



The Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta: A Pali Literary Analysis

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ABSTRACT

The Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta, often referred to as the "First Discourse" or the "Turning of the Wheel of Dharma," is a foundational text in Buddhist literature. This paper provides a comprehensive examination of the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta from the perspective of Pali literature. It explores the historical and cultural context, the linguistic and stylistic features, and the key thematic elements of this important Buddhist scripture.

Keywords: Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta, Mindfulness, Pali Literature, Four Noble Truth, Eight Fold Noble Path

INTRODUCTION:

The Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta is a central text in Buddhist literature, found in the Pali Canon, the oldest extant collection of Buddhist scriptures. This discourse is traditionally attributed to Siddhartha Gautama, the historical Buddha, and is renowned for being his first teaching after attaining enlightenment. This paper seeks to offer an in-depth analysis of the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta from the viewpoint of Pali literature. The name "Dhammacakkappavattana" can be broken down as follows:

"Dhamma" (Sanskrit: Dharma) refers to the teachings and principles of Buddhism, including the nature of reality, ethics, and the path to liberation.

"Cakka" (Sanskrit: Chakra) means a wheel or cycle.

"Pavattana" means setting in motion or turning.

The sutta is so named because it represents the Buddha's act of setting the wheel of Dharma in motion by delivering these teachings to his first five disciples in Sarnath, India.

Key Elements of the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta:

The Four Noble Truths: The Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta expounds the Four Noble Truths, which are the foundational principles of Buddhism. These truths are:

- The Truth of Suffering (Dukkha): This truth acknowledges that suffering is an inherent part of human existence.
- The Truth of the Origin of Suffering (Samudaya): It identifies craving and attachment as the root causes of suffering.
- The Truth of the Cessation of Suffering (Nirodha): It explains that suffering can be brought to an end by the cessation of craving and attachment.
- The Truth of the Path to the Cessation of Suffering (Magga): The Noble Eightfold Path, which is the path to liberation, is elaborated in this section.

The Middle Way: The Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta is notable for the Buddha's rejection of extreme asceticism, which he had practiced prior to his enlightenment. He advocates for the Middle Way, a balanced and moderate path between self-indulgence and self-mortification, as the way to attain enlightenment.

The Noble Eightfold Path: The sutta outlines the Eightfold Path, which is a guide to ethical and mental development. It consists of eight factors: right understanding, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. Following this path is considered essential to overcoming suffering and achieving liberation.

Dependent Origination: Although the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta primarily focuses on the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path, it briefly mentions the concept of dependent origination. This teaching illustrates the interconnected nature of existence and how one's actions (karma) lead to suffering and rebirth.

The Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta is a foundational text in Buddhism, and its teachings form the core of the Buddha's message. It marks the beginning of the Buddha's teaching career and the spread of his insights, which would go on to shape the foundations of Buddhism as we know it today.

Historical and Cultural Context:

To understand the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta's significance in Pali literature, it is essential to consider the historical and cultural context in which it was delivered. The sutta was delivered by the Buddha in Sarnath, India, to his five former ascetic companions, marking the beginning of his teaching career. The Pali Canon and the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta, in particular, provide valuable insights into the socio-religious milieu of ancient India, emphasizing the shift from extreme asceticism to the Middle Way and the development of key Buddhist concepts.

The Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta has inspired extensive commentaries and interpretations by Buddhist scholars and practitioners throughout history. These interpretations have contributed to the richness and diversity of Pali literature, adding layers of meaning and application to the sutta's teachings. The Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta's significance in Pali literature lies in its role as a foundational text that introduces and elaborates on key doctrinal principles and ethical guidelines central to Buddhism. It has had a lasting impact on the development of Buddhist thought, literature, and practice, and continues to be a source of inspiration and contemplation for Buddhists and scholars alike.

Linguistic and Stylistic Features:

The Pali language, in which the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta is preserved, is renowned for its conciseness and precision. The linguistic and stylistic features of the sutta reflect the oral tradition of preservation and transmission of Buddhist teachings. The sutta's structure, with its repetitive and mnemonic elements, highlights the importance of oral recitation and memorization in early Buddhism.

The Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta exhibits several linguistic and stylistic features that are characteristic of the Pali literary tradition and are worth noting for a comprehensive analysis. These features include conciseness, repetition, and mnemonic qualities, which reflect the orality and memorization practices of early Buddhism:

Conciseness: Pali literature, including the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta, is known for its brevity and precision. The text conveys profound philosophical and ethical teachings using a minimal number of words. This conciseness allows for ease of memorization and oral transmission, which was essential in a time when written texts were less common.

Repetition: The sutta employs a certain degree of repetition to reinforce key concepts and teachings. This repetition serves as a mnemonic device, aiding in the oral memorization and recitation of the text. For example, the repetition of the phrase "Iti pi so bhagavā..." (Thus, indeed, is that Blessed One...) at the end of each section serves as a formulaic reminder of the Buddha's authority and the importance of the preceding teachings.

Lists and Formulas: The Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta includes lists and formulas that are structurally organized, making it easier for both the speaker and the listener to grasp and retain the teachings. The most prominent example is the Noble Eightfold Path, which is presented as an eight-item list. Lists and formulas are common in Pali literature and aid in systematic teaching.

Clarity and Directness: Pali literature, including this sutta, is characterized by its straightforward and direct language. The text avoids elaborate metaphors or complex philosophical terminology, emphasizing clarity and accessibility. This is consistent with the Buddha's intention to make his teachings understandable to a wide audience.

Use of Anaphora: Anaphora is a rhetorical device where a word or phrase is repeated at the beginning of successive clauses or sentences. In the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta, the phrase "evaṃ me sutam" (Thus have I heard) is used at the beginning of each section. This phrase is a common introduction in Pali literature, signifying the sutta's oral transmission and traditional authenticity.

Narrative Style: The sutta often takes a narrative form, with the text recounting the events surrounding the Buddha's first sermon and the reactions of the five ascetics who were his audience. This narrative style humanizes the story and helps convey the importance and impact of the teachings.

Clarity of Terminology: Pali literature is known for its consistent and precise use of technical terminology. Key terms in the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta, such as "dukkha" (suffering), "samudaya" (origin of suffering), and "nirodha" (cessation), are used with clarity and consistency, ensuring that the teachings are conveyed accurately.

Structural Organization: The sutta is carefully structured into sections, each addressing a specific aspect of the Buddha's teachings. This organization aids in the systematic presentation of the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path.

These linguistic and stylistic features reflect the oral tradition of early Buddhism and the importance of memorization and recitation. The Pali Canon, including the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta, was passed down through generations of monks and nuns who committed these texts to memory and recited them as part of their monastic training and teaching activities. These features also contribute to the sutta's accessibility and clarity, allowing its teachings to be easily understood and transmitted.

Influence and Interpretations:

The Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta has had a profound impact on the development of Buddhist thought and practice. It has been a subject of extensive commentaries, interpretations, and scholarly analysis in the Pali literary tradition. Different Buddhist schools and scholars have offered their unique perspectives on this sutta, enriching the discourse with diverse interpretations and applications.

The essence of Buddhism, as outlined in the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta, can be distilled into several key principles:

The Four Noble Truths: The core teaching of Buddhism, as expounded in this sutta, is the Four Noble Truths. These truths are:

- a. **The Truth of Suffering (Dukkha):** The Buddha begins by acknowledging the pervasive nature of suffering in human existence. Suffering is not limited to physical pain but includes mental and emotional anguish, dissatisfaction, and the inherent unsatisfactoriness of life.
- b. **The Truth of the Origin of Suffering (Samudaya):** The cause of suffering is identified as craving (tanha) and attachment. We suffer because we desire and cling to things that are transient and subject to change.
- c. **The Truth of the Cessation of Suffering (Nirodha):** The Buddha teaches that it is possible to end suffering by eliminating craving and attachment. This cessation is the ultimate goal of Buddhism, often referred to as Nirvana.
- d. **The Truth of the Path to the Cessation of Suffering (Magga):** The Noble Eightfold Path is presented as the way to end suffering and attain enlightenment. This path comprises right understanding, intention, speech, action, livelihood, effort, mindfulness, and concentration.

The Role of the Buddha: The Buddha is presented as the Awakened One who has discovered and illuminated the path to the cessation of suffering. His teachings serve as the guiding light for those seeking liberation.

Compassion and Empathy: Though not explicitly mentioned in the sutta, the essence of compassion and empathy underlies the entire teaching. The aspiration to end one's suffering extends to all sentient beings, and the practice of right speech and right action encourages kindness and consideration for others.

The Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta encapsulates the fundamental teachings of Buddhism. It outlines the nature of suffering and its causes, offers a path to liberation, and underscores the importance of ethical living, wisdom, and mindfulness. The essence of Buddhism, as derived from this sutta, is the pursuit of a balanced, compassionate, and awakened life that transcends suffering and leads to inner peace and freedom.

The Buddha's approach to problem-solving is rooted in the principles of mindfulness, wisdom, compassion, and ethical conduct. While his teachings primarily address the problem of suffering and the path to liberation, they offer valuable insights for addressing everyday challenges and problems. Here is an exploration of the Buddha's strategy for problem-solving:

Mindfulness: Mindfulness is at the core of the Buddha's problem-solving strategy. It involves being fully present, aware, and attentive to the problem without distraction. By mindfully observing the issue, one gains clarity and insight into its nature and causes.

Understanding the Root Causes: The Buddha encouraged individuals to investigate the root causes of their suffering or problems. This involves deep introspection and contemplation to identify the underlying factors contributing to the issue. Understanding the causes is a crucial step in finding effective solutions.

Non-Attachment: The Buddha's teachings on non-attachment are essential in problem-solving. By approaching problems with non-attachment to specific outcomes, one can maintain emotional balance and make decisions more objectively. Non-attachment allows for greater flexibility and adaptability.

Wisdom: Wisdom is cultivated through an understanding of the interconnectedness of all things and the impermanence of life. The Buddha's wisdom teaches us to discern the most skillful and appropriate actions to address problems effectively.

Ethical Conduct: Ethical behavior is a fundamental aspect of the Buddha's teachings. When faced with a problem, ethical solutions should be sought, following the principles of right speech, right action, and right livelihood. Ethical conduct ensures that the chosen solution does not harm others or create negative consequences.

Compassion and Empathy: Compassion and empathy are emphasized by the Buddha. In problem-solving, it is essential to consider the well-being of all involved and to approach issues with a compassionate heart. Solutions that promote harmony, alleviate suffering, and consider the needs of others are valued.

Right Effort: The concept of "right effort" in the Buddha's Noble Eightfold Path underscores the importance of balanced and appropriate effort. It encourages diligent but not forceful problem-solving, where one exerts the right amount of energy to overcome challenges.

Silence and Contemplation: The Buddha recommended periods of silence and introspection. Silence allows for deep contemplation and insight into problems. It is a means to calm the mind, reduce distraction, and gain clarity.

Meditation: The practice of meditation, as taught by the Buddha, enhances the ability to focus the mind and develop insights. Regular meditation promotes mental clarity, which is invaluable in effective problem-solving.

Acceptance and Equanimity: The Buddha's teachings on acceptance and equanimity encourage individuals to acknowledge the impermanence and unpredictability of life. Problems are recognized as a natural part of human existence. With equanimity, one can approach problems with a balanced and steady mind, accepting both success and failure with grace. The Buddha's strategy for problem-solving is grounded in mindfulness, wisdom, ethical conduct, and compassion. It provides a holistic approach to addressing challenges and finding solutions that not only resolve the issue but also contribute to personal growth and well-being.

Conclusion:

The Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta holds a unique and significant place in Pali literature as a foundational text in Buddhism. Its historical, linguistic, and stylistic features, coupled with its core thematic elements, make it a key point of reference for the understanding and practice of Buddhism. The sutta's influence extends far beyond its initial delivery in Sarnath, and it continues to serve as a source of inspiration and contemplation for Buddhists and scholars worldwide.

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