

As these Five Aggregates are constantly changing mental or physical states or processes, none of them can be considered as a permanent metaphysical self or soul. Therefore, in his Second Sermon, the Buddha said that one is not able to point to any constituent within his or her self and say, "This is mine, this I am, this is my self" (*Samyutta-nikāya*, II, 68). Another early text explains this idea by using the simile of a chariot for the self. In a dialogue between a Buddhist nun named Vajira and Māra the tempter, the question arises about the nature of the self. Vajira says,

There is no "being" found here [within oneself], only a heap of karmic constituents. Just as the word "chariot" is used when we come across a combination of parts, so we speak conventionally of a [human] being when the Five Aggregates are present. (*Samyutta-nikāya*, I, 135)

A later text uses this same simile in a dialogue between the monk Nāgasena and King Milinda. After describing in some detail how the word "chariot" designates the combination of parts that makes it up, Nāgasena concludes that the word "self" is simply a name that designates the Five Aggregates. Therefore, Nāgasena concludes, "In the final analysis, in the ultimate sense, there is no [permanent] self to be found [within the Five Aggregates]" (*Milindapañha*, 27).

DEPENDENT ARISING

The Five Aggregates give a static view of the conventional self; that is, they describe the various parts that constitute the self. The Buddha also taught the notion of dependent arising (*pratītya-samutpāda*; Pali: *paṭicca-samuppāda*), which gives one a dynamic picture of how these parts interact in ways that generate *duḥkha*, and also bring about the cessation of *duḥkha*. This notion of dependent arising is so important that when the Buddha spoke of his Awakening experience, he said, "I have attained the Dharma, profound and difficult to see. . . . Difficult to see is this contingent or dependent arising. Also difficult to see is this: the quiescence of all composite conditions . . . cessation, Nirvana" (*Majjhima-nikāya*, I, 211–212). The Dharma, or teaching, of the Buddha constantly presents the notion of dependent arising as essential to comprehending the awakened Buddhist experience of life (see Figure 2.1). It is through this teaching that one can understand the way in which *duḥkha* arises in the functioning of the Five Aggregates, as well as how it can be brought to cessation.

Here is how the Buddha described dependent arising in general: "That being, this comes to be; from the arising of that, this arises. That being absent, this is not; from the cessation of that, this ceases" (*Samyutta-nikāya*, II, 28). This general principle of conditionality simply states that all things arise and pass away due to certain conditions. When necessary conditions are present to support a thing's existence, it comes to be. As those conditions change and new conditions appear, the thing changes. When the conditions for the

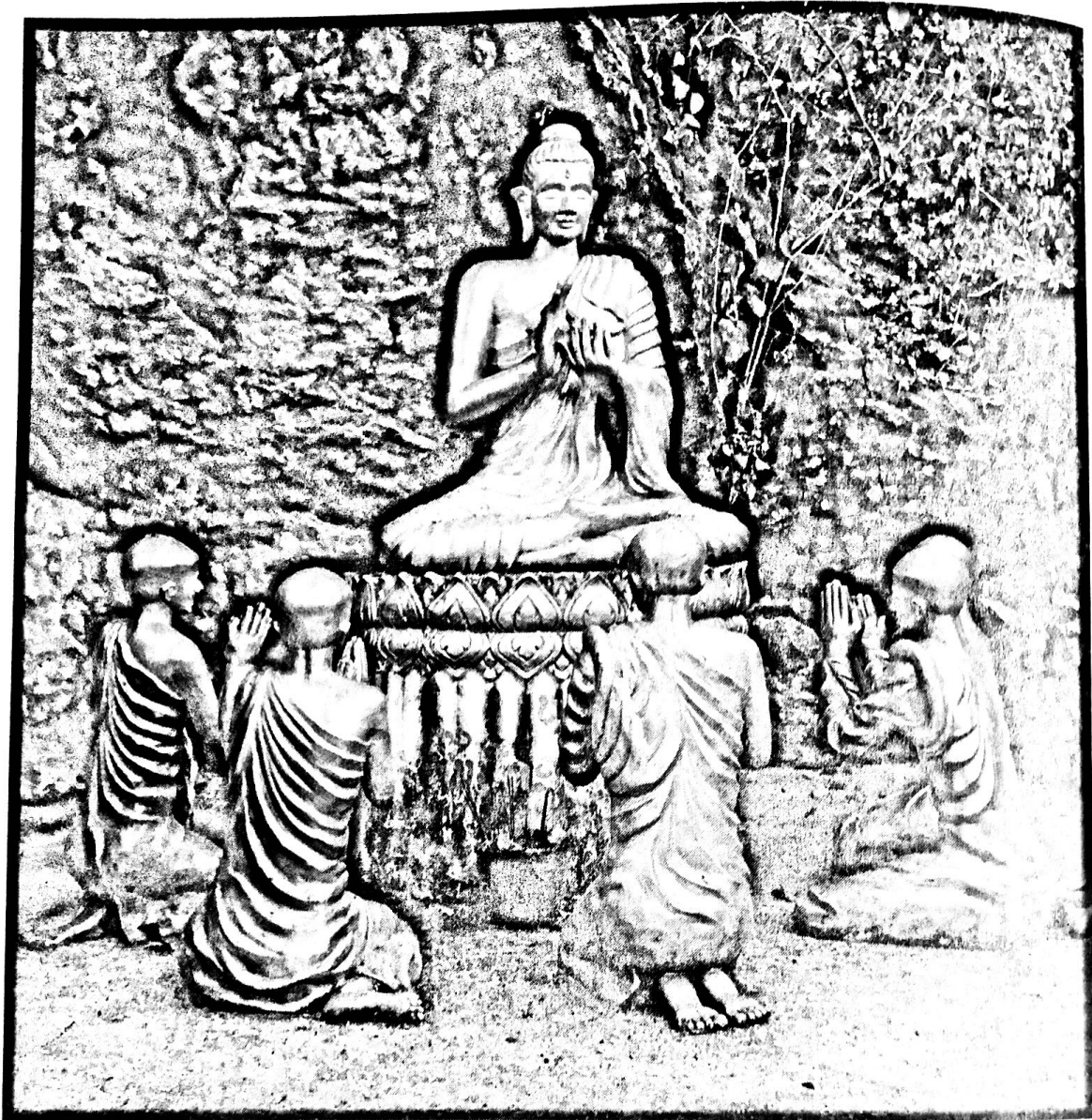


FIGURE 2.1. The Buddha teaching his first five disciples; Luang Prabang, Laos.

thing's existence are finally removed, the thing ceases to be. This principle applies not only to the existence of phenomena but also to the quality of things. For example, the Buddha said that when certain conditions are present, *duḥkha* arises. When those conditions change, *duḥkha* is modified. And when the conditions for *duḥkha* are removed, *duḥkha* itself ceases.

In fact, the Buddha applied this general principle of conditionality to the human condition to explain the arising and cessation of *duḥkha*. That is, he taught a more specific version of dependent arising to explain how certain impermanent constituents of human experience arise such that *duḥkha* itself arises, and also how those constituents can be modified to reduce *duḥkha* until they are fully removed and *duḥkha* ceases. This specific version of the notion of dependent arising can be called the "twelve links (*nidāna*) of conditionality." The twelve conditioning links that produce *duḥkha* include (1) ignorance, (2) mental formations, (3) consciousness, (4) mind and body,

(5) senses, (6) contact, (7) sensation, (8) craving, (9) attachment, (10) becoming, (11) birth, and (12) the whole mass of *duḥkha*. Let us look at these twelve links one at a time.

The following verses from a teaching by the Buddha about these twelve links state how they arise conditionally according to the general formulation of dependent arising, namely, "That being, this comes to be; from the arising of that, this arises":

On [1] ignorance depends [2] mental formations; on mental formations depends [3] consciousness; on consciousness depends [4] mind and body; on mind and body depends [5] senses; on senses depends [6] contact; on sense contact depends [7] sensation, on sensation depends [8] craving; on craving depends [9] attachment; on attachment depends [10] becoming; on becoming depends [11] birth; on birth depends [12] old age and death, sorrow, lamentation, misery, grief and despair. Thus does this entire mass of *duḥkha* arise. (*Samyutta-nikāya*, II, 90)

With this concrete pattern of dependent arising in mind, we first look at the individual links as they contribute to the arising *duḥkha*. Then, we look briefly at how the Buddha says this process can be modified such that *duḥkha* itself ceases. Indeed, most of the rest of this chapter is devoted to the Buddha's teachings on overcoming *duḥkha*.

The first link, *ignorance*, is defined as being ignorant of the Four Noble Truths that we discuss in detail later. In brief, these four truths concern (1) the nature of *duḥkha*, (2) the various causes of *duḥkha*, (3) the possible cessation of *duḥkha*, and (4) the spiritual path that leads to the cessation of *duḥkha*. Ignorance concerning these truths about the dissatisfactory condition of life will condition the second link, namely, one's *mental formations*. These mental formations, as we have seen, are the fourth of the Five Aggregates. While the Buddha taught that the mind is essentially pure and luminous, he explained that it is also defiled by certain mental states that are formed by the mind and that arise dependent ultimately on ignorance. In other words, ignorance conditions negative mental formations, or unwholesome mental states or attitudes. For example, if a person believes that he or she can be satisfied by the passing things of the world, that person will form unwholesome, pleasure-seeking mental states like greed or lust.

The third link is *consciousness*. Its placement at this point means that mental formations condition the state of one's consciousness. For example, if one is always getting angry at people, anger can become a general disposition of one's consciousness. And that disposition of ill will can affect what one is conscious of in others. One may only be conscious of the faults of others, and not their positive qualities. The Buddha also taught that it is this intentional consciousness that, due to karma, continues for a time after death until it sparks a new conscious life, "like one flame lighting another" (*Milindapañha*, 40). Thus, the positive and negative qualities of consciousness follow a person into his or her next life.

The fourth link is *mind and body*, literally, "name and form" (*nāma-rūpa*). That is, the status of one's mind and body, including one's health, is conditioned by the state of one's consciousness. At this point, the body becomes more involved in this process of dependent arising in that one's mental and physical state conditions the fifth link, namely, the orientation of one's *senses* to the world around one. For example, the senses of one's body are drawn toward certain persons and things depending on the orientation of one's mind and body. When one walks into a room, one notices some people and not others because of one's sense orientation toward the people in the room. In this way, one's senses condition the kind of *contact*, which is the sixth link, one has with the world.

Then, because of the positive or negative qualities of this contact, certain *sensations/feelings*, the seventh link, arise. If one contacts something one takes to be positive, one begins to entertain pleasant sensations or feelings. If, on the other hand, one encounters something one takes to be negative, unpleasant sensations or feelings arise. It is based on these emotional responses to persons, things, and events that there is the arising of the eighth link, namely, *craving*. Craving is either a self-centered desire to prolong the enjoyment of a pleasurable feeling or a self-centered desire to get rid of an unenjoyable feeling. This craving conditions the arising of the ninth link, *attachment*. In fact, cravings evolve into attachments. That is, the prior links of ignorance, unwholesome mental formations, and negative orientations toward life all intensify cravings to the point that they give rise to attachments.

An attachment is an active, decision-based clinging to the things of this world, to the pleasures derived from these things, or to an aversion to things one does not enjoy. It is these kinds of attachments that condition the *becoming* of one's life, the tenth link in the process of dependent arising. In other words, one's attachments in life condition the continuing unwholesome process of existence that has arisen from ignorance, negative mental formations, self-centered orientations, and craving. This continuing process of becoming, marked by one's personality-forming attachments, conditions one's *birth*, the eleventh link. This link means how one is reborn after death. However, it can also mean that the way one lives his or her life "gives birth," as it were, to one's personal identity—the kind of person one is. Finally, this birth or identity, because it arises dependent on attachments that are based ultimately on ignorance, conditions the final link, namely, "the entire mass of *duḥkha*."

An example of how these twelve links of conditionality might actually work themselves out in a particular life process would be the following. If we take a person who is born into an abusive situation, because of that person's (1) ignorance, he or she may not understand what is causing the *duḥkha* of that situation. Based on this ignorance, he or she might develop certain unwholesome (2) mental formations, or attitudes, about his or her self, other persons, and the world in general. These attitudes could affect his or her states of (3) consciousness, and thereby his or her (4) mental and physical well-being. This unhealthy condition of mind and body could then affect

what he or she (5) senses, (6) contacts, (7) feels, and (8) craves in life. Some of these cravings may develop into unhelpful (9) attachments to people or things that simply continue negative (10) becoming, or patterns of affectivity and behavior. These patterns give (11) birth to the person's identity in ways that produce (12) *duḥkha* for himself or herself and others.

We can see from this example why Buddhists claim that these twelve links of dependent arising should be seen as forming a circle. That is, the conditions of *duḥkha* that a person produces for himself or herself and for others simply contribute to the arising of more ignorance in one's life. Thereby, the circle of negative conditionality continues and deepens. Buddhist art depicts this circle of conditionality as a twelve-spoked Wheel of Life. However, this is not a pessimistic doctrine about life; the Wheel of Life can be broken by the attainment of Awakening and Nirvana. The Buddha expresses this hope by presenting the twelve links in terms of their cessation:

On the complete fading away and cessation of [1] ignorance ceases [2] mental formations; on the cessation of mental formations ceases [3] consciousness; on the cessation of consciousness ceases [4] mind and body; on the cessation of mind and body ceases [5] senses; on the cessation of senses ceases [6] contact; on the cessation of contact ceases [7] sensation; on the cessation of sensation ceases [8] craving; on the cessation of craving ceases [9] attachment; on the cessation of attachment ceases [10] becoming; on the cessation of becoming ceases [11] birth; on the cessation of birth ceases [12] old age and death, sorrow, lamentation, misery, grief and despair. Thus does the entire mass of *duḥkha* cease. (*Samyutta-nikāya*, II, 90)

What is implied here is that the process of dependent arising can also be a process of dependent cessation. We are brought back to the second part of the abstract formulation of dependent arising, namely, "That being absent, this is not; from the cessation of that, this ceases." As we shall see later, the Buddha teaches an Eightfold Path whereby one brings to awareness, pacifies, and even eradicates the ignorance, unwholesome attitudes, craving, and attachments that produce *duḥkha*. The "complete fading away and cessation" of these negative conditioning factors and their resultant *duḥkha* is Nirvana.

KARMA AND REBIRTH

In the center of some of the artistic renderings of the Wheel of Life are pictures of the various realms in which living beings can be reborn through karma. Karma, according to the Buddha, is the result of willful intention: "It is will [*cetanā*], O monks, that I call karma; for having willed, one acts through body, speech or mind" (*Anguttara-nikāya*, III, 415). In other words, the good or bad willful intentions that motivate the doing of good or bad actions are what result in karmic fruition. Accidental or unintended good or bad actions, like nonmoral actions, do not result in karma. However, all intentional moral or immoral acts condition or mold one's consciousness in

ways that, in turn, condition one's life in the future, and ultimately one's rebirth. Remember that it is consciousness that, like a flame in this life, lights the flame of one's next life. In this regard, good or bad rebirths are not to be seen simply as rewards or punishments, but as the resulting effect of one's conscious character molded by lives of good and bad actions that reflect how one ultimately chooses to live.

In defining good and bad actions, the Buddha spoke of wholesome (*kuśala*) and unwholesome (*akuśala*) acts. A wholesome action is one that produces a positive condition of mind and body for the actor and for those affected by the action. A positive condition is one that is ultimately conducive to the attainment of Nirvana. An unwholesome action is one that produces harmful effects and is not ultimately conducive to attaining Nirvana. The Buddha taught that there are three fundamental motivations, or "root causes," of unwholesome actions: greed (*rāga*; Pali: *lobha*), hate (*dveṣa*; Pali: *dosa*), and delusion (*moha*). These are known as the Three Root Evils. Being motivated by greed can mean allowing one's actions to be rooted in longing for something or someone or in more strong desires like avarice or lust. This kind of motivation can also involve clinging to dogmatic views in ways that are not uplifting for oneself or others. Being motivated by hatred can involve irritation with something or someone or strong feelings of aversion, anger, or even wrath. Delusion as a motivation means pursuing actions that result from an active distortion of, or hiding from, the truth in certain matters or from being unclear or full of doubts about things one should make the effort to understand.

On the other hand, the Buddha also taught that one should be motivated by the opposites of these Three Root Evils. Then, one's actions will be wholesome for oneself and others and will contribute to conditions that are conducive to the attainment of Nirvana. For example, motivation from non-greed (*alobha*) implies the positive intentions of generosity or renunciation for the benefit of others. Non-hate (*adosa*) motivations include friendliness, patience, loving kindness, and compassion for others. Non-delusion (*amoha*) motivations include clarity of mind and insight into reality.

Buddhist Cosmology

Good and bad karma, resulting from positive and negative motivations, determine one's rebirth in the cycle of *saṃsāra*. Where this rebirth can take place brings us to the topic of Buddhist cosmology. The early texts describe three types of "realms" in which rebirth takes place: the realms of sense desire (*kāma-loka*), the realms of form (*rūpa-loka*), and the formless realms (*arūpa-loka*).

The five realms of sense desire, the lower of the three realms, include the hell realms, the realms of the hungry ghosts (*preta*; Pali: *peta*), the realms of animals, the realms of humans, and the realms of the lower gods (*deva*). In the hells, everything is repulsive, and one constantly experiences painful states of mind and body. Because no rebirth is for eternity, when the karma

that brought one to such an unfortunate state is used up, one is reborn into another realm. The realms of the hungry ghosts are states that overlap the human world. Ghosts are so attached to earthly conditions that they are reborn on earth with a body of "subtle matter" such that they are normally unseen by humans. They haunt this world tormented by their unsatisfied attachments. The animal realms are where beings, because of their karma, have to undergo certain sufferings associated with animal conditions. The human realms are the first sense-desire realms that are seen as a reward for good karma. This is because the human realms are where moral virtue and wisdom can be cultivated, as one's will is not overwhelmed by the pains of the lower states or the pleasures of the higher heavenly states.

The last status in the realms of sense desire is that of certain lower gods. Sometimes proud and fiercesome celestial beings (*asuras*) are mentioned as also existing on this level. They are said to be in opposition to the lower gods because the gods expelled them from their heavens. In any case, the lower gods reside in six levels of existence. In the lowest of these six levels, the gods are more like spirits that inhabit the earth's surface and atmosphere. Sometimes mentioned in this regard are the *gandharvas*, celestial musicians; *yakṣas* and *rākṣasas*, good and evil spirits; *nāgas*, serpents that can assume human form; *garuḍas*, birds with human heads; as well as other minor spirits dwelling in nature. Among the higher celestial levels are found the World-Protectors, the gods of the Vedic religion, and the *Tuṣita* Heaven from where persons are reborn as human Buddhas. It is believed that the next human Buddha after Gautama will be Maitreya, who now resides in the *Tuṣita* Heaven.

The realms of form are inhabited by higher gods, referred to as *Brahmā* deities, who reside in sixteen celestial levels of progressive calmness and purity. The top five levels are attainable by humans who have almost reached Nirvana. In those levels, one will, in fact, complete the path and achieve Nirvana. The other eleven levels are related to the Four Meditations (*dhyānas*) that were practiced by the Buddha in achieving Awakening and have been practiced in Buddhism since the earliest Saṅgha. It is said that these meditations attune the consciousness to such refined states and help one to be reborn in them. In these heavenly realms, the deities are said to have pure forms and to lack the desires that characterize the gods in the realms of desire.

The formless realms consist of the four highest levels of celestial rebirth possible. Here, the *Brahmā* deities have no desire, shape, or form, only pure mental existence. The four formless realms correspond to the Four Formless Meditations. While these meditations have been practiced in Buddhism from the beginning of the Saṅgha as part of the path to Nirvana, they can also lead to rebirth into the formless realms. Rebirth into any of the *Brahmā* realms requires not just meditative attainment but also moral achievement. Of special importance are the virtues called the Four Divine Adobes, or, literally, "*Brahmā* abodes" (*Brahmā-vihāras*). These four virtues include loving kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity. We discuss these meditative and moral practices later. But, it is interesting to note that

Sahampatī Brahmā, the deity who came down to convince the Buddha to teach the Dharma, was from the *Brahmā* realms. Also, one should note that the Buddha did not teach that one should worship these celestial deities. However, the early texts indicate that the Buddha and the Saṅgha respected their karmic attainment.

The earliest texts present the realms of sense desire as constituting a vast number of "world systems" (*cakra-vāla*). The Buddha taught that the beginning of these systems cannot be found, nor can their extent. These world systems have gone through incalculable eons during which they expand and contract. They contract in clusters with the lower realms disappearing, leaving only the upper more spiritual realms. At the center of each world system is the world mountain, Meru or Sineru. It is surrounded by mountains and seas, with continents beyond where humans and animals live, and below which reside hungry ghosts and hell beings. In the shadows of the slopes of Mt. Meru dwell the *asuras*, while on the slopes themselves dwell the lower gods. Above Mt. Meru and beyond the realm of sense desire are the realms of form and the formless realms. Here, the *Brahmā* deities rule over the world systems. As beings "wander" from life to life, they pass from one realm to another, or from one world system to another, until they tread the path of the Buddha and attain the release of Nirvana.

The Wheel of Life

In the Wheel of Life pictured in Figure 2.2, we find a blending of the twelve links of dependent arising, karma, rebirth, and Buddhist cosmology. The outermost ring of the wheel consists of representations of the twelve links that define the manner of causality that result in beings wandering from life to life due to their karma. Inside this ring we find pictures of the six sense realms of existence (lower gods, *asuras*, humans, animals, hungry ghosts, and hell beings). In the next double segment are the two ways: the downward way of rebirth to the lower realms because of the Three Root Evils and the upward way because of the spiritual path. Those monks following the path in the picture are pointed to the goal of Nirvana, depicted in the upper left of the picture, by the Buddha in the upper right of the picture. There is a subtle thread leading from the path to Nirvana that is outside the Wheel of Life. At the very center of the wheel are the Three Root Evils of greed, hate, and delusion symbolized by the cock, snake, and pig. These Root Evils keep the Wheel of Life turning, a wheel that is held in the grasp of the Lord of Death.

THE FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS

We can see from the teachings of the Buddha discussed earlier that for him, the Five Aggregates, namely the five impermanent factors of one's existence, are always changing in certain patterns of dependent arising. No matter what realm one is born into, the patterns of this conditioning process are always in some ways dissatisfactory (*duḥkha*). To seek for a kind of permanent



FIGURE 2.2. The Wheel of Life, painting on cloth, twentieth century, Tibet. Library of Congress Asian Collection.

Self (*Ātman*), as some Upaniṣadic teachers were proposing, was for the Buddha a mistake. There simply is no permanent substantial self behind or within the mental and physical elements or processes of life. Instead, one should attend to the changing twelve-linked patterns of dependent arising to see how it is that one's life is ultimately dissatisfying. One should examine

what the patterns of perceiving and thinking, of decision making and mental formation, of sensing and feeling are like that make life dissatisfactory. Then one should see what the causes of these unwholesome patterns are and how they can be changed and ultimately eliminated.

To make his point, the Buddha taught that all the factors of one's life are "on fire":

All things, O monks, are on fire. And what, O monks, are all these things that are on fire? The eye, O monks, is on fire. Visible forms . . . eye consciousness . . . impressions received by the eye . . . whatever sensations, pleasant, unpleasant, or indifferent that arise dependent on impressions received by the eye are on fire. With what are these on fire? With the fire of passion, with the fire of hatred, with the fire of infatuation, with the [whole mass of *duḥkha*] are they on fire. (*Mahāvagga*, I, 21)

The Buddha goes on to repeat this claim in regard to the other five senses (including the mind). His point is that all aspects of one's experience are "burning" from an inner "fire" that one must discover and extinguish. As the word *Nirvana* means "to blow out" or "to extinguish," to realize Nirvana, one must discover the hidden "fire" that burns one's life with dissatisfaction and then extinguish it. In his Awakening, the Buddha understood the "fire" causing *duḥkha*. He also discovered how to get rid of that fire to extinguish *duḥkha* and to attain what he called the "coolness" of Nirvana. Moved by compassion for humankind's suffering from the burning of *duḥkha*, it is said that the Buddha sought out the five ascetics with whom he had been friends and delivered to them his First Sermon at Deer Park.

This First Sermon was the "turning of the wheel of the Dharma" (see Figure 2.3) that presented what are called the Four Noble Truths. These Holy Truths are about the dissatisfactory human condition, its cause, its possible end, and the path that leads to this release. These are called "noble" truths because they are morally and spiritually fruitful: When they are realized in a person's experience, they lead to the achievement of Nirvana. They are also noble because it takes a noble person, a person of courage, honesty, and insight, to realize them. It is not easy to face the dissatisfactory conditions of one's own life. In fact, people often do whatever they can to avoid these unpleasant facts. They sometimes turn to worldly diversions, immerse themselves in studies or work, or even lose themselves in mind-dulling drugs or alcohol. But the teaching of the Buddha is that if one truly and courageously faces reality and sees the truth about his or her life, indeed about life itself, with time and guidance, one can find the cause of the discontent, heal it, and realize a new and truly satisfactory life.

The Middle Way

Let us look, then, at the First Sermon of the Buddha (*Samyutta-nikāya*, V, 420 ff.) to see what these Four Noble Truths entail. The Buddha begins his

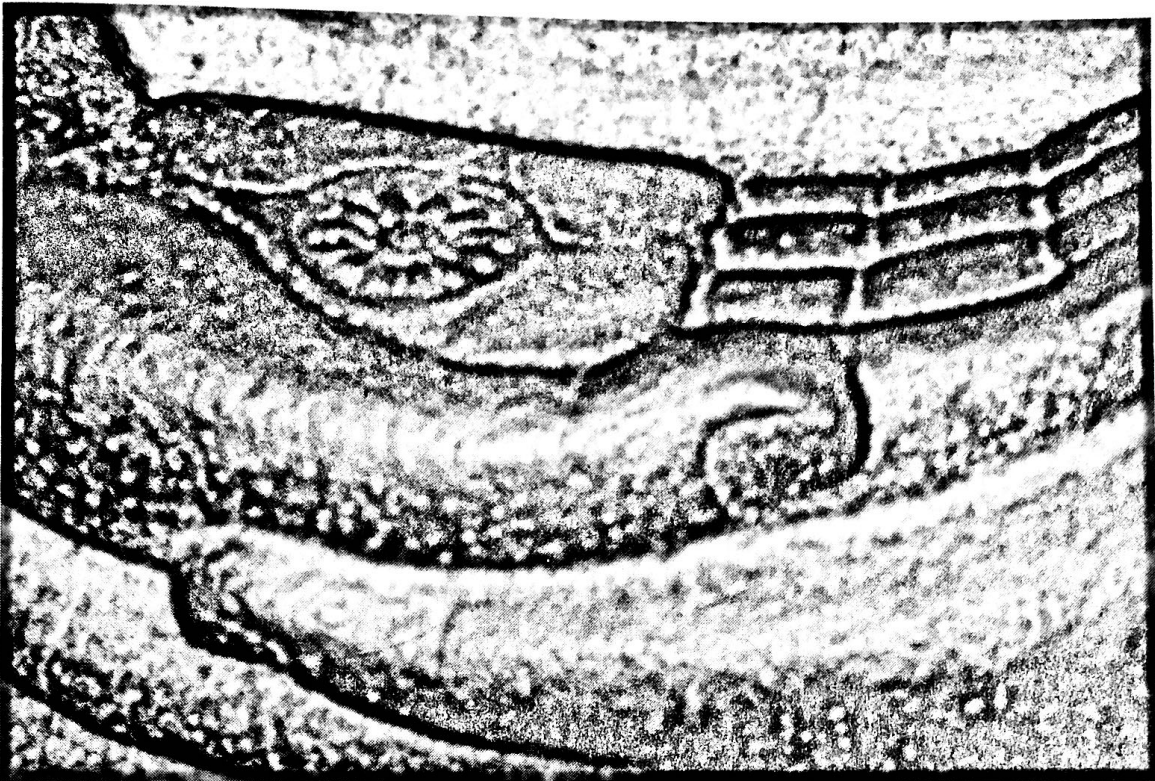


FIGURE 2.3. Dharma Cakra (Wheel of the Dharma) on the hand of the enthroned Buddha; fourth century C.E., India. The Art Institute of Chicago.

sermon by addressing the ascetics' concern that he had given up the rigors of the spiritual life to return to a life of self-indulgence:

These two extremes, O monks, are not to be practiced by one who has gone forth from the world. What are these two extremes? That one which is joined with the passions, low and vulgar, common, ignoble and useless. And also that one which is joined with self-torture and pain, ignoble and useless. Avoiding those two extremes, the [Buddha] has gained the knowledge of the Middle Way, which gives sight and knowledge, tends to calm, to insight, to Awakening and Nirvana. What, O monks, is the Middle Way . . . ? It is the Noble Eightfold Path, namely, Right Understanding, Right Thought, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration. . . .

*middle way:
Path*

The Buddha makes it clear that his Middle Way avoids the pursuit of sensual pleasures on the one hand and the pursuit of ascetic self-torment on the other. He had experienced both the way of life-attachment and life-denial, and found them lacking. What did lead to Awakening and Nirvana was a Middle Way of moral discipline, meditation practice, and penetrating insight that can be found through following the Noble Eightfold Path. It is only after proposing this path that the Buddha goes on to present the Four Noble Truths. In this way, he subordinates conceptions about the truth to moral and spiritual transformation.

The First Noble Truth: Life Is Duhkha

What are these Four Noble Truths that put one in touch with the reality of the human condition and present one with a religious path that can transform one's life? In the next lines of the Buddha's First Sermon, the first truth is stated:

Now this, O monks, is the noble truth of *duhkha*. Birth is *duhkha*, old age is *duhkha*, sickness is *duhkha*, and death is *duhkha*. Sorrow, lamentation, dejection, and despair are *duhkha*. Contact with unpleasant things is *duhkha*, and separation from what one wishes is *duhkha*. In short, the Five Aggregates onto which one grasps are *duhkha*.

This First Noble Truth, the truth of *duhkha*, proclaims that life as ordinarily lived is dissatisfactory. We have already seen what *duhkha* means when we discussed the Three Characteristics. In this sermon, it is said that *duhkha* is found in at least four kinds of situations that arise in ordinary life. First are the dissatisfactory conditions associated with physical processes such as old age, sickness, and death. Second are the dissatisfactory conditions, such as sorrow and dejection, that are associated with mental-emotional processes. Third is the particular dissatisfaction one finds with unpleasant things. Fourth is the dissatisfaction one finds in not possessing the things one wants or needs. Finally, the Buddha says that all of these kinds of situations that characterize the human condition point to a simple fact. This fact is that when one "grasps" for lasting happiness in the impermanent physical things and mental processes of ordinary life, distinguished here by the Five Aggregates, one will only find dissatisfaction.

① physical
② mental/emotional
③ aversion
④ desire
Dissatisfaction

As we saw before, the Buddha is not denying that there is any happiness in life. But, because all elements of life are subject to change, such happiness is not lasting, and therefore not fully satisfying. Certainly most people find some degree of happiness in life, but when one looks around at the world or within oneself, one often finds that things are just not fully satisfactory. Reading this statement of the Buddha into our own times, how many people are living in desperate situations with little or no hope of relief? Even for those who are not directly affected by great tragedies, who is without the experience of "sorrow, lamentation, dejection, and despair?" The Buddha taught that given the dissatisfactory conditions of human life, even in times of relative happiness, within every person there is a sense of lack, a sense that something is missing, a sense of *duhkha*. *Duhkha* is not an abstract idea; every person has his or her personal *duhkha*. It takes a noble person to realize this fact and to seek the cause of this unfortunate condition shared by all humanity, as well as a possible remedy.

The Second Noble Truth: The Cause of Duhkha

The Second Noble Truth is the truth about the cause (*samudaya*) of *duhkha*. Here is how the Buddha describes the cause of *duhkha* in the next verses of his First Sermon:

Now this, O monks, is the noble truth of the cause of *duḥkha*: that craving which leads to rebirth, combined with pleasure and passion, finding pleasure here and there. This is the craving for sensual pleasure, the craving for continued becoming, and the craving for non-becoming.

The word we translate as "craving" is *trṣṇā* (Pali: *taṇhā*), which literally means "thirst." This thirst includes the many forms of desire that seek self-gratification to find happiness. In this sermon, the Buddha presents what he calls elsewhere the "Three Forms of Thirst." The most obvious form of such thirst is the desire for "sensual pleasure." Because all sensual objects of desire are impermanent, the self-gratification that one obtains from possessing them obviously cannot give one lasting happiness. To try to find such happiness in these sensual pleasures only leads to frustration and dissatisfaction, which, in turn, fuel the craving for more pleasures. Also, the search for happiness in the enjoyment of pleasures motivates one to relate to others in self-centered ways that result in negative karma and unhappy rebirths. Here is also a psychological basis for social conflict, injustice, violence, and war.

The second form of thirst is the desire for "becoming." We have already seen in the twelve links of conditionality that craving (or thirst) conditions attachments, which condition becoming, meaning the continuing process of one's life. So this second type of thirst includes the desires to defend or protect oneself and one's possessions and pleasures, to advance one's own life, to enhance one's ego and social status, to gain more power and prestige. On the other hand, the thirst for "non-becoming" includes desires for self-denial in the ascetic life, for the removal of unpleasant people or things from one's life, for self-destructive habits or patterns of behavior. We can see from these Three Forms of Thirst that, for the Buddha, craving is not just a single phenomenon; it has multiple and even conflicting forms.

It is also clear from the twelve links of conditionality that thirst is not the first cause of *duḥkha*. It is conditioned by a deeper source, namely, the ignorance that is referred to as the first of the twelve links. What is this fundamental ignorance? It is a lack of realizing the Buddha's Dharma concerning the real nature of self and world. Using the metaphor from the Buddha's Fire Sermon quoted earlier, the ignorance of such realities as impermanence, no-self, and *duḥkha* produces a very subtle yet powerful self-awareness that is self-centered and burns one's life with craving or thirst. To use another metaphor, this self-awareness is like a "field" in which everything that one experiences is analyzed and judged from a self-centered and ultimately ignorant point of view. It is from this ignorance, this lack of clear insight into the Four Noble Truths about life, that "seeds" of *duḥkha* grow.

In this First Sermon, the craving that causes *duḥkha* implies an ignorant view of the self as an ongoing possessor and enjoyer of the things of life. People are thirsting to be and to possess, to become and to acquire, in ways that produce a dissatisfactory life for themselves and others. This unwholesome lifestyle is based on people's view of themselves as "controllers" or "possessors" and the world as being made up of people and things to be controlled or possessed in ways that cause *duḥkha*. It seems that this inner

Ignorance
precedes
thirst

①

②

③

self-centered vision of self and world "solidifies," as it were, into the kinds of thirsting and often self-destructive states of mind that the Buddha identifies as the causes of *duḥkha*.

Also, this ignorant view of self and world is related to another form of thirst that the Buddha mentions in other sermons, namely, a craving to be right that leads to an attachment to ideas, views, theories, or beliefs. This kind of attachment produces dogmatism, prejudice, and intolerance. When one puts this kind of dogmatic attitude together with the thirst to obtain personal happiness, the thirst to advance one's life (including one's views) by the use of power, and the thirst for self-destructive actions, one finds causes for everything from "verbal wrangling" to ideological warfare. When the Buddha spoke out about the social, economic, and political issues of his day, he taught that these problems that bring about so much *duḥkha* in people's lives are ultimately rooted in the human mind. It is there, in ignorance and unwholesome mental formations, that the root of humankind's *duḥkha* must, in the final analysis, be addressed. For the Buddha, only a deep, insightful penetration into how unwholesome dispositions, attitudes, feelings, and thoughts are produced from ignorance and thirst can enable a person to stop fueling the inner fire that produces the burning of *duḥkha*.

The Third Noble Truth: The Cessation of Duḥkha

The Third Noble Truth concerns the cessation (*nirodha*) of *duḥkha*. In his First Sermon, the Buddha states it in just a few words: "Now this, O monks, is the noble truth of the cessation of *duḥkha*. It is the complete cessation of that very craving, giving it up, renouncing it, release from it, detachment from it." Although in this particular sermon he does not use the word, the cessation he is speaking about here is Nirvana. As we have seen, Nirvana literally means "blowing out" or "extinguishing" and was used to describe the cessation of a fire. In this sermon, the Buddha is saying that the cessation of *duḥkha* is brought about by the extinction of craving or thirst. When craving ceases, its effect, namely *duḥkha*, ceases and the result is Nirvana.

One thing that is interesting about the Buddha's statement of the Third Noble Truth is the few words he uses in comparison to the number used in stating the other three truths. Perhaps the reason is that the Buddha never spoke very much about what Nirvana ultimately is. Up to this point we have been looking at teachings of the Buddha that he explicates at some length. Therefore, there is not a great deal of disagreement among scholars about what those teachings entail. However, this is not the case with Nirvana. In fact, volumes have been written in which scholars have tried to answer the question, "What is Nirvana?" Some claim that it is an absolute Truth. Others say it is a transcendent metaphysical Reality. Still others argue that it is a supermundane experience or a supreme and pure state of mind.

At the conclusion of this chapter, we discuss why the Buddha did not speak about Nirvana in any great detail and also present an interpretation of

Nirvana based just on the early texts. Here, it is enough to say that no matter how Nirvana is interpreted, in the Third Noble Truth it refers to the cessation of *duḥkha* brought about by the letting go of craving. In other teachings by the Buddha, Nirvana is said to entail the cessation of defilements or the cessation of the Three Root Evils of greed, hate, and delusion. However, one should not conclude from these statements that Nirvana is something that is "caused" by the cessation of craving. Nirvana is not produced by anything, and so it is called "unconditioned" (*asaṃskṛta*; Pali: *asaṃkhata*). On the other hand, Nirvana is "realized" by following the Eightfold Path that is proclaimed in the Fourth Noble Truth. That is, the Eightfold Path does not cause or produce Nirvana but leads one to it like a path that leads to a place that is already there to be discovered.

The Fourth Noble Truth: The Eightfold Path to the Cessation of Duḥkha

The Buddha presents the Fourth Noble Truth, about the Path (*mārga*; Pali: *magga*) that leads to the cessation of *duḥkha*, in the next lines of his First Sermon:

Now this, O monks, is the noble truth of the way that leads to the cessation of *duḥkha*. This is the Noble Eightfold Path, namely, Right Understanding, Right Thought, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration. . . .

In the Four Noble Truths, we can see a method of medical treatment that was popular at the time of the Buddha. First, there is the identification of the disease. Second, there is an analysis of the cause of the disease. Third, this analysis is followed by defining the desired cure that will remove the cause of the disease, and thereby the disease itself, thus producing renewed health. Fourth, there is a specific method prescribed for curing the disease. In the Eightfold Path, the Buddha gave a prescription that will "cure" the dissatisfactory condition of human existence. This Fourth Noble Truth provides a path for the journey from ordinary human living, characterized by *duḥkha*, to a life characterized by freedom, peace, and happiness, namely, to the Nirvana proclaimed in the Third Noble Truth. It is the Middle Way of moral and religious practice that the Buddha mentioned in the introductory passages to this First Sermon.

In the naming of each of these eight steps, we find the word "right" (*samyañc*; Pali: *sammā*) being used as an adjective. This word is not used by the Buddha to indicate a command. The Buddha is not demanding that his disciples follow these steps as a religious or moral duty. Rather, the word "right" means "skillful." In other words, these eight steps will skillfully help one advance in the religious way that leads to Nirvana. Therefore, the Buddha said that one should not follow these steps simply because he taught them. One should try them in his or her own experience to see if they do indeed

① diagnosis
② etiology
③ cure/prescription
④ application

what
"is right"

importance
of
sequence?

lead to Awakening and Nirvana. Also, these steps are not intended to be taken one after the other in the order they appear in the Buddha's listing of them. Rather, they are to be developed more or less together so that they reinforce each other in one's spiritual life. In the next section of this chapter, we look at each of these steps to see how they skillfully advance one's life in the direction of Awakening and Nirvana.

Awakening

In the conclusion to his First Sermon, the Buddha says:

How does
this idea
of agency/
self-sensing/
differ compared
to Western
traditions?

As long as I did not perceive with knowledge and insight . . . these noble truths, so long, O monks, in this world . . . had I not attained the highest and complete Awakening. But, when I perceived with knowledge and insight . . . these noble truths, then, O monks, in this world . . . I attained the highest and complete Awakening. Thus I knew knowledge arose in me, insight arose that the emancipation of my mind is unmovable. This is my last existence; now there is no more rebirth.

In complete Awakening, one realizes the end of *dukkha*. Ignorance, as first in the twelve links of conditionality, is said to entail not knowing the Four Noble Truths. In this passage, Awakening is said to entail knowing these truths with penetrating insight. Thus, the ignorance that conditions the arising of craving is extinguished. By Awakening, achieved through the Eightfold Path, one can find release from the unwholesome factors of mind that produce the dissatisfactory state of ordinary human existence. In short, the Buddha teaches that true "emancipation" from rebirth is Nirvana, and this lasting happiness and peace can be found by attaining Awakening through following the Eightfold Path. At this point, then, let us look more carefully at this path to Nirvana.

THE EIGHTFOLD PATH

The steps of the Eightfold Path (see Figure 2.4) are arranged under three categories. The first two steps (Right Understanding and Right Thought) fall under the category of "proper view"; they present a perspective and way of thinking that orient one skillfully on the path to Awakening and Nirvana. The next three steps (Right Speech, Right Action, and Right Livelihood) fall under the category of "proper conduct"; they define what is required to walk the path in terms of moral purification and living. The last three steps (Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration) fall under the category of "proper practice"; these practices deepen proper view into the wisdom of Awakening and deepen proper conduct into an awakened life.

These three divisions of the Eightfold Path are also labeled in another way by the Buddha. Proper view is called "wisdom" (*prajñā*; Pali: *paññā*), because its two steps provide the wisdom necessary for Awakening. Proper conduct