching of the Buddha, introduced in the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta as a balanced approach to spiritual practice. It represents a path of moderation, avoiding the extremes of self-indulgence and self-mortification, and leads to insight, wisdom, and ultimately, Nirvana.

1. Concept and Origin Before attaining enlightenment, the Buddha (then Siddhartha Gautama) experimented with both extreme asceticism and indulgence. He was born into luxury as a prince but, upon encountering the realities of old age, sickness, death, and renunciation, he left his palace to seek spiritual truth. Initially, Siddhartha practiced severe asceticism with the five ascetics in the forests of Uruvela, depriving himself of food, sleep, and comfort. However, realizing that self-mortification only weakened the body and clouded the mind, he abandoned this approach (Rahula, 1974). His former companions criticized him, but Siddhartha recognized that neither luxury nor self-denial led to liberation. He then accepted a modest meal, revitalized his strength, and sat beneath the Bodhi Tree, where he attained enlightenment. This realization of the Middle Way marked the birth of his teaching, which emphasizes balance and practicality in the spiritual path.

2. The Two Extremes to Avoid The Buddha identified two unprofitable extremes that obstruct spiritual progress: The Extreme of Sensual Indulgence (Kāmasukhallikānuyoga) This extreme involves seeking pleasure and gratification through the senses. While sensual pleasures might bring temporary happiness, they are impermanent and often lead to attachment, craving (tanhā), and ultimately, suffering (dukkha) Indulgence in sensual pleasures keeps the mind distracted and attached to external conditions, preventing insight into the true nature of reality—that all things are impermanent (anicca), unsatisfactory (dukkha), and without a permanent self (anattā) The Extreme of Self-Mortification (Attakilamathānuyoga) On the opposite end of the spectrum is self-mortification, where practitioners subject themselves to harsh physical and mental austerities. The Buddha himself engaged in such practices, including severe fasting, breath control, and prolonged exposure to discomfort. However, he found that these extreme practices weakened the body and mind, leading not to enlightenment but to confusion and suffering. The Buddha taught that the body should be treated as a tool for spiritual development, not as an object of punishment.

3. The Middle Way in Practice In everyday life, the Middle Way involves making mindful choices that avoid extremes:

1) Diet and Health, eating moderately to nourish the body without overindulgence or deprivation.

2) Work and Leisure, balancing professional responsibilities with personal well-being and rest.

3) Spiritual Practice, engaging consistently in meditation and study without becoming rigid or complacent.

For monks and laypeople alike, the Middle Way encourages practical wisdom, promoting harmony and inner peace in both monastic and secular contexts.

4. The Significance of the Middle Way The Middle Way is not merely a compromise but a profound spiritual insight into the nature of existence (Rahula, 1974). It provides a methodical approach to:

1) Overcoming Suffering, through balanced practice, individuals can achieve a state of inner peace and enlightenment (Nirvana).

2) Living in the World, the Middle Way is adaptable, allowing individuals to navigate life's challenges with equanimity and wisdom.

3) Fostering Compassion, avoiding extremes, practitioners maintain a compassionate and non-judgmental attitude towards themselves and others.

The Middle Way is a timeless teaching that guides practitioners on a balanced path to liberation. By avoiding the extremes of sensual pleasure and self-mortification, the Buddha's teaching encourages a life of moderation, insight, and mindful living. The Noble Eightfold Path, as the practical embodiment of the Middle Way, offers a holistic approach to achieving spiritual enlightenment and living harmoniously in the world.

5. The Role of Mindfulness and Meditation Mindfulness and meditation are pivotal components of the Buddha's teaching, emphasized as essential tools on the path toward enlightenment (Khemraj, et al, 2022). Through Right Mindfulness and Right Concentration, a practitioner develops the ability to:

- Observe the true nature of the mind and body.
- Understand impermanence (anicca), suffering (dukkha), and the non-self (anatta).
- Attain mental states that foster wisdom and compassion.

6. The Impact of the Teaching the Buddha's delivery of this discourse marked the beginning of his teaching career, and it is said that upon hearing it, the five ascetics understood the truth and attained the first stages of enlightenment, including the stream entry.

Spread of Buddhism

The teachings of the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta reached beyond India, influencing cultures and spiritual traditions in Sri Lanka, Southeast Asia, Central Asia, China, Korea, Japan, and Tibet Buddhist art, literature, philosophy, and meditation practices became integral to these societies, adapting to local cultures while preserving the essence of the Buddha's teachings.

Spiritual and Philosophical Impact

1. Influence on Other Traditions: The Middle Way and Four Noble Truths influenced not only Buddhist traditions but also other spiritual and philosophical systems:

2. Hinduism: Certain schools, such as Advaita Vedanta, integrated elements of Buddhist philosophy, particularly in concepts of non-self (anatta) and impermanence (anicca)

3. Jainism: Although pre-dating Buddhism, Jainism adopted and paralleled ethical teachings like non-violence (ahimsa) and compassion

4. Western Philosophy and Psychology: Modern scholars and practitioners, including Carl Jung and Jon Kabat-Zinn, have incorporated Buddhist concepts of mindfulness and suffering into psychotherapy and mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR)

5. Contemporary Relevance: In the modern world, the Sutta's teachings offer practical wisdom for:

6. Mental Health: Through mindfulness practices, promoting mental well-being and resilience.

7. Ethical Living: Encouraging a balanced lifestyle and compassionate interactions.

8. Global Peace: Advocating non-violence, tolerance, and interfaith dialogue

The Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta had an enduring impact, from inspiring the enlightenment of the five ascetics to influencing global spiritual and philosophical traditions. Its teachings continue to resonate with practitioners and scholars, offering profound insights into the nature of suffering, the path to liberation, and the value of a balanced life. The Middle Way, Four Noble Truths, and Noble Eightfold Path remain timeless principles, guiding individuals toward wisdom, compassion, and inner peace.

The Discourse's Methodology

Certainly! Let's explore and discuss the Wheel of Dhamma (Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta) in more depth, focusing on its central themes, concepts, and its implications for personal and spiritual development in Buddhism.

- Presents a logical sequence, beginning with an acknowledgment of suffering, followed by an understanding of its causes, and then offering a path to its cessation.

- Relates the teachings to the experience of the listener, offering both wisdom and actionable practices.

- Uses direct experience as a key element, encouraging practitioners to test and verify the teachings through meditation and mindful living.

The goal is not just intellectual understanding but actual transformation through lived experience.

Impact of the Discourse The first sermon had a profound impact on the Buddha's first audience, the five ascetics. Kondañña, one of the ascetics, became the first to attain Sotapanna (Stream-entry), the first stage of enlightenment. This shows that the teachings were not just theoretical but were transformative, offering a direct path to spiritual progress.

Conclusion The Timeless Relevance of the Wheel of Dhamma, the Wheel of Dhamma remains central to Buddhist practice because it provides a clear, systematic approach to understanding and overcoming suffering. Its teachings are as relevant today as they were 2,600 years ago, offering practical methods for dealing with the challenges of life, cultivating wisdom, and ultimately attaining liberation.

Conclusion

The Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta, also known as the Discourse on the Wheel of Dhamma, represents the Buddha's groundbreaking revelation after his enlightenment and marks the beginning of his teaching career. Delivered to the five ascetics at the Deer Park in Isipatana, the sutta introduces the foundational concepts of the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path, which together form the core framework for Buddhist practice. These teachings provide a

profound understanding of suffering (Dukkha), its causes, and the means to overcome it, guiding practitioners toward the ultimate goal of liberation (Nirvana).

At the heart of the sutta lies the concept of the Middle Way, which advocates for a balanced approach to life, avoiding both extremes of sensual indulgence and extreme asceticism. This principle offers a practical and ethical path that leads to spiritual awakening, focusing on mindfulness, ethical conduct, and mental discipline. The Buddha's teachings stress the importance of experiential wisdom, urging practitioners to test and verify these principles through direct experience and meditation.

The impact of the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta extends far beyond its immediate audience of the five ascetics. It not only set the Wheel of Dhamma in motion but also laid the foundation for the development of the Buddhist Sangha, the community of practitioners who would continue to spread the Buddha's teachings throughout the world. The sutta's relevance is not confined to ancient India but resonates globally, offering insights into the nature of suffering and practical tools for achieving peace and enlightenment.

Today, the teachings of the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path continue to guide millions of practitioners across diverse Buddhist traditions. The timeless wisdom found in the sutta is particularly relevant in the modern world, where its principles can be applied to address the challenges of daily life, mental well-being, and the pursuit of ethical and compassionate living. Ultimately, the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta remains a pivotal document in Buddhist thought, offering a path to wisdom, liberation, and inner peace, with its profound teachings continuing to inspire and guide those on the journey to enlightenment.

Suggestions

The research into the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta (Discourse on the Wheel of Dhamma) has yielded profound insights into the core teachings of Buddhism, especially concerning the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path. These teachings offer a roadmap for overcoming suffering (dukkha) and attaining spiritual liberation (nirvana). Based on the findings, the following suggestions are proposed to both practitioners and the general public for applying and expanding these teachings.

1. **Practical Application of the Four Noble Truths Understanding and Addressing Suffering (Dukkha):** One of the key takeaways from the research is the importance of acknowledging the existence of suffering in daily life, whether physical, emotional, or existential. It is suggested that individuals start by embracing the reality of suffering and using it as a stepping stone to a deeper inquiry into the nature of human existence. This acknowledgment can foster greater compassion, mindfulness, and acceptance of the impermanence of life. **Craving and Attachment:** Research highlights that craving (tanha) is the root cause of suffering. As such, individuals can benefit from identifying their attachments and desires, learning to let go of unrealistic expectations, and practicing non-attachment through meditation and mindfulness. **Path to Cessation of Suffering:**

It is recommended that practitioners focus on cultivating wisdom (panna), ethical conduct (sila), and mental discipline (samadhi) to actively work toward overcoming suffering in their lives.

2. Promoting the Middle Way Balanced Living: The Buddha's teaching of the Middle Way between indulgence and self-mortification provides valuable guidance in today's world, where extremes in lifestyle, diet, and behavior are prevalent. Research suggests that individuals adopt a balanced lifestyle—embracing moderation in all things, from work to leisure, and avoiding both excessive indulgence and deprivation. Mindful Decision-Making: Applying the Middle Way to decision-making can help individuals navigate life's challenges with equanimity, avoiding impulsive actions or rigid discipline. Practitioners should seek balance, making thoughtful, conscious choices rather than falling into extremes.

3. Integration of Meditation and Mindfulness Mindfulness in Daily Life: The research underscores the role of mindfulness and meditation in the Buddha's teachings. To deepen one's practice, individuals should cultivate mindfulness in everyday activities, becoming fully present in each moment. This can lead to better mental clarity, emotional regulation, and overall well-being. Meditation for Insight: It is suggested that individuals regularly engage in meditation practices, especially focusing on insight (vipassana), to cultivate understanding of impermanence (anicca), suffering (dukkha), and non-self (anatta), which form the basis of the Buddha's teachings.

Body of Knowledge

While the study of the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta provides deep insights into the teachings of Buddhism, further studies are needed to expand on its contemporary applications and interdisciplinary intersections. Below are suggestions for future research avenues:

1. Modern Psychological and Therapeutic Applications Integration with Modern Psychotherapy, there is significant potential for integrating the teachings of the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta with contemporary psychological approaches, such as mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) and cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT). Future research could explore the effects of Buddhist teachings on mental health, particularly regarding mindfulness and meditation as tools for alleviating anxiety, depression, and other psychological struggles.

2. Cross-Cultural Influence and Adaptation Global Spread of Buddhist Teachings could explore how the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta and other Buddhist teachings have adapted in various cultural contexts, especially as Buddhism continues to spread across the world. Comparative studies could highlight how different cultures have integrated the core Buddhist concepts while maintaining their unique traditions and practices.

3. Environmental Ethics in Buddhism Sustainability and the Middle Way: With increasing global concern about environmental issues, research could investigate how Buddhist teachings—specifically the Middle Way and concepts of non-attachment—can be applied to modern

environmental ethics. This study could explore ways in which Buddhism can contribute to sustainability and ecological mindfulness in an age of environmental crisis.

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