

An Exposition of The Dhammacakka Sutta



by
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Association for Insight Meditation

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An Exposition of the Dhammacakka Sutta

The full title is the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta, but it is widely known as the Dhammacakka Sutta.

After attaining Enlightenment, the Buddha was at first reluctant to teach the Dhamma that he had realised. He considered, "This Dhamma is profound and goes against the flow of sensual desire; most people are strongly attached to and immersed in sensual pleasures." However, he reasoned that some were not too strongly attached, and were already searching for truth. They would be able to understand it.

First he thought to teach it to Āḷāra Kālāma, who had taught him meditation to attain the realm of infinite consciousness, but devas told him that Āḷāra had passed away only last week; and he realised this was true by his own direct knowledge.

Next he thought about teaching Uddaka Rāmaputta, who had taught him meditation to attain the realm of neither perception nor non-perception, but devas told him that Uddaka had passed away the previous night; and he realised this was true by his own direct knowledge.

So he decided to teach the Dhamma first to the five ascetics who accompanied him while he was practising self-mortification. So he went to the deer park at the Sages' Grove near Benares, where they were staying.

The Buddha was alone after his enlightenment. There was no one to tell him where the ascetics were staying, but on the night of his enlightenment he had attained the divine eye by means of which one can see things at a great distance.

Introduction

The Dhammacakka Sutta begins as follows:

*“Ekaṃ samayaṃ Bhagavā Bārāṇasiyaṃ viharati
Isipatane Migadāye. Tatra kho Bhagavā pañcavaggiye
bhikkhū āmantesi:”*

“At one time the Blessed One was staying at the deer park in the Sage’s Grove near Benares. Then the Blessed One addressed the group of five ascetics:”

The Buddha was not yet staying at Isipatana, but had only just arrived after a journey of ten or eleven days on foot from Bodhgāya, a distance of about 144 miles. Seeing him coming, the five ascetics agreed not to greet him, or to offer him water or a seat, because in their view he had reverted to a life of comfort, and had abandoned the struggle for enlightenment. Their view was that enlightenment could only be attained by self-mortification — by punishing the body to remove attachment. However, when he approached, they could not adhere to their agreement, so they greeted him, fetched water for washing the feet, and offered him a seat.

The Buddha stated plainly that he had attained enlightenment and urged them to listen to him, but they were sceptical. Only when the Buddha reminded them of his total honesty during their long association did their hearts become open to listen. Then he began by saying:

The Middle Path

“Dveme, bhikkhave, antā pabbajitena na sevitabbā. Katame dve? Yo cāyaṃ kāmesu kāmasukhallikānuyogo hīno gammo pothujjaniko anariyo anatthasaṃhito, yo cāyaṃ attakilamathānuyogo dukkho anariyo anatthasaṃhito. Ete kho, bhikkhave, ubho ante anupagamma majjhimā paṭipadā Tathāgatena abhisambuddhā cakkhukaraṇī ñāṇakaraṇī upasamāya abhiññāya sambodhāya nibbānāya saṃvattati.”

“These two extremes, monks, should not be followed by one gone forth. Which two? Sensual indulgence, which is low, vulgar, worldly, ignoble, and unprofitable; and self-mortification, which is painful, ignoble, and unprofitable. Avoiding these two extremes, monks,

the Tathāgata has discovered the Middle Path that produces vision and knowledge, and leads to tranquillity, higher knowledge, enlightenment, and nibbāna.”

The Buddha was fully conscious of the view that the five ascetics held. They had been living in the forest practising austerity much longer than him. They were the astrologers who predicted at his birth that he would become either a Buddha or a World Turning Monarch (*Cakkavatti*). One of them, Koṇḍañña, had predicted certainly that he would become a Fully Enlightened Buddha. Believing firmly in their knowledge of astrology, they had renounced the world twenty-nine years before him, thirty-five years ago, to await his renunciation. They hoped to be the first to benefit from his teaching, and were disappointed when they thought he had given up the struggle. Evidently, they had lost confidence in their own astrology.

So the Buddha began by denouncing indulgence in sensual pleasures, which they believed was incompatible with higher knowledge. Only then did he denounce self-mortification — which they practised — as painful, ignoble, and unprofitable. He then stated that by avoiding these two extremes he had discovered the Middle Path that produces knowledge and vision, and leads to tranquillity, higher knowledge, enlightenment, and nibbāna.

Now they were eager to hear his teaching. They had abandoned sensual pleasures thirty-five years ago, and had practised self-mortification ever since then without any beneficial result worth mentioning. No doubt they had had a hard time, living in the forest all those years with scanty food and shelter, without the company of relatives. All of them were now over fifty years old.

“Katamā ca sā, bhikkhave, majjhimā paṭipadā Tathāgatena abhisambuddhā cakkhukaraṇi ñāṇakaraṇi upasamāya abhiññāya sambodhāya nibbānāya saṁvattati? Ayameva ariyo aṭṭhaṅgiko maggo, seyyathidaṃ: sammādiṭṭhi sammāsāṅkappo sammāvācā sammākammanto sammā-

ājīvo sammāvāyāmo sammāsati sammāsamādhi. Ayaṃ kho sā, bhikkhave, majjhimā paṭipadā Tathāgatenā abhisambuddhā cakkhukaraṇi ñāṇakaraṇi upasamāya abhiññāya sambodhāya nibbānāya saṃvattati.”

“And what, monks, is the Middle Path that produces vision and knowledge, and leads to tranquillity, higher knowledge, enlightenment, and nibbāna? It is this noble eightfold path itself, namely: right view, right thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. The Tathāgata, monks, has discovered the Middle Path that produces vision and knowledge, and leads to tranquillity, higher knowledge, enlightenment, and nibbāna.”

The Buddha only mentioned the eight path factors in brief, without explaining their meaning in detail. The ascetics must have already been familiar with basic moral conduct, and the proper livelihood for a recluse, but it is not said whether they had learnt from the Bodhisatta how to attain the *jhānas*. He had mastered them all under Āḷāra and Uddaka. Having realised that they did not lead to enlightenment, perhaps he did not teach them to the five ascetics, since they were searching for a different path. Without even the enjoyment of *jhānic* bliss, the ascetics must have had a tough time staying in the forest — they could not have been lazy and addicted to sensual pleasures.

After simply listing the factors of the eightfold path, the Buddha went on to explain the four noble truths.

The First Noble Truth

“Idaṃ kho pana, bhikkhave, dukkhaṃ ariyasaccam: jātipi dukkhā, jarāpi dukkhā, byādhipi dukkho, maraṇampi dukkhaṃ, appiyehi sampayogo dukkho, piyehi vippayogo dukkho, yampicchaṃ na labhati tampi dukkhaṃ: saṅkhittena pañcupādānakkhandhā dukkhā.”

“This, monks, is the noble truth of suffering: birth is suffering, aging is suffering, disease is suffering, death is suffering, association with the unloved is suffering, separation from the loved is suffering, not getting what one wants is suffering, in brief the five aggregates of grasping are suffering.”

The Second Noble Truth

“Idaṃ kho pana, bhikkhave, dukkhasamudayaṃ ariya-saccaṃ: yāyaṃ taṇhā ponobbhavikā, nandirāga-sahagatā tatratatrābhinandinī, seyyathidaṃ: kāmataṇhā, bhavataṇhā, vibhavataṇhā.”

“This, monks, is the noble truth of the cause of suffering: this craving that leads to repeated becoming, taking delight now here, now there, namely: craving for sensual pleasures, craving for existence, and craving for non-existence.”

Learned monks explain craving for non-existence as the craving that arises dependent on the belief that this very life is the only one. It is not the wish to commit suicide, but the wish to enjoy life to the full, without having to worry about the consequences of one’s actions. If one does not believe in a future existence after death, what reason is there not to enjoy oneself as much as possible? “Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we may die” is a common maxim that many ignorant people live by. Not seeing that rebirth follows death as surely as Monday morning follows the weekend, people try their utmost to enjoy sensual pleasures, regardless of the effect on their health, reputation, and spiritual life.

The Third Noble Truth

“Idaṃ kho pana, bhikkhave, dukkhanirodhaṃ ariya-saccaṃ: yo tassāyeva taṇhāya asesavirāganirodho cāgo paṭinissaggo mutti anālayo.”

“This, monks, is the noble truth of the cessation of suffering: the cessation of craving without any remainder, giving it up, renouncing it, and complete freedom from it.”

We can all restrain our desires for a while, if we know that we can indulge in them as much as we like later. However, this is not renunciation at all, but only restraint. To renounce something means we must fully understand the disadvantages of attachment to it, and then give it up.

Every smoker knows very well that cigarettes cause lung cancer, heart disease, *etc.*, yet they are not able to give up smoking. When they rightly understand the suffering involved in smoking they will certainly give it up. It is the same with sensual pleasures. We remain attached to them as long as we do not realise their disadvantages. Attachment to views also causes suffering, but people relinquish their views with great difficulty.

The Fourth Noble Truth

“Idaṃ kho pana, bhikkhave, dukkhanirodhagāmini paṭipadā ariyasaccaṃ: ayameva ariyo aṭṭhaṅgiko maggo, seyyathidaṃ: sammādiṭṭhi sammāsaṅkappo sammāvācā sammākammanto sammā-ājīvo sammāvāyāmo sammāsati sammāsamādhī.”

“This, monks, is the noble truth of the way leading the cessation of suffering: this noble eightfold path itself, namely: right view, right thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration.”

The noble eightfold path is often taught in the order: morality, concentration, and wisdom, beginning with right action, speech, and livelihood, since morality is the foundation of spiritual development. However, here the Buddha began with right view because the five ascetics were already well established in morality, but did not have right view. Because

their view was wrong, everything else was wrong too, so they could attain no benefit from their wrong efforts.

All Buddhists should strive to establish right view. There are two conditions for the arising of right view: the utterance of another, and systematic attention. The utterance of another may also be found by reading books. Systematic attention, or wise attention is essential. If we are not open-minded when reading or listening to others, we will not understand anything, because our wisdom is obscured by attachment to our own opinions. Due to not understanding the truth of suffering we are reborn repeatedly.

If we are intelligent and open-minded, we will be able to reason wisely and accept whatever is right, while rejecting anything that is false. Then our view will gradually be straightened out until it is completely in conformity with the Buddha's teaching. When we have acquired mundane right view, or gained confidence in the Buddha, Dhamma, and Saṅgha, we will surely strive to attain nibbāna, the end of suffering. Those who do not practise meditation, have not yet acquired even mundane right view. Supramundane right view can be gained only by attaining the path of a Stream-winner.

The Buddha then went on to explain the three aspects of each of the four truths, regarding which the vision, knowledge, wisdom, insight, and light arose that had never arisen before. The same phrase is used repeatedly regarding each of the twelve aspects, so I have summarised the translation. For each of the four truths, the second and third aspects are different.

The Buddha's Understanding of the Truth

“Idaṃ dukkhaṃ ariyasaccan’ti me, bhikkhave, pubbe ananussutesu dhammesu cakkhuṃ udapādi, ñāṇaṃ udapādi, paññā udapādi, vijjā udapādi, āloko udapādi. ‘Taṃ kho panidaṃ dukkhaṃ ariyasaccaṃ pariññeyyan’ti me, bhikkhave, pubbe ananussutesu dhammesu cakkhuṃ udapādi, ñāṇaṃ udapādi, paññā udapādi, vijjā udapādi, āloko udapādi. ‘Taṃ kho panidaṃ dukkhaṃ

ariyasaccaṃ pariññātan'ti me, bhikkhave, pubbe ananussutesu dhammesu cakkhuṃ udapādi, ñāṇaṃ udapādi, paññā udapādi, vijjā udapādi, āloko udapādi."

"Vision, knowledge, wisdom, insight, light arose regarding things not seen before that 'This is the noble truth of suffering.' ... 'This noble truth of suffering should be [thoroughly] understood.' ... 'This noble truth of suffering has been understood.'"

Here, the Buddha uses five synonyms for wisdom to stress that he had comprehensively understood the noble truth of suffering. Vision or the eye (*cakkhuṃ*) of wisdom, knowledge (*ñāṇaṃ*), wisdom (*paññā*), insight (*vijjā*) is the antithesis of delusion or ignorance (*avijjā*), and light (*āloko*) or illumination denotes the perfect clarity of his vision.

"Idaṃ dukkhasamudayaṃ ariyasaccaṃ'ti me, bhikkhave, pubbe ananussutesu dhammesu cakkhuṃ udapādi, ñāṇaṃ udapādi, paññā udapādi, vijjā udapādi, āloko udapādi. 'Taṃ kho panidaṃ dukkhasamudayaṃ ariyasaccaṃ pahātabban'ti me, bhikkhave, pubbe ananussutesu dhammesu cakkhuṃ udapādi, ñāṇaṃ udapādi, paññā udapādi, vijjā udapādi, āloko udapādi. 'Taṃ kho panidaṃ dukkhasamudayaṃ ariyasaccaṃ pahīnan'ti me, bhikkhave, pubbe ananussutesu dhammesu cakkhuṃ udapādi, ñāṇaṃ udapādi, paññā udapādi, vijjā udapādi, āloko udapādi."

"Vision, knowledge, wisdom, insight, light arose regarding things not seen before that 'This is the noble truth of the cause of suffering.' ... 'This noble truth of the cause of suffering should be abandoned.' ... 'This noble truth of the cause of suffering has been abandoned.'"

Understanding what should be done may not be so hard, but the Buddha had also done what should be done — renounced the craving that is the cause of suffering.

“Idaṃ dukkhanirodhaṃ ariyasaccan’ti me, bhikkhave, pubbe ananussutesu dhammesu cakkhuṃ udapādi, ñāṇaṃ udapādi, paññā udapādi, vijjā udapādi, āloko udapādi. ‘Taṃ kho panidaṃ dukkhanirodhaṃ ariyasaccaṃ sacchikātabban’ti me, bhikkhave, pubbe ananussutesu dhammesu cakkhuṃ udapādi, ñāṇaṃ udapādi, paññā udapādi, vijjā udapādi, āloko udapādi. ‘Taṃ kho panidaṃ dukkhanirodhaṃ ariyasaccaṃ sacchikatan’ti me, bhikkhave, pubbe ananussutesu dhammesu cakkhuṃ udapādi, ñāṇaṃ udapādi, paññā udapādi, vijjā udapādi, āloko udapādi.”

“Vision, knowledge, wisdom, insight, light arose regarding things not seen before that ‘This is the noble truth of the cessation of suffering.’ ... ‘This noble truth of the cessation of suffering should be realised.’ ... ‘This noble truth of the cessation of suffering has been realised.’”

“Idaṃ dukkhanirodhagāmini paṭipadā ariyasaccan’ti me, bhikkhave, pubbe ananussutesu dhammesu cakkhuṃ udapādi, ñāṇaṃ udapādi, paññā udapādi, vijjā udapādi, āloko udapādi. Taṃ kho panidaṃ dukkhanirodhagāmini paṭipadā ariyasaccaṃ bhāvetabban’ti me, bhikkhave, pubbe ananussutesu dhammesu cakkhuṃ udapādi, ñāṇaṃ udapādi, paññā udapādi, vijjā udapādi, āloko udapādi. ‘Taṃ kho panidaṃ dukkhanirodhagāmini paṭipadā ariyasaccaṃ bhāvitan’ti me, bhikkhave, pubbe ananussutesu dhammesu cakkhuṃ udapādi, ñāṇaṃ udapādi, paññā udapādi, vijjā udapādi, āloko udapādi.”

“Vision, knowledge, wisdom, insight, light arose regarding things not seen before that ‘This is the noble truth of the path to the end of suffering.’ ... ‘This noble truth of the path to the end of suffering should be developed.’ ... ‘This noble truth of the path to the end of suffering has been developed.’”

So suffering should be thoroughly understood, craving should be abandoned, nibbāna should be realised, and the path should be developed. The Buddha had done this fully and completely, so he could boldly claim to be fully enlightened. We must develop the path until we also realise the end of suffering.

There is huge difference between understanding theoretically and realising practically. No one needs to be told that pain, disease, old age, not getting what one wants, *etc.*, are suffering — it is obvious. However, our understanding is not right understanding, nor clear understanding. If it was right understanding we would already be Arahants, without any mental defilements such as greed, anger, envy, conceit, pride, delusion. Just by hearing about the four noble truths and thinking over them a bit, do we become enlightened? Not at all. Therefore, morality has to be perfected, concentration has to be deepened, mindfulness has to be firmly established, effort has to be roused up and made vigorous, thoughts have to be turned away from worldly desires. Only then can we gain the right view that can penetrate suffering properly. When the suffering of conditioned existence is clearly understood, we will definitely want to be liberated from it. No one wants to be liberated from happiness — they want to enjoy it as much as possible, but sensual enjoyment is just suffering concealed by delusion.

The Buddha's Claim of Enlightenment

The Buddha continued by explaining that as long as he had not fully understood, abandoned, realised, and developed these four truths, he did not claim to be enlightened.

“Yāvakiṃvañca me, bhikkhave, imesu catūsu ariyasaccesu evaṃ tiparivaṭṭaṃ dvādasākāraṃ yathābhūtaṃ ñāṇa-dassanaṃ na suvisuddhaṃ ahosi, neva tāvāhaṃ, bhikkhave, sadevake loke samāraḷe sabrahmaḷe sassamaṇabrāhmaṇiyā pajāya sadevamaṇussāya ‘Anuttaraṃ sammāsambodhiṃ abhisambuddho’ti paccaññāsiṃ.”

“As long, monks, as my knowledge of these four noble truths in three aspects and twelve ways was not completely pure, I did not, monks, claim incomparable full enlightenment in the world with its māras, brahmas, recluses and brahmins, with its gods and men.”

“Yato ca kho me, bhikkhave, imesu catūsu ariyasaccesu evaṃ tiparivaṭṭaṃ dvādasākāraṃ yathābhūtaṃ ñāṇa-dassanaṃ suvisuddhaṃ ahosi, athāhaṃ, bhikkhave, sadevake loke samāraḷe sabrahmaḷe sassamaṇa-brāhmaṇiṃ pajāya sadevamaṇussāya ‘Anuttaraṃ sammāsambodhiṃ abhisambuddho’ti paccaññāsiṃ.”

“But when, monks, my knowledge of these four noble truths in three aspects and twelve ways was completely pure, I did claim, monks, the incomparable full enlightenment in the world with its māras, brahmas, recluses and brahmins, with its gods and men.”

“Ñāṇaṇca pana me dassanaṃ udapādi: ‘Akuppā me vimutti, ayamantimā jāti, natthidāni punabbhavo’”ti.

“Then knowledge and discernment arose in me:
“Irreversible is my liberation, this is my final birth,
there will be no more further existence.”

This is the end of what the Buddha taught to the five monks. The rest of the Dhammacakka Sutta was appended later when the discourse was related to record what happened after the Blessed One had finished teaching.

Koṇḍañña Realises the Truth

“Idamavoca Bhagavā. Attamaṇā pañcavaggiyā bhikkhū Bhagavato bhāsitaṃ abhinandunti.”

This is what the Blessed One said. The group of five monks rejoiced exceedingly in what the Blessed One had said.

*“Imasmiñca pana veyyākaraṇasmiṃ bhaññamāne
Āyasmato Koṇḍañña virajaṃ vītamalaṃ dhamma-
cakkhuṃ udapādi: ‘Yaṃ kiñci samudayadhammaṃ,
sabbaṃ taṃ nirodhadhammaṃ’ti.*

“When this discourse had been given, the spotless, stainless eye of Dhamma arose in the Venerable Koṇḍañña: “Whatever arises, all that passes away.”

This means that Venerable Koṇḍañña realised nibbāna and attained the path of Stream-winning. His insight presumably developed gradually as he listened to the discourse, culminating in enlightenment just as the Blessed One finished speaking. None of the other four ascetics gained enlightenment at that time, but they must have gained firm faith in the Blessed One for they took up the rains retreat with him the following day and all began to practise meditation diligently. By the fourth day, all five monks had gained Stream-winning, and on the fifth day they all gained Arahantship on listening to the discourse on not-self — the *Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta*.

The Devas Rejoice

*“Pavattite ca pana Bhagavatā Dhammacakke, Bhumma
devā saddamanussāvesuṃ: ‘Etaṃ Bhagavatā Bārāṇasi-
yaṃ Isipatane Migadāye anuttaraṃ Dhammacakkaṃ
pavattitaṃ appaṭivattiyaṃ samaṇena vā brāhmaṇena
vā devena vā mārena vā brahmunā vā kenaci vā
lokasmin’ti.”*

“When the Wheel of the Dhamma had been set rolling by the Blessed One, the earthbound devas declared in one voice: “The Incomparable Wheel of Dhamma has been set rolling by the Blessed One in the deer park, at the Sage’s resort near Benares, and it cannot be turned back by any recluse, brahmin, deva, māra, brahma, or by anyone in the world.”

“Bhummānaṃ devānaṃ saddaṃ sutvā, Cātumahārājikā devā saddamanussāvesuṃ: ‘Etaṃ Bhagavatā Bārāṇasiyaṃ Isipatane Migadāye anuttaraṃ Dhammacakkaṃ pavattitaṃ, appaṭivattiyaṃ samaṇena vā brāhmaṇena vā devena vā mārena vā brahmunā vā kenaci vā lokasmin’ti.”

“Having heard the earthbound devas, the devas of the Four Great Kings declared in one voice: “The Incomparable Wheel of Dhamma has been set rolling by the Blessed One in the deer park, at the Sage’s resort near Benares, and it cannot be turned back by any recluse, brahmin, deva, māra, brahma, or by anyone in the world.”

“Cātumahārājikānaṃ devānaṃ saddaṃ sutvā, Tāvatiṃsā devā saddamanussāvesuṃ: ‘Etaṃ Bhagavatā Bārāṇasiyaṃ Isipatane Migadāye anuttaraṃ Dhammacakkaṃ pavattitaṃ, appaṭivattiyaṃ samaṇena vā brāhmaṇena vā devena vā mārena vā brahmunā vā kenaci vā lokasmin’ti.”

“Having heard the devas of the Four Great Kings, the devas of the Thirty-three declared in one voice: “The Incomparable Wheel of Dhamma has been set rolling by the Blessed One in the deer park, at the Sage’s resort near Benares, and it cannot be turned back by any recluse, brahmin, deva, māra, brahma, or by anyone in the world.”

“Tāvatiṃsānaṃ devānaṃ saddaṃ sutvā, Yāmā devā saddamanussāvesuṃ: ‘Etaṃ Bhagavatā Bārāṇasiyaṃ Isipatane Migadāye anuttaraṃ Dhammacakkaṃ pavattitaṃ, appaṭivattiyaṃ samaṇena vā brāhmaṇena vā devena vā mārena vā brahmunā vā kenaci vā lokasmin’ti.”

“Having heard the devas of the Thirty-three, the Yāmā devas declared in one voice ...

“Yāmānaṃ devānaṃ saddaṃ sutvā, Tusitā devā saddamanussāvesuṃ: ‘Etaṃ Bhagavatā Bārāṇasiyaṃ Isipatane Migadāye anuttaraṃ Dhammacakkaṃ pavattitaṃ, appaṭivattiyaṃ samaṇena vā brāhmaṇena vā devena vā mārena vā brahmunā vā kenaci vā lokasmin’ti.

“Having heard the Yāmā devas, the Tusita devas declared in one voice ...

“Tusitānaṃ devānaṃ saddaṃ sutvā, Nimmānaratī devā saddamanussāvesuṃ: ‘Etaṃ Bhagavatā Bārāṇasiyaṃ Isipatane Migadāye anuttaraṃ Dhammacakkaṃ pavattitaṃ, appaṭivattiyaṃ samaṇena vā brāhmaṇena vā devena vā mārena vā brahmunā vā kenaci vā lokasmin’ti.

“Having heard the Tusita devas, the devas who delight in creating declared in one voice ...

“Nimmānaratīnaṃ devānaṃ saddaṃ sutvā, Paranimitavasavattī devā saddamanussāvesuṃ: ‘Etaṃ Bhagavatā Bārāṇasiyaṃ Isipatane Migadāye anuttaraṃ Dhammacakkaṃ pavattitaṃ, appaṭivattiyaṃ samaṇena vā brāhmaṇena vā devena vā mārena vā brahmunā vā kenaci vā lokasmin’ti.

“Having heard the devas who delight in creating, the devas who delight in creations declared in one voice ...

“Paranimitavasavattīnaṃ devānaṃ saddaṃ sutvā, Brahmakāyikā devā saddamanussāvesuṃ: ‘Etaṃ bhagavatā bārāṇasiyaṃ isipatane migadāye anuttaraṃ Dhammacakkaṃ pavattitaṃ appaṭivattiyaṃ samaṇena vā brāhmaṇena vā devena vā mārena vā brahmunā vā kenaci vā lokasmin’ti.

“Having heard the devas who delight in creations, the brahmas declared in one voice ...

The Great Earthquake

“Itiha tena khaṇena (tena layena) tena muhuttena yāva brahmalokā saddo abbhuggacchi. Ayañca dasasahassilokadhātu saṅkampi sampakampi sampavedhi, appamāṇo ca ulāro obhāso loke pāturahosi atikkamma devānaṃ devānubhāvanti.

“Thus, at that very moment, at that very instant, the sound reached up to the brahmā realms, and this ten-thousandfold world system trembled, and heaved, and shook, and an incomparable radiance arose in the world, even surpassing the radiance of all the deities.”

In the [Mahāparinibbāna Sutta](#), a discourse from the Dīghanikāya that relates the events during the last six months or so of the Buddha’s life, another great earthquake is mentioned. It occurred when the Buddha renounced the possibility of extending his life-span by using his psychic powers, and told Māra that he would die in three months time. In that discourse, the Venerable Ānanda asked the Buddha the reason for the great earthquake, and the Buddha told him the eight causes of earthquakes, of which the setting in motion of the wheel of the Dhamma is the sixth cause.

1. This earth is supported by water, the water by air, the air by space. At times great winds blow strongly and the water is shaken. When the water is shaken, the earth is shaken. (N.B. Water is the element of cohesion or fluidity, air the element of motion. These elements are present even in molten rock).
2. A recluse or deity of great power causes the earth to shake by the power of concentration.
3. When the Bodhisatta passes away from the Tusita heaven, mindfully and deliberately, and is conceived in his mother’s womb the great earth shakes.

4. When the Bodhisatta issues forth from his mother's womb, mindfully and deliberately, the great earth shakes.
5. When the Tathāgata attains the supreme and perfect enlightenment the great earth shakes.
6. When the Tathāgata sets in motion the wheel of the Dhamma the great earth shakes.
7. When the Tathāgata, mindfully and deliberately, gives up the life-sustaining mental process the great earth shakes. (He could prolong his life by supernormal power but not being asked, he gives up the possibility and announces the time of his death.)
8. When a Buddha passes away and attains *parinibbāna* the great earth shakes.

Many people doubt the existence of *devas* and *brahmas*, and few people claim to have seen them, but it is hard to rule out their existence given the overwhelming evidence in such important discourses as the Dhammacakka Sutta, Sakkapañha Sutta, Maṅgala Sutta, Brahmājāla Sutta, Tevijja Sutta, and many others.

The Tevijja Sutta explains the way to reach the Brahmā realm. In this discourse the Buddha ridicules the brahmins who cannot even point out the way to reach the sun and moon, which they can see, let alone the way to reach Brahmā, whom they cannot see. He goes on to show the way to meet Brahmā through the practice of the four *Brahmavihāras*. It is therefore obvious that the Buddha did know the way to the Brahmā realm and could go there whenever he wished to.

There are so many discourses about things beyond common human knowledge, that it becomes quite irrational to dismiss them all. If one rejects all the discourses that make any mention of psychic powers, *devas*, *brahmas*, heavenly realms, spirits, and hell, there will be very few discourses left.

One could dismiss many of the magical events in the commentaries as mere embellishment, but the Pāli texts themselves contain copious evidence for the existence of *devas* and *brahmas*. The Brahmin Saṅgārava, a student of the three

Vedas, who spoke contemptuously of the Buddha as “A bald-headed recluse,” asks the Buddha directly in the Saṅgārava Sutta (Majjhima, Sutta 100), “Are there gods?”

The Buddha replied, “It is known to me to be the case that there are gods.” When Saṅgārava tries to cast doubt on the Buddha’s answer, the Buddha said, “Bhāradvāja, when one is asked, ‘Are there gods?’ whether one answers, ‘There are gods,’ or ‘It is known to me to be the case [that there are gods],’ a wise man can draw the definite conclusion that there are gods.”

The Buddha knew by his own direct knowledge that there were gods. He had given countless discourses to them, so he was known as ‘*Satthadevāmanussānaṃ*’ — teacher of gods and men. He was not simply repeating a widely held belief, that is why he replied to Saṅgārava in the way that he did. Had he simply stated, “Yes, there are gods” Saṅgārava would have thought that he was simply repeating the conventional belief.

Whenever we read a Sutta, we should bear in mind the circumstances under which it was given, and to whom it was given. We should read the introduction to a discourse carefully; it is recorded because it is relevant to the answer that the Buddha gives. We should also remember that the Buddha had the power to read the minds of others, so he knew the real motive behind their question, and whether they would be able to understand his answer.

Because I have no such powers, when people ask me a question I tend to take it at face value. It is only later that I may realise the questioner really meant to ask something else. For example, one person asked me how to deal with anger, so I told her how to contemplate anger (in oneself) using the insight method of bare awareness.

However, what she really meant to ask was, “How do I deal with aggression (in others)?” This is quite a different question. One should practise loving-kindness to deal with hostility and aggression. If one uses the method of bare awareness, the

situation may get worse because the aggressive person is not getting any attention.

The Buddha was the perfect diplomat. He knew exactly what to say to arouse faith in others if it was at all possible. Once he was described as a magician who used his magic to convert the followers of others.

The Buddha Praises Koṇḍañña

The Dhammacakka Sutta ends as follows:

“Atha kho Bhagavā imaṃ udānaṃ udānesi: ‘Aññāsi vata bho Koṇḍañño, aññāsi vata bho Koṇḍañño’ti. Iti hidaṃ Āyasmato Koṇḍaññassa ‘Aññāsikoṇḍañño’ tveva nāmaṃ ahoṣīti.”

Then the Blessed One made this joyful utterance:

“Venerable Koṇḍañña has understood. Venerable Koṇḍañña has understood.” Thus Venerable Koṇḍañña became known as ‘Koṇḍañña the Wise.’

The full name of the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta means “The Setting in Motion of the Wheel of the Dhamma.” That is its delivery marks the beginning of the transmission of the Buddha’s understanding to others. The commentary adds that millions of brahmas and countless devas also realised nibbāna while listening to the Dhammacakka Sutta.

The discourse was given at sunset, when both the sun and moon were visible in the sky. Hemavata, one of the devas who was present, did not gain realisation of the Dhamma because his thoughts wandered to his friend, Sātāgiri, who was absent. Therefore, when listening to or reading a religious discourse one should give it one’s undivided attention. The Dhamma is very profound, if it could be understood easily we would all be enlightened by now. The Bodhisatta had to sit for the whole night in meditation (about twelve hours) without moving from his seat, to gain enlightenment, after six years of experimenting with wrong methods. Of the five ascetics, who had all

been living far from sensual indulgence for thirty-five years, only one gained realisation immediately on listening to the discourse. The other four had to practise meditation for from one to four days before gaining the first path and its fruition.

Hemavata told his friend about the discourse and brought him to see the Buddha. The Buddha taught them the Hemavata Sutta later the same night. That was the second discourse of the Buddha. Overhearing the conversation of the two devas, a young lady who was expecting a baby, gained faith in the Buddha and attained nibbāna. Thus, she became the first enlightened lay disciple of the Buddha before even meeting him. The Hemavata Sutta can be found in the Uragavagga, the first chapter of the Suttanipāta.

All over Burma there are “Dhammacakka Sutta Reciting Societies” whose sole purpose is to memorise and recite this discourse just for the joy of doing so. Learning the original Pāli by heart is very useful. Though one does not understand the meaning at first, gradually the meaning of each word becomes crystal clear.

To listen with reverence to the recitation of Suttas, even without comprehending the meaning, is of spiritual value. When one’s knowledge becomes mature, one can speak with authority on the Suttas that one has memorised by heart. All Buddhist lay people should commit to memory at least one or two important discourses such as the Mettā Sutta, on loving-kindness, and the Maṅgala Sutta, on blessings. The Maṅgala Sutta is especially valuable for lay people. Wishing to know about auspicious signs that tell of future happiness, a certain deity approached the Buddha and sought his advice. The Buddha enumerated thirty-eight moral virtues that give happiness in the future. The Siṅgāla Sutta from the Dighanikāya should also be studied, though it is too long to memorise, because it contains very useful advice for lay people on how to live a successful and happy life in accordance with Dhamma.

Though the Dhammacakka Sutta is quite long, it is not at all difficult to learn by heart as it contains many repetitive phrases. Recitation of texts that one has learnt by heart is recommended by the Buddha as a method to overcome sloth and brighten the mind. Recitation is an easy way to focus the mind on the Dhamma, though one should, of course, know the meaning too. So learn this Dhammacakka Sutta by heart and study the meaning in detail. The entire Pāḷi text is included above, and each paragraph is followed by its translation.

A Guide to Pronunciation

Vowels with a macron accent — ā, ī, and ū — are double the length of normal vowels.

The consonant ‘va’ is pronounced like ‘wa’.

The ‘ṃ’ with a dot, which comes at the end of a word or prefix is pronounced as ‘ng’ in *sing*. There is no dot under ‘m’ when it precedes ‘p’ in “*yampicchaṃ*” or “*tampi*.”

The n tilde ‘ñ’ is pronounced as ‘ny’ in *canyon* or as ‘ñ’ in the Spanish word *mañana*.

‘Ph’ is pronounced like the first ‘p’ in *topography*, never as ‘f’ like the ‘ph’.

Both halves of double consonants should be pronounced: e.g. ‘kka’ in *cakka* should be pronounced as ‘ck-ca’ in *black-cat*, not as ‘ck’ in *backache*.

‘C’ is always pronounced as ‘ch’, never as ‘k’ or ‘s’.