



A CRITICAL STUDY OF THE DHAMMACAKKAPPAVATTANA SUTTA: THE FOUNDATION OF BUDDHIST TEACHING

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Abstract

The Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta¹ is important as the first sermon delivered by the Buddha after attaining Enlightenment at Sarnath, nearly 8 Km from Varanasi, UP, India. It is one of the most important and famous teachings in Buddhism because it presents the foundation of the Buddha's teaching through the Middle Path, the Four Noble Truths, and the Noble Eightfold Path. This research dissertation article critically studies the doctrinal significance and practical value of the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta in Buddhist philosophy and daily life. The study is based on Pali textual analysis and modern scholarly interpretations. It explains how to avoid the two extremes of sensual pleasure and self-mortification and why to follow the Middle Path as the way to liberation. The article also emphasizes the relevance of the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path in solving modern social, ethical, and psychological problems in the present day. This study concludes that the value and importance of Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta is a timeless teaching that guides humanity towards peace, wisdom and liberation.

Keywords: *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta, Four Noble Truths, Noble Eightfold Path, Middle Path, Buddhism*

Introduction

The meaning of *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta* occupies a central position in Buddhist literature and tradition, and it was delivered by the Buddha to the five ascetics at Isipatana, near

¹ Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta: The "Setting in Motion of the Wheel of Dhamma," the Buddha's first sermon delivered to the five ascetics at Isipatana (Sarnath), explaining the Middle Path, the Four Noble Truths, and the Noble Eightfold Path. It is found in the *Samyutta Nikāya* (SN 56.11).

Vārāṇasī, after his Enlightenment under the Bodhi Tree at Bodhgaya. This discourse is known as the “Setting in Motion of the Wheel of Dhamma” because it is the first and beginning of the Buddha’s teaching mission and the establishment of the Buddhist Saṅgha.² It explains the importance of the Middle Path (*Majjhimā Paṭipadā*),³ the Four Noble Truths (Cattāri Ariya-saccāni),⁴ and the Noble Eightfold Path (*Ariyo Aṭṭhaṅgiko Maggo*)⁵. These teachings form the core of Buddhist philosophy and practice and the Buddha emphasized that liberation from suffering can be achieved not through extreme luxury or severe self-mortification, but it is the way through balanced wisdom and ethical living.

The importance of this *sutta* is not limited to ancient India from the last 26 centuries; even today, its teachings are highly relevant to modern society, where people suffer stress, anxiety, dissatisfaction, and moral confusion. The *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta* offers practical guidance for developing inner peace, ethical conduct, mindfulness, and understanding the nature and wisdom.

Historical Background of the First Sermon

After attaining Enlightenment at Bodhgayā, Bihar, the Buddha spent seven weeks contemplating the profound Dhamma he had realized, and at first, he was thinking of teaching the Dhamma to the world, because the truth of the Dhamma was too deep and difficult for ordinary people to understand. However, out of great compassion for all beings, he decided to teach the path leading to liberation. Then Buddha delivered the Dhamma to the five ascetics, namely Koṇḍañña, Vappa, Bhaddiya, Mahānāma, and Assaji, who had practiced austerities previously with him. He met them at the Deer Park in Isipatana (Sarnath). The place where he delivered the first sermon of *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta*.

After the end of the discourse, the most venerable Koṇḍañña attained the first stage of sainthood known as *Sotāpanna*⁶. Because of this event, the Buddhist Saṅgha⁷ officially began.

² <https://so13.tci-thaijo.org/index.php/Buddho/article/view/1515>

³ *Majjhimā Paṭipadā*: The “Middle Path” or “Middle Way” taught by the Buddha, which avoids the two extremes of sensual indulgence and self-mortification, leading to wisdom, peace, and liberation.

⁴ *Cattāri Ariya-saccāni*: The “Four Noble Truths” taught by the Buddha, namely the truth of suffering (*dukkha*), the cause of suffering (*samudaya*), the cessation of suffering (*nirodha*), and the path leading to the cessation of suffering (*magga*).

⁵ *Ariyo Aṭṭhaṅgiko Maggo*: The “Noble Eightfold Path,” consisting of Right View, Right Thought, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration, which leads to the cessation of suffering and attainment of *Nibbāna*.

⁶ A *sotāpanna* (Pali) or “stream-enterer” is a person who has attained the first stage of enlightenment in Buddhism, having entered the “stream” of the Noble Eightfold Path that leads directly to *Nibbāna*. They have abandoned the first three fetters: self-view, doubt, and attachment to rituals. A *sotāpanna* is assured of no future rebirth in lower realms and will reach full liberation in seven or fewer lifetimes.

⁷ The Buddhist Saṅgha refers to the community or assembly of followers who uphold, practice, and spread the Buddha’s teachings, representing one of the Three Jewels (along with Buddha and Dharma). It traditionally signifies the ordained monastic community—monks (*bhikkhu*) and nuns (*bhikkhuni*)—but often includes lay practitioners in modern usage.

The name of the *Sutta*'s title, “*Dhammacakkappavattana*” can be divided into three terms: “*Dhamma*” meaning truth or doctrine, “*Cakka*” meaning wheel, and “*Pavattana*” meaning setting in motion; therefore, the title means “Setting in Motion the Wheel of Dhamma.”

Understanding the Middle Path

One of the main teachings in the *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta* is the Middle Path, or *Majjhima Patipada*, which is to avoid two extremes that should not be followed by one who seeks liberation. The first extreme is indulgence in sensual pleasures (*Kāmasukhallikānuyoga*), and the second one to avoid is self-mortification (*Attakilamathānuyoga*). The Buddha himself experienced both extremes before attaining Enlightenment, while as Prince Siddhattha, and he lived in luxury and enjoyment within the palace. Later, he practiced severe asceticism for six years very difficult and torturing his body through extreme fasting and hardship, even though, by those practices, he realized that neither extreme led to wisdom or liberation.

Therefore, the Buddha found the Middle Path by himself, which avoids both sensual indulgence and self-torture. Because the Middle Path can be used practically, balanced, and conducive to peace and wisdom, moreover, it leads to knowledge, enlightenment, and *Nibbāna*. That Middle Way is identified and stated with the Noble Eightfold Path, and they are- Right View, Right Thought, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration. These eight types of factors guide individuals toward moral purity by good concentration (*samadhi*), mental discipline (*sīla*), and wisdom (*panna*).

The Four Noble Truths

The Four Noble Truths are the core teachings of the Buddha's Dhamma because they provide a realistic analysis of human life and explain the path leading to liberation from suffering and freedom from *Samsara*⁸.

1. The Truth of Suffering (Dukkha)

The Buddha taught that life is characterized and formed by suffering and dissatisfaction. Birth, aging, sickness, death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair are all forms of suffering. Even pleasant and happy moment experiences are impermanent and eventually become a source of dissatisfaction. The concept of *Dukkha* -sufferings does not mean that life is entirely negative, but it explains the unstable and impermanent nature of worldly existence. Understanding the types of suffering helps individuals develop wisdom and a realistic view of life.

⁸ *Samsāra*: The continuous cycle of birth, death, and rebirth in which beings wander due to ignorance (*avijjā*) and craving (*taṇhā*) until attaining liberation (*Nibbāna*).

2. The Truth of the Cause of Suffering (Samudaya)

The Buddha explained that craving (*Taṇhā*) is the main cause of suffering, because human beings constantly desire sensual pleasures, existence, and non-existence. Therefore, these types of cravings create attachment and lead to repeated rebirths and dissatisfaction. And if craving arises due to ignorance (*Avijjā*), which prevents individuals from seeing reality clearly. Finally, because of that ignorance and attachment, people remain trapped in *samsāra*, the cycle of birth and death.

3. The Truth of the Cessation of Suffering (Nirodha)

The cessation or end of suffering is possible through the complete understanding and elimination of craving and ignorance. This state is known as Nibbāna, which is the highest goal in Buddhism. Nibbāna is described as peace, freedom, and liberation from all defilements, but it is not a place but a state of complete mental purification, peace and ultimate happiness.

4. The Truth of the Path Leading to the Cessation of Suffering (Magga)

The path leading to the end of suffering is the practice of the Noble Eightfold Path, and this path provides practical guidance for ethical conduct, mental discipline, and wisdom. The Noble Eightfold Path can be divided into three groups, and they are as follows;

1. **Wisdom (*Paññā*):** Right View and Right Thought
2. **Morality (*Sīla*):** Right Speech, Right Action, and Right Livelihood
3. **Concentration (*Samādhi*):** Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration

By the practice of these eight factors, one can gradually purify one's mind and attain liberation systematically.

Conclusion: Practical Relevance in Modern Society

The study of the *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta* is highly relevant to modern society, because in the present day, many people suffer from stress, anxiety, depression, greed, anger, and social conflict. Only the Buddha's teachings offer practical solutions for these problems. The practice of the Middle Path teaches balance and moderation, which are essential in modern life because of being dominated by consumerism and competition. The Buddha's teaching encourages simplicity, compassion, and inner peace. Therefore, the *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta* is not only a religious teaching but also a universal guide for personal and social well-being.

Furthermore, this discourse continues to inspire millions of people around the world, and its practical relevance in modern society demonstrates that the Buddha's wisdom is timeless and universal. Therefore, the Buddha's first sermon of *Dhammacakkappavattana*

Sutta remains one of the most valuable spiritual teachings for the development of peace, morality, and liberation.

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