

## Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta

### (The First Sermon)

Samyutta Nikaya 56

Discussion using Thanissaro's translation

[https://www.dhammadata.org/suttas/SN/SN56\\_11.html](https://www.dhammadata.org/suttas/SN/SN56_11.html)

I have heard that on one occasion the Blessed One was staying near Vārāṇasī in the Deer Park at Isipatana. There he addressed the group of five monks:

***Discussion:** In his first sermon the Buddha addressed five of his fellow wandering renunciants (samaññas), who would go on to become his first followers – the beginnings of his monastic community (the Sangha).*

“There are these two extremes that are not to be indulged in by one who has gone forth. Which two? That which is devoted to sensual pleasure in connection with sensuality: base, vulgar, common, ignoble, unprofitable; and that which is devoted to self-affliction: painful, ignoble, unprofitable. Avoiding both of these extremes, the middle way realized by the Tathāgata—producing vision, producing knowledge—leads to stilling, to direct knowledge, to self-awakening, to unbinding.

*His teaching is (metaphorically) a ‘Middle Way’ between two extremes, both of which are psychological attitudes towards physical embodiment in the world:*

*Firstly: devotion to sensual pleasures. Does this mean: attachment to all information from the senses or to only to particularly egregious sensual pleasures, or is it the quality of the devotion (or attachment, or addiction, or clinging) that matters?*

*Secondly: devotion to self-affliction. The close meaning refers to the ascetic self-mortification practices used by wandering religious specialists at that time in order to bring about altered states of consciousness. The Buddha himself had tried the method of starvation and found it useless. The wider meaning refers to any negative self-deprecating attitude that tends towards self-harm or even suicide.*

“And what is the middle way realized by the Tathāgata that—producing vision, producing knowledge—leads to stilling, to direct knowledge, to self-awakening, to unbinding? Precisely this noble eightfold path: right view, right resolve, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration. This is the middle way realized by the Tathāgata that—producing vision, producing knowledge—leads to stilling, to direct knowledge, to self-awakening, to unbinding.

*The Buddha's Middle Way alternative is the fourth 'Noble Truth': the 'Eight-fold Path', which is a practical method of self-awakening. Since it is brought about by oneself, rather than by others, it produces a direct form of knowledge of 'the way things really are in the world', leading to unbinding (nibbāna, detachment, recovery from addiction, letting go of clinging). Clinging in what sense? There will be many explanations over 2,500 years, but the simplest is that clinging takes three basic psychological forms: attraction (greed), aversion (hatred) and confusion (delusion).*

“Now this, monks, is the noble truth of stress: Birth is stressful, aging is stressful, death is stressful; sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, & despair are stressful; association with the unbeloved is stressful, separation from the loved is stressful, not getting what is wanted is stressful. In short, the five clinging-aggregates are stressful.

*This paragraph takes a step back to the beginning, to address the first of the four 'Noble Truths': 'dukkha (stress) is a Pali term with no satisfactory English equivalent. Various, it means stress, ill, suffering, or dissatisfaction. It could also be the anguish or poignancy of being a living person. As so often with translation between languages, it turns out that there is a constellation of possible meanings. In this case the central meaning is 'dissatisfaction', rather than the usual blunt 'suffering' – but it is worth noticing that all these terms refer to subtle nuances in the ways in which we feel states of discontent, both physically and psychologically.*

“And this, monks, is the noble truth of the origination of stress: the craving that makes for further becoming—accompanied by passion & delight, relishing now here & now there— i.e., craving for sensuality, craving for becoming, craving for non-becoming.

*The second 'Noble Truth' is that the origin (samudaya) of stress is craving. Underlying the '4 Truths' is the basic Buddhist 'Middle Way' understanding that everything has a cause. The cause of dukkha is craving or thirst (taṇhā), which 'makes for further becoming' i.e.: generates karma and so produces our unsatisfactory existence. Note that Stephen Batchelor argues that samudaya should be the first of the Four 'Truths', since craving is the beginning of the whole process. According to Caroline (and David) Brazier<sup>1</sup>, psychologically and as a practice, samudaya is the 'choice point' at which one can give in to craving, or begin to make an end to craving by recognising craving as it arises, and letting it go. David Brazier's etymological preference is for the translation of samudaya as 'arising' rather than 'cause', and for the literal translation of taṇhā as 'thirst' rather than the figurative translation as 'craving'.*

*What is happening at this crucial point in experience? In any moment of consciousness, feeling precedes awareness, forcing attempts to stop craving just after it has already arisen. This is where practice can be so useful, both by encouraging an ethical*

*lifestyle/attitude that diminishes craving and by increasing (speed of?) awareness of what's arising in the mind.*

*What is the 'frame' by which the Four Truths are interpreted: does craving generate the whole world (realism), or does craving generate the world only as it is experienced (idealism)? There is no easy answer to this question:*

*The traditional, early Buddhist framework seems to have been quasi-idealist, for of the five-clinging-aggregates, kāya or rūpa means 'forms' rather than physical things: there is no attempt to determine whether these forms do have physical reality<sup>2</sup>. Thus, through the aggregate of mental formation (sankhāra) craving generates everything we can be aware of, and everything in awareness is stressful (dukkha). The trouble with this traditional view, as Stephen Batchelor points out,<sup>3</sup> is that it raises the old Christian question of 'natural evil'. It is easy to see that people are the cause of dukkha produced by their own feelings and actions, such as addiction and injury by dangerous driving, but what about natural evils such as volcanic/earthquake activity, or genetic illnesses such as cystic fibrosis?<sup>4</sup>*

*The alternative (realist) framework restricts the cause-effect craving relationship to what goes on through our own speech, body and mind. It is broadly psychological, although still taking account of embodiment. This position is close to the Zen emphasis on practice: what is it in this text that is conducive to motivating [my] practice, making it comprehensible and making it more efficient? To be clear: this practice-based position does not deny traditional Buddhist cosmology (kammic causation, rebirth, enlightenment etc.) but it does de-centralise these traditional teachings: what matters is practice, since without that there can be no beneficial consequences. And to be fair: the Buddha himself both espoused the traditional Indian world-view and refused to be drawn into discussion of it. One could say that along the journey from traditional to contemporary approaches, there has been a noticeable shift in which explanations are taken literally, and which explanations are taken figuratively (metaphorically).*

*"And this, monks, is the noble truth of the cessation of stress: the remainderless fading & cessation, renunciation, relinquishment, release, & letting go of that very craving.*

*This is the opposite of samudaya: rather than producing dukkha, cessation (nirodha) leads to the annihilation or destruction of the causes of dukkha. Again, the framework matters: from a realist, traditional perspective, samudaya means causal origin in the sense of the bursting forth of life, thus nirodha refers to the gradual cessation of all of existence. From a more psychological, practice-based perspective nirodha refers only to personal acts of body, speech and mind. Nirodha can be thought of as 'containment' – of all harmful thoughts and behaviours. There may be an 'acceptance' stage to cessation, recognising 'ownership' of such behaviours. In relation to therapy - before we can change something, first we need to notice it, and then accept it for what it is – be honest with the self, without avoidance, or delusion: e.g. [in] Alcoholics Anonymous, saying that – 'my name is*

*X and I am an alcoholic'. Only when we have accepted what is actually happening, can we make a conscious decision to let go of the old ways (habits, feelings, behaviours) in a preference for new (healthier) ones.*

*"And this, monks, is the noble truth of the way of practice leading to the cessation of stress: precisely this noble eightfold path—right view, right resolve, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration.<sup>5</sup>*

*Of the eight limbs of the noble path, numbers 1 and 2 concern understanding or wisdom; 3, 4 and 5 concern conduct or ethics (sīla); 6, 7 and 8 concern ways of paying attention to our experience.*

**1. Right View** (*sammā-diṭṭhi*) *is a clear understanding of the four 'truths'.*

*Wallis notes that sammā means 'inclined towards' something, so this word indicates a 'sound' direction of practice, rather than practice having arrived at perfection. Similarly, Ven. Sumedho talks recently of right view as 'pointing towards' an intuitive understanding of the arising of dissatisfaction:*

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vh321tO\\_4j0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vh321tO_4j0)

**2. Right Resolve** (*sammā-saṅkappa*) *is an intention to proceed along the path, but one brought deliberately to consciousness to the extent that it forms a vow or resolution. For example: making and keeping the commitment to sit in meditation on a daily basis, so making the initiation of the practice into part of the practice in itself: it too constitutes a form of awareness. From the explanation of right resolve found in SN 5. 45.8, it was noted that resolve involved renunciation, traditionally in the sense of leaving home to join the monastic sangha, but more explicitly renouncing the intention to perform any evil action out of ill will or a desire to do harm.*

**3. Right Speech** (*sammā-vācā*) *as found in the ethical trainings for monks, is avoidance of false speech, divisive speech, harsh speech and idle chatter. Of these gossip may be the most difficult to relinquish, by virtue of the attractions and occasionally socially-useful functions of superficial interaction. There was a long discussion of the ways, functions and importance of communication between inherently social beings: not just in words, but through charismatic presence, in order to read other people's states of mind, by the interpretation of actions, and by the use of silence, especially when self-restraint can be more beneficial than interjection.*

**4. Right Action** (*sammā-kammanta*) *traditionally refers to the five ethical trainings, including right speech. In SN 5.45.8, three are mentioned: abstinence from taking life, from taking what is not given (theft) and from sexual misconduct. Abstinence from substances that 'cloud the mind' is not mentioned, but could be taken as read. Again the*

*emphasis is on renunciation of selfish intention, but beyond that there is much scope (and pressing need) for personal interpretation of such simple guidance in the light of contemporary ethical dilemmas, such as how to respond to pollution, climate change and political events occurring in other national jurisdictions.*

**5. Right Livelihood** (*sammā-ājīva*) Traditionally, this points towards becoming a monk (*bhikkhu*) or nun (*bhikkhuni*). More widely, it refers to avoidance of any occupation that causes needless suffering, or any activity that gets in the way of the other seven elements of the eight-fold path. There are similarities with the Hippocratic (medical) Oath to ‘first do no harm’.

**6. Right Effort** (*sammā-vāyāma*) SN 5.45.8 mentions ‘generat[ing] desire for the non-arising of unrisen evil unwholesome states...[she] makes an effort, arouses energy, and strives...for the abandoning of arisen evil unwholesome states...for the arising...maintenance...and fulfilment by development of [arisen wholesome states]’. Here seems to be an origin for the condensed explanation of Buddhism overall, in the Dhammapada: ‘cease to do evil, begin to do good, this is the teaching of the Buddhas’.

*The final two limbs of the path address mental discipline or attentiveness.*

**7. Right Mindfulness** (*sammā-sati*) is for the prevention of craving by paying close attention to whatever arises in consciousness. What arises is traditionally located in four categories: body, feeling, mind (mental qualities) and phenomena (*dharmas*). The aim is just to observe what arises as such, without any reciprocal reaction, so leaving the mind free to attend to the next arising. Although there are innumerable *dharmas* that can be the object of attention, and it is the function of the later *Abhidhamma* literature to list, characterise, and explain all of them, this is quite an exhaustive, complicated way of referring to what can be just the observation of experience, which is simply done in the Zen tradition by ‘just sitting’ (*shikantaza*). The regular, committed practice of mindfulness (*sati*) is considered to naturally lead on to insight (*vipassanā*) into the nature of the world as it really is (*yathā-bhūtam*), a form of wise understanding that naturally includes compassion towards all sentient beings who are caught up in craving and suffering. This route to insight is the Buddha’s unique contribution to the Indian meditation tradition.

**8. Right Concentration** (*samma-samādhi*) is the achievement and maintenance of an attentional state of mind. In an associated text, SN 5.45.8, when the Buddha is asked to explain right concentration he does so in the form of four meditative states (*jhāna*). This Pali term translates into Sanskrit as *dhyāna*, Chinese as *chan’na* and Japanese as *zen*.

*The four jhāna are a sequence of progressively increasing states of absorption in calm, detached, one-pointed concentration, in which attention remains focussed on it’s objective (cittakaggatā).*

**First Jhāna** ‘...which is accompanied by thought and examination, with rapture and happiness born of seclusion.’

**Second Jhāna** ‘With the subsiding of thought and examination, [s]he enters and dwells in the second jhāna, which has internal confidence and unification of mind, is without thought and examination, and has rapture and happiness born of concentration.’

**Third Jhāna** ‘With the fading away of as well of rapture, [s]he dwells equanimous and, mindful and clearly comprehending, he experiences happiness with the body; [s]he enters and dwells in the third jhāna, of which the noble ones declare: ‘[S]he is equanimous, mindful, one who dwells happily.’

**Fourth Jhāna** ‘With the abandoning of pleasure and pain, and with the previous passing away of joy and displeasure, [s]he enters and dwells in the fourth jhāna, which is neither painful nor pleasant and includes the purification of mindfulness by equanimity. This is called right concentration.’<sup>6</sup>

*There may be some overlap in the meaning of ‘mindfulness’ and ‘concentration’, but perhaps it is best not to get caught up in the search for precise meanings for these terms. Samathā or samādhi is an initial meditative process designed to make insight possible by settling and quietening the mind. However, it may be that calming and concentration, mindfulness and insight happen together, at the same time and as mutually-reinforcing parts of a single process, whether or not the Buddha occasionally describes mindfulness and concentration separately and in different terms.*

“Vision arose, insight arose, discernment arose, knowledge arose, illumination arose within me with regard to things never heard before: ‘This is the noble truth of stress’ ... ‘This noble truth of stress is to be comprehended’ ... ‘This noble truth of stress has been comprehended.’

“Vision arose, insight arose, discernment arose, knowledge arose, illumination arose within me with regard to things never heard before: ‘This is the noble truth of the origination of stress’ ... ‘This noble truth of the origination of stress is to be abandoned’<sup>5</sup> ... ‘This noble truth of the origination of stress has been abandoned.’

“Vision arose, insight arose, discernment arose, knowledge arose, illumination arose within me with regard to things never heard before: ‘This is the noble truth of the cessation of stress’ ... ‘This noble truth of the cessation of stress is to be realized’ ... ‘This noble truth of the cessation of stress has been realized.’

“Vision arose, insight arose, discernment arose, knowledge arose, illumination arose within me with regard to things never heard before: ‘This is the noble truth of the way of practice leading to the cessation of stress’ ... ‘This noble truth of the way of practice leading to the cessation of stress is to be developed’ ... ‘This noble truth of the way of practice leading to the cessation of stress has been developed.’

*These paragraphs indicate that insight into each of the four ‘Truths’ is a three-fold process: firstly, intellectual understanding; secondly, coming to terms with the fact that intellectual understanding is insufficient; thirdly, making the meditative effort to put the four into the kind of meditative practice that leads to full realization. Four truths and three levels of understanding equates to twelve ways of seeing. The making of that mathematical point seems slightly pedantic. In essence, it is a quasi-legalistic way of completely stating the obvious for the purpose of persuasion, in the course of set-piece argument with other wandering renunciants who were intent on destroying opponent’s arguments while advancing their own world-views.*

“And, monks, as long as this—my three-round, twelve-permutation knowledge & vision concerning these four noble truths as they have come to be—was not pure, I did not claim to have directly awakened to the right self-awakening unexcelled in the cosmos with its devas, Māras, & Brahmās, in this generation with its contemplatives & brahmans, its royalty & commonfolk. But as soon as this—my three-round, twelve-permutation knowledge & vision concerning these four noble truths as they have come to be—was truly pure, then I did claim to have directly awakened to the right self-awakening unexcelled in the cosmos with its devas, Māras, & Brahmās, in this generation with its contemplatives & brahmans, its royalty & commonfolk. Knowledge & vision arose in me: ‘Unprovoked is my release. This is the last birth. There is now no further becoming.’”

*Having understood the four ‘Truths’ in the above three ways, the Buddha uses the same metaphor to be found in the early Aṭṭhakavagga: that his knowledge was ‘pure’. As a result, he felt able to claim to be awakened by his own effort: ‘unprovoked is my release. This is the last birth. There is now no further becoming.’ To be clear: this is an ethical, intellectual and meditative effort undertaken by one person, with the beneficial result restricted to that person.*

That is what the Blessed One said. Gratified, the group of five monks delighted in the Blessed One's words. And while this explanation was being given, there arose to Ven. Kondañña the dustless, stainless Dhamma eye: Whatever is subject to origination is all subject to cessation.

*But, although awakening is an individual achievement, people do effect each other, in this case because '...explanation was being given'. We are told that all of the five hearers '...delighted at his words', but one, Kondañña, achieved direct knowledge that 'whatever is subject to origination is subject to cessation'. Thus, this sutta marks the moment when a teaching has been offered and understood. This exchange of understanding constitutes 'the first turning of the Wheel of the Law (Dhamma)'. Kondañña knows, but there is no claim that he is fully self-awakened, and it is not said that his knowledge is purified, therefore there is more work to be done before his last rebirth.<sup>7</sup>*

And when the Blessed One had set the Wheel of Dhamma in motion, the earth devas cried out: "Near Vārāṇasī, in the Deer Park at Isipatana, the Blessed One has set in motion the unexcelled Wheel of Dhamma that cannot be stopped by contemplative or brahman, deva, Māra, or Brahmā, or anyone at all in the cosmos." On hearing the earth devas' cry, the Devas of the Four Great Kings took up the cry... the Devas of the Thirty-three... the Devas of the Hours... the Contented Devas... the Devas Delighting in Creation ... the Devas [Muses?] Wielding Power over the Creations of Others... the Devas of Brahmā's Retinue took up the cry: "Near Vārāṇasī, in the Deer Park at Isipatana, the Blessed One has set in motion the unexcelled Wheel of Dhamma that cannot be stopped by contemplative or brahman, deva, Māra, or Brahmā, or anyone at all in the cosmos."

*A list of earthly and heavenly minor gods (devas) are reported to bear witness to what has just happened: the beginning of the teaching and transmission of Buddhism as a practice and as an explanation.*

So in that moment, that instant, the cry shot right up to the Brahmā worlds. And this ten-thousand-fold cosmos shivered & quivered & quaked, while a great, measureless radiance appeared in the cosmos, surpassing the effulgence of the deities.

*The whole cosmos 'shivered and quivered and quaked...measureless radiance appeared' as a sign of this auspicious event. This is the first of many similar hyperbolic reports, often*

*involving rainbows, around significant moments in the long history of Buddhism. The reader must decide for themselves if such reports are reliable, or reliably fictional.*

Then the Blessed One exclaimed: “So you really know, Kondañña? So you really know?” And that is how Ven. Kondañña acquired the name Añña-Kondañña—Kondañña who knows.

*The point that the teaching has been successfully transmitted is here reinforced: Kondañña is one who knows.*

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<sup>1</sup> Brazier, Caroline, *Buddhist Psychology*, 2012, (Robinson).

<sup>2</sup> Hamilton, Sue, ‘The External World: it’s status and relevance in the Pali Nikayas’, 1999, *Religion*, 29, pp. 73-90.

Hamilton, Sue, *Early Buddhism, a New Approach: the I of the Beholder*, 2000, (Richmond, Curzon).

<sup>3</sup> Batchelor, Stephen, ‘A Secular Buddhism’, *Journal of Global Buddhism*, 2012, Vol. 13, <http://www.globalbuddhism.org/jqb/index.php/jqb/article/view/127>

<sup>4</sup> Stephen Batchelor uses the example of cystic fibrosis in the above article. It is worth noting that modern evidence-based scientific medicine has greatly alleviated the suffering caused by illnesses such as cystic fibrosis, opening the possibility for productive, happy lives that are not entirely defined by dis-ease.

<sup>5</sup> The eight-fold path is set out in slightly greater detail in *Saṃyutta Nikāya* 5.45.8 ‘Analysis’.

It is also discussed by:

Rahula, Walpola, 1967 [1959], *What the Buddha Taught*, (Bedford, Gordon Fraser), pp.45-50.

And by:

Wallis, Glenn, 2007, *The Basic Teachings of the Buddha*, (New York, Modern Library), pp. 111-127.

<sup>6</sup> Bodhi, Bhikkhu, 2000, *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: a translation of the Saṃyutta Nikāya*, (Boston, Wisdom), SN 5.45.8, pp.1529.

<sup>7</sup> Note that some members of the discussion group believe in rebirth, some are agnostic on the matter, and some do not believe in rebirth.