

The First Discourse of the Buddha

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Precisely two months after his Enlightenment at Buddhagaya on the full - moon day of Asalhi (July), the Buddha delivered the first discourse to group of five ascetics who had been His disciples previously.

This discourse was expounded by the Buddha, while He was residing at Deer Park in Isipatana, near Baranasi. The Intellectual five monks were closely associated with Buddha for six years in Uruvela forest before his enlightenment.

They were the only human beings that were present to hear the first sermon. Many other invisible beings such as devas and brahmas also were present on that great occasion. They took advantage of the golden opportunity of listening to the first sermon. The Buddha directly addressed His sermon to the five ascetics and the discourse was intended mainly for them.

Dhammacakka is the name given to this first discourse of the Buddha. Here in 'dhamma' means wisdom or knowledge and 'cakka' means founding or establishment. Therefore, Dhammacakka means the 'Founding of Wisdom, or the Establishment of Wisdom'. Dhammacakkapavattana means the Exposition of the Establishment of Wisdom.

Dhamma may also be interpreted as Truth and cakka as wheel. Therefore, Dhammacakkapavattana would mean the Turning of the wheel of Truth.

Two Extremes

In this most important discourse He cautioned His old disciples to avoid two extremes. His actual words were: "There two extremes which should not be resorted to by a recluse who has renounced the world".

One extreme was constant attachment to sensual pleasures (kamasukhallikanuyoga). The Buddha described this extreme as base, vulgar, worldly, ignoble and profit less. This extreme of self-indulgence retards spiritual progress of meditators.

Another extreme was self-mortification (attakilamathanuyoga) which weakens the intellect. This extreme is not practised by the ordinary man. The Buddha remarked that it is painful, ignoble, and profitless. Unlike the first extreme this is not described as base, worldly, and vulgar. The Buddha had painful experience of this profitless course, described it as useless. It only multiplies suffering instead of diminishing it.

Ariya means Noble Ones who are free from passions. Attha means the Ultimate Good. For a Buddhist this is Nibbana, the complete emancipation from suffering. Therefore, 'anattasamhita' may be interpreted as not conducive to ultimate good.

The Buddha said that by realizing the mistake of both these two extremes, He followed a middle path. He discovered this new path by Himself. The Buddha termed His new system "Majjhima patipada", the "Middle Path".

Unlike the two diametrically opposite extremes he rejected, this middle path produces spiritual insight and intellectual wisdom to see things as they truly are. When insight is clarified and the intellect is sharpened, everything is seen in its true perspective.

Furthermore, the Middle Path leads to the subjugation of passions and the multiplying of wisdom and peace. Above all it leads to the attainment of the four supramundane Path Knowledges of Sainthood, to the understanding of the Four Noble Truths and finally to the realization of the Ultimate Goal, Nibbana.

The Middle Path

Now, what is the Middle Path? The Buddha replied: It is the Noble Eightfold Path. Then He elaborated the eight factors of this Noble Path.

1. The first factor is **Right Understanding**. This is the key-note of Buddhism. The Buddha started with Right Understanding in order to clear the doubts of the group of five monks, and guided them on the right way.

Right Understanding deals with knowledge of oneself as one really is. It is explained as the knowledge the four Noble Truths also. These Truths are concerned with this "one-fathom long body of man". Right understanding of the first Noble Truth leads to the eradication of the second Noble Truth which is the origin of the first Noble Truth.

One who searches for supramundane happiness and final liberation must understand that the first Noble Truth is to be penetrated, the Second Noble Truth to be eradicated, the Third Noble Truth is to be realized and the Fourth Noble Truth is to be followed. This is the brief meaning of Right Understanding. The key-note of Buddhism is this Right Understanding.

2. Clear vision leads to clear thinking. The second factor of the Noble Eightfold Path, therefore, is **Right Thought**. This mental state may be called "initial application". This important mental state eliminates wrong ideas or emotions and helps the other moral adjuncts to be directed towards Nibbana.

Samma Sankappa (Right Thought) serves the double purpose of eliminating evil thoughts and developing pure thoughts. In this particular connection, Right Thought is three-fold:

- a. Nekkhamma Sankappa - The Thought of Renunciation of worldly pleasures or the thought of selflessness. This is opposed to attachment, selfishness, and self-possessiveness.
- b. Abyapada Sankappa - The thought of loving-kindness or benevolence which is opposed to hatred, ill-will, or aversion.
- c. Avihimsa Sankappa - The thought of harmlessness or compassion, which is opposed to cruelty and callousness.

These evil and good forces are latent in all mankind. As long as we are worldlings, these evil forces rise to the surface at unexpected moments in disconcerting strength. When once they are totally eradicated on attaining full enlightenment, one's stream of consciousness becomes perfectly purified.

He whose mind is free from selfish desires, hatred and cruelty, and is saturated with spirit of selflessness, loving-kindness, and harmlessness, lives in perfect peace. He is indeed a blessing to himself and others.

3. Right Thought leads to **Right Speech**, the third factor. It deals with refraining from false speech, slandering, harsh words and frivolous talk.

People should be truthful and trustworthy and should ever seek the good and beautiful in others, instead of deceiving, defaming, denouncing, or disuniting of others. A harmless mind generated by loving-kindness can not give vent to harsh speech which first defaces the speaker and then hurts another. Whatever his utterance is not only true, but it must also be sweet and pleasant, useful, fruitful, beneficial and acceptable by others.

4. **Right Action** follows after Right Speech, Right Action entails refraining from killing, stealing, and sexual misconduct. These three evil deeds are caused by craving and anger, associated with ignorance. By the gradual eliminating of these causes from the mind, blameworthy actions will find no expression. Being pure in mind, a person will lead a pure life.

5. **Right Livelihood**: Purifying view, thoughts, words, and deeds at the outset, the spiritual pilgrim tries to purify his livelihood by refraining from the five kinds of trade which are forbidden to lay disciples. They are trading in 1) weapons, 2) humans, 3) the slaughter of animals and 4) intoxicating drink and drugs. To show an appreciation for the beauty of life, all people should abstain from these five kinds of improper trade.

6. **Right Effort** is fourfold, namely:

- a. The endeavour to prevent the arising of evils not yet arisen.
- b. The endeavour to discard evil that has already arisen.
- c. The endeavour to cultivate good not yet arisen.
- d. The endeavour to develop the good which has already arisen.

Right Effort plays a very important part in the Noble Eightfold Path. It is by one's own effort that deliverance is obtained; not by seeking refuge in others or by offering prayers. Both a rubbish-heap of evil and a store-house of virtue are found in men. By Right Effort one removes the rubbish-heap and cultivates the seeds of latent virtues.

7. Right Effort is closely associated with **Right Mindfulness**. It is constant mindfulness with regard to body, feelings, thoughts and mind objects. Mindfulness on these four objects tends to eradicate misconceptions with regard to desirability, so-called happiness, permanence and an immortal soul.

8. Right Effort and Right Mindfulness lead to **Right Concentration**, which is one-pointedness of mind. A concentrated mind acts as a powerful aid to see things as they truly are by means of penetrative insight.

Of these eight factors of the Noble Eightfold Path, the first two are grouped under Wisdom, the second three under Morality, and the last three under Concentration. According to the order of development, Sila-Morality, Samadhi-Concentration, and Panna-Wisdom are the three stages of the Noble Path. All these factors denote the mental attitude of the aspirant who is striving to gain Deliverance.

Having prefaced the discourse with a description of the two extremes and His newly discovered Middle Path, the Buddha expounded the Four Noble Truths in detail.

"Sacca"

Sacca is the Pali term for Truth which means what really is. Its Sanskrit equivalent is Satya which denotes an incontrovertible fact. The Buddha expressed definitely four such Truths, the foundations of His teaching, which are associated with the so-called being. Hence, His doctrine is homo-centric, in contrast to theo-centric religions. His teaching is inward looking rather than outward looking.

Whether a Buddha arises or not, these Truths always exist. It is the Buddha who reveals these to the deluded world. Nobody can change them with time, space, or person, because they are Ultimate Truths. The Buddha did not depend upon anyone for His realization of the Noble Truths.

He Himself said in this discourse: - "With regard to this Dhamma unheard before, there arose in me the eye; the knowledge, the wisdom, the insight and the light". These words are very significant, because they testify to the originality of His new teaching.

In Pali these truths are called Ariya Sacca. These were discovered by Ariya who is far removed from passions. Therefore, they are so-called Ariya Sacca, The Noble Truths.

The First Noble Truth

The First Noble Truth deals with dukkha which means suffering or misery. Here, "du" means emptiness and "kha" means feeling. Dukkha therefore means feeling of emptiness. Average men are only surface-seers. An Ariya sees things as they truly are. To an Ariya all life is suffering and he finds no real happiness in this world which otherwise deceives mankind with illusory pleasures. Material happiness is merely the gratification of some desire.

All beings are subject to birth (jati), decay (jara), disease (vyadhi), and finally to death (marana). No one is exempt from these four causes of suffering. In the discourse the Buddha said "Birth is suffering, decay is suffering, disease is suffering, death is suffering".

Unfulfilled wishes are also suffering. As a rule, every body wishes to be associated either with beloved persons or pleasant things. No body wishes to be associated with hated persons or unpleasant things. We always wish to be associated with persons or things we like.

However, our cherished desires are not always gratified. At times what we least expect or least desire is thrust on us. Sometimes, such unexpected unpleasant circumstances become so intolerable and painful that weak ignorant people are compelled to commit suicide; as if such an act would solve the problems of life.

Real happiness is found within and it is not defined in terms of wealth, power, honours, or conquests. If such worldly possessions are forcibly or unjustly obtained or are misdirected or even viewed with attachment, they become a source of misery and sorrow for the possessors.

Normally the enjoyment of sensual pleasures is the highest and only happiness for average people. There is no doubt some momentary happiness in the anticipation, gratification, and retrospection of such fleeting material pleasure, but this is illusory and temporary.

According to the Buddha, non - attachment (viraga) to material pleasure, or transcending material pleasure is a greater bliss. In brief, this composite body of clinging is itself a great heap of manifold suffering.

The Second Noble Truth

It is said in the text, "It is this craving which produces rebirth, accompanied by passionate clinging, delight now here this life, then there that life. It is the craving for sensual pleasures, craving for existence, and craving for non-existence".

There are three kinds of craving :

1. The first is the grossest form of craving, which is simple attachment to all sensual pleasures (kamatanha).
2. The second is attachment to existence (bhavatanha).
3. The third is attachment to non-existence (vibhava tanha).

Of the three, the second craving is attachment to sensual pleasures connected with the belief in eternalism (sassataditthi), and the third craving is attachment to sensual pleasures connected with the belief in nihilism. (ecchedaditthi). Bhavatanha may also be interpreted as attachment to the realms of form and vibhavatanha as attachment to the formless realms. (rupatanha and arupatanha).

Craving is a powerful mental force latent in all beings. It is the chief cause of most of the miseries of life. This craving, gross or subtle, leads to repeated births in cycle of continuity of suffering. This craving makes beings cling to all forms of life. Right Understanding of the First Noble Truth leads to the eradication of craving.

There are six kinds of craving corresponding to the six sense organs such as, eyes, nose, tongue, body and mind, and six sense objects such as, form, smell, sound, taste, touch, and mental objects They become twelve when they are treated as internal and external. They are reckoned as 36 when viewed as past, present and future. When multiplied by the foregoing three kinds of craving, they amount to 108 altogether.

The Buddha also said in the Anguttara and Digha Nikaya that the worldlings who are conjoined with attachment of craving have to go through the unending process of Dependent Origination.

The grossest forms of craving are attenuated on attaining Sakadagami, the second stage of Sainthood, and are eradicated on attaining Anagami, the third stage of Sainthood. The subtle forms of craving are eradicated on attaining Arahantship.

Right understanding of the First Noble Truth leads to the eradication (pahatabba) of craving. The Second Noble Truth thus deals with the mental attitude of the ordinary man towards the external objects of sense.

The Third Noble Truth is that there is a complete cessation of suffering which is Nibbana, the ultimate goal of Buddhists. It can be achieved in this life itself by the total eradication of all forms of craving. This Nibbana is to be comprehended (sacchikatabba) and unending peace and happiness attained by renouncing all attachment to the external world.

The Third Noble Truth

This is said in the discourse. "Now, Bhikkhus, this is the Noble Truth of the cessation of suffering. It is the complete separation from, and destruction of, this very craving; its forsaking, renunciation, liberation therefrom, and non-attachment thereto."

The Third Noble Truth states that there is a complete cessation of suffering which is Nibbana, the ultimate goal of Buddhists. Nibbana can be achieved in this very life by the total eradication of all forms of craving. This Nibbana is to be realized by the eye of enlightenment by renouncing all attachment to the internal body and external world.

This First Truth of suffering which depends on this so-called being and various aspects of life, is to be carefully examined, analysed, and understood. This examination leads to a proper understanding of oneself as one really is. The cause of this suffering is craving or attachment. It is stated in the Dhammapada: "From craving springs grief; from craving springs fear; for him who is wholly free from craving, there is no grief, much less fear." (v.216)

Craving leads to repeated births. This Second Truth indirectly deals with past, present and future births. This Second Truth of craving which produces rebirth and which is original cause of suffering, is to be totally eradicated, uprooted and destroyed without exception. This Third Truth of the cessation of suffering is to be realized by developing the Noble Eight Fold Path.

The Fourth Noble Truth

When a person develops properly the Noble Eight Fold Path, he can eradicate craving which is cause of suffering. When he eradicates craving, he can stop completely the continuous cycle of suffering. When this craving and this suffering are removed completely, one can realize Nibbana. This is the power of the Noble Eight Fold Path. This unique path is the only straight way to Nibbana. This Fourth Noble Truth is to be developed.

Expounding the four Noble Truths in various ways the Buddha concluded the discourse with the forcible words; "Bhikkhus, as long as the absolute true intuitive knowledge regarding these four Noble Truths under their three aspects, and twelve modes, was not perfectly clear to me, so long did I not acknowledge that I had gained incomparable Supreme Enlightenment."

"When the absolute true intuitive knowledge regarding these Four Noble Truths become perfectly clear to me, then only did I acknowledge that I had gained incomparable Supreme Enlightenment."

"There arose in me the knowledge and insight; 'Unshakable is the deliverance of my mind, this is my last birth, and now there is no existence again.'"

At the end of the discourse Kondanna, the senior of the five disciples, understood the Dhamma and attained the first stage of Sainthood whereby he realized that whatever is subject to origination all that is subject to cessation - Yam kinca samudaya dhammam sabbam tam nirodha dhammam.

When the Buddha expounded the discourse of the Dhammacakka, the earth-bound deities exclaimed: "This excellent Dhammacakka, which could not be expounded by any ascetic, priest, god, Mara or Brahma in this world, has been expounded by the Exalted One at the Deer Park, in Isipatana, near Baranasi."

Hearing this, Devas and Brahmas of all the other planes also shouted the same in joyous chorus. A radiant light, surpassing the light of gods, appeared in the world. The light of the Dhamma illumined the whole world, and brought peace and happiness to all beings.

What is the best?

"The best of paths is the Eightfold Path.

The best of truths are the Four Noble Truths.

The best of states is non-attachment.

The best of bipeds is the Seeing One."

(Dhammapada 273)

Conclusion

The Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path as taught only by the Buddha makes us aware of suffering, the causes of suffering and the way out of suffering. Buddhism is thus the only means for all beings to overcome the evils of life. And this achieved is by eradicating ignorance and craving, thereby enabling all of us to attain true and lasting peace and happiness in this life and beyond.