

Turning the Wheel of Truth

- Date** ■ Uncertain, sometime after 530 B.C., first written in 29 B.C.
- Place** ■ Varanasi, India
- Type of Source** ■ Religious text (original written version in Pali, original spoken in Sanskrit)
- Author** ■ Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha or Shakyami, compiled by his followers
- Historical Context** ■ Siddhartha Gautama was born a prince in Nepal. At age 29 he became so horrified by death and suffering that he became a wandering monk. After being disappointed with the results of physical torments, Gautama left his five companions to seek the truth in meditation. After 49 straight days of meditation, he discovered the way out of suffering to supreme bliss called *nirvana*. He returned to his companions and gave this sermon.
- After his death, his students compiled the Tripitaka (“Three Baskets”) that contained all the Buddha’s teachings including his first sermon. These were transmitted orally by monks for centuries. In 30 B.C. a famine killed so many monks in Sri Lanka that a council agreed to write down the Tripitaka.

Samyutta Nikaya—Chapter 56

Thus have I heard. The Blessed One was once staying at Varanasi, at the deer park called Rsiapatana. And there the Blessed One addressed the company of the five **Bhikkhus**, and said, “There are two extremes, O Bhikkhus, which the man who has given up the world ought not to follow—the habitual practice, on the one hand of those things whose attraction depends upon the passions, and especially of sensuality—a low and pagan way (of seeking satisfaction) unworthy, unprofitable, and fit only for the worldly minded and the habitual practice, on the other hand, of **asceticism**, which is painful, unworthy, and unprofitable.

“There is a middle path, O Bhikkhus, avoiding these two extremes, discovered by the **Tathagata**—a path which opens the eyes, and bestows understanding, which leads to peace of mind, to the higher wisdom, to full enlightenment, to **Nirvana!**

“What is that middle path, O Bhikkhus, avoiding these two extremes, discovered by the Tathagata—that path which opens the eyes, and bestows understanding, which leads to peace of mind, to the higher wisdom, to full enlightenment, to Nirvana?...

“Now this, O Bhikkhus, is the **noble truth** concerning suffering:

Birth is attended with pain, decay is painful, disease is painful, death is painful. Union with the unpleasant is painful, painful is separation from the pleasant; and any craving that is unsatisfied, that too is painful. In brief, [everything that makes us individuals] springs from attachment [and] is painful. This then, O Bhikkhus, is the noble truth concerning suffering.

Samyutta Nikaya

Pali for “Collected Sayings,” one of five collections in the Sutta Pitaka (“Basket of Instruction”)

Bhikkus

monks or holy beggars

asceticism

the path of extreme discipline and eliminating all pleasure

Tathagata

Pali for “the one who has come” or “the one who has gone.” Buddha’s way of referring to himself.

Nirvana

ultimate bliss, the end of suffering

noble truth

The Four Noble Truths are the basis of all Buddhist thought.

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“Now this, O Bhikkhus, is the noble truth concerning the origin of suffering:

Truly, it is that craving, causing the **renewal of existence**, accompanied by sensual delight, seeking satisfaction now here, now there—that is to say, the craving for the gratification of the passions, or the craving for [a future] life, or the craving for success [in this present life]. This then, O Bhikkhus, is the noble truth concerning the origin of suffering.

“Now this, O Bhikkhus, is the noble truth concerning the [end] of suffering.

Truly, it is the destruction, in which no passion remains, of this very craving; the laying aside of, the getting rid of, the being free from, no longer harboring this craving. This then, O Bhikkhus, is the noble truth concerning the destruction of suffering.

“Now this, O Bhikkhus, is the noble truth concerning the way which leads to the destruction of sorrow.

Truly it is this noble eightfold path; that is to say: Right views; Right aspirations; Right speech; Right conduct; Right livelihood; Right effort; Right mindfulness; and Right contemplation. This then, O Bhikkhus, is the noble truth concerning the destruction of sorrow.

“That this was the noble truth concerning sorrow, was not, O Bhikkhus, among the doctrines handed down, but there arose within me the eye [to understand it], there arose the knowledge [of its nature], there arose the understanding [of its cause], there arose the wisdom [to guide in the path of tranquillity], there arose the light [to dispel darkness from it]”...

[The next section is essentially a repetition of the previous verse with the Buddha asserting that each of the Noble Truths is new and came from his own insight not from earlier ideas.]

The repetition is probably a result of stressing this point to students who were memorizing the sermon.]

“So long, O Bhikkhus, as my knowledge and insight were not quite clear, regarding each of these four noble truths in this triple order, in this twelfold manner—so long was I uncertain whether I had attained to the full insight of that wisdom which is unsurpassed in the heavens or on earth, among the whole race of **Samanas** and **Brahmans**, or of **gods** or men...

“And now this knowledge and this insight has arisen within me. Immovable is the emancipation of my heart. This is my last existence. There will now be no rebirth for me!”

Thus spoke the Blessed One. The company of the five Bhikkhus, glad at heart, exalted the words of the Blessed One. And when the discourse had been uttered, there arose within the venerable **Kondanna** the eye of truth, spotless, and without a stain, [and he saw that] whatsoever has an origin, in that is also inherent the necessity of coming to an end.

renewal of existence
reincarnation. Buddha believe reincarnation was caused by continually seeking new pleasures.

Samanas
wandering ascetic monks similar to the Buddha and his companions

Brahmans
Hindu priests

gods
Buddhism, especially the Theravada branch that wrote the Tripitaka, does not emphasize gods. As a result, it is never clear if the deities mentioned are supposed to be actual beings or metaphors.

On the other hand, Buddha also taught that all existence is an illusion, making the question of gods ultimately pointless.

Kondanna
also spelled Kaundinya. Kodanna was the first of the Buddha's companions to attain enlightenment. He became a leader in the early Buddhist sangha (community).

Turning the Wheel of Truth

And when the **royal chariot wheel of the truth** had thus been set rolling onwards by the Blessed One, the gods of the earth gave forth a shout, saying:

“In Varanasi, at the deer park called Rsipatana, the supreme wheel of the empire of Truth has been set rolling by the Blessed One—that wheel which not by any Samana or Brahman, not by any god, not by any **Brahma** or **Mara**, not by any one in the universe, can ever be turned back!”

royal chariot wheel of the truth

The wheel of truth is now used the symbol of Buddhism. The word “truth” is the translation for “dhamma” (Pali) or “dharma” (Sanskrit). Dharma is used in Hinduism to mean “destiny,” “duty,” or “path” related to a person’s caste.

Brahma

the Hindu creator god, also used by Buddhist to describe perfect deities

Mara

the demon tempter. Buddhists, especially early Buddhists, viewed Mara as a distraction to enlightenment and a deceiver, but not cruel or evil.

Source: “Dhamma-Kakka-Ppavatta Sutta: Foundation of the Kingdom of Righteousness,” *Internet Sacred Archives*, n.d., <<http://www.sacred-texts.com/bud/sbe11/sbe11104.htm>> (May 20, 2011).