DN 26 — The Wheel-Turning Monarch

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Text

Long Discourses 26

The Wheel-Turning Monarch

1. Taking Refuge in Oneself

So I have heard. At one time the Buddha was staying in the land of the Magadhans at Mātulā. There the Buddha addressed the mendicants, “Mendicants!”

“Venerable sir,” they replied. The Buddha said this:

“Mendicants, live as your own island, your own refuge, with no other refuge. Let the teaching be your island and your refuge, with no other refuge. And how does a mendicant do this? They meditate observing an aspect of the body—keen, aware, and mindful, rid of covetousness and displeasure for the world. They meditate observing an aspect of feelings … mind … principles—keen, aware, and mindful, rid of covetousness and displeasure for the world. That’s how a mendicant lives with themselves as island and refuge, without other refuge; with the teachings as island and refuge, without other refuge.

You should roam inside your own territory, the domain of your fathers. If you roam inside your own territory, the domain of your fathers, Māra won’t find a vulnerability or get an opportunity. It is due to undertaking skillful qualities that merit grows.

2. King Daḷhanemi

Once upon a time, mendicants, there was a king named Daḷhanemi who was a wheel-turning monarch, a just and principled king. His dominion extended to all four sides, he achieved stability in the country, and he possessed the seven treasures. He had the following seven treasures: the wheel, the elephant, the horse, the jewel, the woman, the householder, and the commander as the seventh treasure. He had over a thousand sons who were valiant and heroic, crushing the armies of his enemies. After conquering this land girt by sea, he reigned by principle, without rod or sword.

Then, after many years, many hundred years, many thousand years had passed, King Daḷhanemi addressed one of his men, ‘My man, when you see that the heavenly wheel-treasure has receded back from its place, please tell me.’

‘Yes, Your Majesty,’ replied that man.

After many thousand years had passed, that man saw that the heavenly wheel-treasure had receded back from its place. So he went to King Daḷhanemi and said, ‘Please Your

Majesty, you should know that your heavenly wheel-treasure has receded back from its place.'

So the king summoned the crown prince and said, 'Dear prince, my heavenly wheel-treasure has receded back from its place. I've heard that when this happens to a wheel-turning monarch, he does not have long to live. I have enjoyed human pleasures. Now it is time for me to seek heavenly pleasures. Come, dear prince, rule this land surrounded by ocean! I shall shave off my hair and beard, dress in ocher robes, and go forth from the lay life to homelessness.'

And so, after carefully instructing the crown prince in kingship, King Daḷhanemi shaved off his hair and beard, dressed in ocher robes, and went forth from the lay life to homelessness. Seven days later the heavenly wheel-treasure vanished.

Then a certain man approached the newly anointed aristocrat king and said, 'Please Your Majesty, you should know that the heavenly wheel-treasure has vanished.' At that the king was unhappy and experienced unhappiness. He went to the royal seer and said, 'Please Your Majesty, you should know that the heavenly wheel-treasure has vanished.'

When he said this, the royal seer said to him, 'Don't be unhappy at the vanishing of the wheel-treasure. My dear, the wheel-treasure is not inherited from your father. Come now, my dear, proceed in the noble duty of a wheel-turning monarch. If you do so, it's possible that—on a fifteenth day sabbath, having bathed your head and gone upstairs in the royal longhouse to observe the sabbath—the heavenly wheel-treasure will appear to you, with a thousand spokes, with rim and hub, complete in every detail.'

2.1. The Noble Duty of a Wheel-Turning Monarch

'But Your Majesty, what is the noble duty of a wheel-turning monarch?'

'Well then, my dear, relying only on principle—honoring, respecting, and venerating principle, having principle as your flag, banner, and authority—provide just protection and security for your court, troops, aristocrats, vassals, brahmins and householders, people of town and country, ascetics and brahmins, beasts and birds. Do not let injustice prevail in the realm. Provide money to the penniless in the realm.

And there are ascetics and brahmins in the realm who refrain from intoxication and negligence, are settled in patience and gentleness, and who tame, calm, and extinguish themselves. From time to time you should go up to them and ask and learn: "Sirs, what is skillful? What is unskillful? What is blameworthy? What is blameless? What should be cultivated? What should not be cultivated? Doing what leads to my lasting harm and suffering? Doing what leads to my lasting welfare and happiness?" Having heard them, you should shun what is unskillful and proceed having undertaken what is skillful.

This is the noble duty of a wheel-turning monarch.'

2.2. The Wheel-Treasure Appears

'Yes, Your Majesty,' replied the new king to the royal seer. And he proceeded in the noble duty of a wheel-turning monarch.

While he was proceeding in that duty, on a fifteenth day sabbath, he had bathed his head and gone upstairs in the royal longhouse to observe the sabbath. And the heavenly wheel-treasure appeared to him, with a thousand spokes, with rim and hub, complete in every detail. Seeing this, the king thought, ‘I have heard that when the heavenly wheel-treasure appears to a king in this way, he becomes a wheel-turning monarch. Am I then a wheel-turning monarch?’

Then the anointed king, rising from his seat and arranging his robe over one shoulder, took a ceremonial vase in his left hand and besprinkled the wheel-treasure with his right hand, saying, ‘Roll forth, O wheel-treasure! Triumph, O wheel-treasure!’

Then the wheel-treasure rolled toward the east. And the king followed it together with his army of four divisions. In whatever place the wheel-treasure stood still, there the king came to stay together with his army. And any opposing rulers of the eastern quarter came to the wheel-turning monarch and said, ‘Come, Great King! Welcome, Great King! We are yours, Great King, instruct us.’ The wheel-turning monarch said, ‘Do not kill living creatures. Do not steal. Do not commit sexual misconduct. Do not lie. Do not drink liquor. Maintain the current level of taxation.’ And so the opposing rulers of the eastern quarter became his vassals.

Then the wheel-treasure, having plunged into the eastern ocean and emerged again, rolled toward the south. … Having plunged into the southern ocean and emerged again, it rolled toward the west. …

Having plunged into the western ocean and emerged again, it rolled toward the north, followed by the king together with his army of four divisions. In whatever place the wheel-treasure stood still, there the king came to stay together with his army. And any opposing rulers of the northern quarter came to the wheel-turning monarch and said, ‘Come, Great King! Welcome, Great King! We are yours, Great King, instruct us.’ The wheel-turning monarch said, ‘Do not kill living creatures. Do not steal. Do not commit sexual misconduct. Do not lie. Do not drink liquor. Maintain the current level of taxation.’ And so the rulers of the northern quarter became his vassals.

And then the wheel-treasure, having triumphed over this land surrounded by ocean, returned to the royal capital. There it stood still by the gate to the royal compound at the High Court as if fixed to an axle, illuminating the royal compound.

3. On Subsequent Wheel-Turning Monarchs

And for a second time, and a third, a fourth, a fifth, a sixth, and a seventh time, a wheel-turning monarch was established in exactly the same way. And after many years the seventh wheel-turning monarch went forth, handing the realm over to the crown prince.

Seven days later the heavenly wheel-treasure vanished.

Then a certain man approached the newly anointed aristocrat king and said, ‘Please Your Majesty, you should know that the heavenly wheel-treasure has vanished.’ At that the king was unhappy and experienced unhappiness. But he didn’t go to the royal seer and ask about the noble duty of a wheel-turning monarch. He just governed the country according to his own ideas. So governed, the country’s people did not prosper like before, as they

had when former kings proceeded in the noble duty of a wheel-turning monarch.

Then the ministers and councillors, the treasurers and chief ministers, military officers, guardsmen, and professional advisers gathered and said to the king, ‘Your Majesty, when governed according to your own ideas, the country’s people do not prosper like before, as they did when former kings proceeded in the noble duty of a wheel-turning monarch. In your realm are found ministers and councillors, treasurers and chief ministers, military officers, guardsmen, and professional advisers—both ourselves and others—who remember the noble duty of a wheel-turning monarch. Please, Your Majesty, ask us about the noble duty of a wheel-turning monarch. We will answer you.’

4. On the Period of Decline

So the anointed king asked the assembled ministers and councillors, treasurers and chief ministers, military officers, guardsmen, and professional advisers about the noble duty of a wheel-turning monarch. And they answered him. After listening to them, he provided just protection and security. But he did not provide money to the penniless in the realm. And so poverty grew widespread.

When poverty was widespread, a certain person stole from others, with the intention to commit theft. They arrested him and presented him to the king, saying, ‘Your Majesty, this person stole from others with the intention to commit theft.’

The king said to that person, ‘Is it really true, my man, that you stole from others with the intention to commit theft?’

‘It’s true, Your Majesty.’

‘What was the reason?’

‘Your Majesty, I can’t survive.’

So the king provided some money to that person, saying, ‘With this money, my man, keep yourself alive, and provide for your mother and father, partners and children. Work for a living, and establish an uplifting religious donation for ascetics and brahmins that’s conducive to heaven, ripens in happiness, and leads to heaven.’

‘Yes, Your Majesty,’ replied that man.

But then another man stole something from others. They arrested him and presented him to the king, saying, ‘Your Majesty, this person stole from others.’

The king said to that person, ‘Is it really true, my man, that you stole from others?’

‘It’s true, Your Majesty.’

‘What was the reason?’

‘Your Majesty, I can’t survive.’

So the king provided some money to that person, saying, ‘With this money, my man, keep yourself alive, and provide for your mother and father, partners and children. Work for a living, and establish an uplifting religious donation for ascetics and brahmins that’s

conducive to heaven, ripens in happiness, and leads to heaven.'

'Yes, Your Majesty,' replied that man.

People heard about this: 'It seems the king is providing money to anyone who steals from others!' It occurred to them, 'Why don't we steal from others?' So then another man stole something from others.

They arrested him and presented him to the king, saying, 'Your Majesty, this person stole from others.'

The king said to that person, 'Is it really true, my man, that you stole from others?'

'It's true, Your Majesty.'

'What was the reason?'

'Your Majesty, I can't survive.'

Then the king thought, 'If I provide money to anyone who steals from others, it will only increase the stealing. I'd better make an end of this person, finish him off, and chop off his head.'

Then he ordered his men, 'Well then, lads, tie this man's arms tightly behind his back with a strong rope. Shave his head and march him from street to street and square to square to the beating of a harsh drum. Then take him out the south gate and make an end of him, finish him off, and chop off his head.'

'Yes, Your Majesty,' they replied, and did as he commanded.

People heard about this: 'It seems the king is chopping the head off anyone who steals from others!' It occurred to them, 'We'd better have sharp swords made. Then when we steal from others, we'll make an end of them, finish them off, and chop off their heads.' They had sharp swords made. Then they started to attack villages, towns, and cities, and to infest the highways. And they chopped the heads off anyone they stole from.

And so, mendicants, from not providing money to the penniless, poverty became widespread. When poverty was widespread, theft became widespread. When theft was widespread, swords became widespread. When swords were widespread, killing living creatures became widespread. And for the sentient beings among whom killing was widespread, their lifespan and beauty declined. Those people lived for 80,000 years, but their children lived for 40,000 years.

Among the humans who lived for 40,000 years, a certain person stole something from others. They arrested him and presented him to the king, saying, 'Your Majesty, this person stole from others.'

The king said to that person, 'Is it really true, my man, that you stole from others?'

'No, Your Majesty,' he said, deliberately lying.

And so, mendicants, from not providing money to the penniless, poverty, theft, swords, and killing became widespread. When killing was widespread, lying became widespread.

And for the sentient beings among whom lying was widespread, their lifespan and beauty declined. Those people who lived for 40,000 years had children who lived for 20,000 years.

Among the humans who lived for 20,000 years, a certain person stole something from others. Someone else reported this to the king, ‘Your Majesty, the person named so-and-so stole from others,’ he said, going behind his back.

And so, mendicants, from not providing money to the penniless, poverty, theft, swords, killing, and lying became widespread. When lying was widespread, backbiting became widespread. And for the sentient beings among whom backbiting was widespread, their lifespan and beauty declined. Those people who lived for 20,000 years had children who lived for 10,000 years.

Among the humans who lived for 10,000 years, some were beautiful, some were ugly. And the ugly beings, coveting the beautiful ones, had relations with the wives of others.

And so, mendicants, from not providing money to the penniless, poverty, theft, swords, killing, lying, and backbiting became widespread. When backbiting was widespread, sexual misconduct became widespread. And for the sentient beings among whom sexual misconduct was widespread, their lifespan and beauty declined. Those people who lived for 10,000 years had children who lived for 5,000 years.

Among the humans who lived for 5,000 years, two things became widespread: harsh speech and talking nonsense. For the sentient beings among whom these two things were widespread, their lifespan and beauty declined. Those people who lived for 5,000 years had some children who lived for 2,500 years, while others lived for 2,000 years.

Among the humans who lived for 2,500 years, desire and ill will became widespread. For the sentient beings among whom desire and ill will were widespread, their lifespan and beauty declined. Those people who lived for 2,500 years had children who lived for 1,000 years.

Among the humans who lived for 1,000 years, wrong view became widespread. For the sentient beings among whom wrong view was widespread, their lifespan and beauty declined. Those people who lived for 1,000 years had children who lived for five hundred years.

Among the humans who lived for five hundred years, three things became widespread: illicit desire, immoral greed, and wrong religious teachings. For the sentient beings among whom these three things were widespread, their lifespan and beauty declined. Those people who lived for five hundred years had some children who lived for two hundred and fifty years, while others lived for two hundred years.

Among the humans who lived for two hundred and fifty years, these things became widespread: lack of due respect for mother and father, ascetics and brahmins, and failure to honor the elders in the family.

And so, mendicants, from not providing money to the penniless, all these things became widespread—poverty, theft, swords, killing, lying, backbiting, sexual misconduct, harsh speech and talking nonsense, desire and ill will, wrong view, illicit desire, immoral greed,

and wrong religious teachings, and lack of due respect for mother and father, ascetics and brahmins, and failure to honor the elders in the family. For the sentient beings among whom these things were widespread, their lifespan and beauty declined. Those people who lived for two hundred and fifty years had children who lived for a hundred years.

5. When People Live for Ten Years

There will come a time, mendicants, when these people will have children who live for ten years. Among the humans who live for ten years, girls will be marriageable at five. The following flavors will disappear: ghee, butter, oil, honey, molasses, and salt. The best kind of food will be finger millet, just as fine rice with meat is the best kind of food today.

The ten ways of doing skillful deeds will totally disappear, and the ten ways of doing unskillful deeds will explode in popularity. Those humans will not even have the word 'skillful', still less anyone who does what is skillful. And anyone who disrespects mother and father, ascetics and brahmins, and fails to honor the elders in the family will be venerated and praised, just as the opposite is venerated and praised today.

There'll be no recognition of the status of mother, aunts, or wives and partners of tutors and respected people. The world will become dissolute, like goats and sheep, chickens and pigs, and hounds and jackals.

They'll be full of hostility toward each other, with acute ill will, malevolence, and thoughts of murder. Even a mother will feel like this for her child, and the child for its mother, father for child, child for father, brother for sister, and sister for brother. They'll be just like a deer hunter when he sees a deer—full of hostility, ill will, malevolence, and thoughts of killing.

Among the humans who live for ten years, there will be an interregnum of swords lasting seven days. During that time they will see each other as beasts. Sharp swords will appear in their hands, with which they'll take each other's life, crying, 'It's a beast! It's a beast!'

But then some of those beings will think, 'Let us neither kill nor be killed! Why don't we hide in thick grass, thick jungle, thick trees, inaccessible riverlands, or rugged mountains and survive on forest roots and fruits?' So that's what they do.

When those seven days have passed, having emerged from their hiding places and embraced each other, they will come together and cry in one voice, 'Fantastic, dear foe, you live! Fantastic, dear foe, you live!'

6. The Period of Growth

Then those beings will think, 'It's because we undertook unskillful things that we suffered such an extensive loss of our relatives. We'd better do what's skillful. What skillful thing should we do? Why don't we refrain from killing living creatures? Having undertaken this skillful thing we'll live by it.' So that's what they do. Because of undertaking this skillful thing, their lifespan and beauty will grow. Those people who live for ten years will have children who live for twenty years.

Then those beings will think, 'Because of undertaking this skillful thing, our lifespan and beauty are growing. Why don't we do even more skillful things? What skillful thing should we do? Why don't we refrain from stealing … sexual misconduct … lying … backbiting …

harsh speech … and talking nonsense. Why don't we give up covetousness … ill will … wrong view … three things: illicit desire, immoral greed, and wrong religious teachings. Why don't we pay due respect to mother and father, ascetics and brahmins, honoring the elders in our families? Having undertaken this skillful thing we'll live by it.' So that's what they do.

Because of undertaking this skillful thing, their lifespan and beauty will grow. Those people who live for twenty years will have children who live for forty years. Those people who live for forty years will have children who live for eighty years, then a hundred and sixty years, three hundred and twenty years, six hundred and forty years, 2,000 years, 4,000 years, 8,000 years, 20,000 years, 40,000 years, and finally 80,000 years. Among the humans who live for 80,000 years, girls will be marriageable at five hundred.

7. The Time of King Saṅkha

Among the humans who live for 80,000 years, there will be just three afflictions: greed, starvation, and old age. The Black Plum Tree Land will be successful and prosperous. The villages, towns, and capital cities will be no more than a chicken's flight apart. And the land will be so full of humans you'd think they were squashed together, like a thicket of rushes or reeds. The royal capital will be Varanasi, renamed Ketumatī. And it will be successful and prosperous, populous and full of people, with plenty of food. There will be 84,000 cities in the Black Plum Tree Land, with the royal capital of Ketumatī foremost.

And in the royal capital of Ketumatī a king named Saṅkha will arise, a wheel-turning monarch, a just and principled king. His dominion will extend to all four sides, he will achieve stability in the country, and possess the seven treasures. He will have the following seven treasures: the wheel, the elephant, the horse, the jewel, the woman, the householder, and the commander as the seventh treasure. He will have over a thousand sons who are valiant and heroic, crushing the armies of his enemies. After conquering this land girt by sea, he will reign by principle, without rod or sword.

8. The Arising of the Buddha Metteyya

And the Blessed One named Metteyya will arise in the world—perfected, a fully awakened Buddha, accomplished in knowledge and conduct, holy, knower of the world, supreme guide for those fit for training, teacher of gods and humans, awakened, blessed— just as I have arisen today. He will realize with his own insight this world—with its gods, Māras, and divinities, this population with its ascetics and brahmins, gods and humans—and make it known to others, just as I do today. He will teach the Dhamma that's good in the beginning, good in the middle, and good in the end, meaningful and well-phrased. And he will reveal a spiritual practice that's entirely full and pure, just as I do today. He will lead a Saṅgha of many thousand mendicants, just as I lead a Saṅgha of many hundreds today.

Then King Saṅkha will have the sacrificial post once built by King Mahāpanāda raised up. Having reigned, he will abdicate, offering charity to ascetics and brahmins, paupers, vagrants, supplicants, and beggars. Then, having shaved off his hair and beard and dressed in ocher robes, he will go forth from the lay life to homelessness in the Buddha Metteyya's presence. Soon after going forth, living withdrawn, diligent, keen, and resolute, he will realize the supreme culmination of the spiritual path in this very life. He will live

having achieved with his own insight the goal for which gentlemen rightly go forth from the lay life to homelessness.

Mendicants, live as your own island, your own refuge, with no other refuge. Let the teaching be your island and your refuge, with no other refuge. And how does a mendicant do this? It's when a mendicant meditates by observing an aspect of the body—keen, aware, and mindful, rid of covetousness and displeasure for the world. They meditate observing an aspect of feelings … mind … principles—keen, aware, and mindful, rid of covetousness and displeasure for the world. That's how a mendicant lives with themselves as island and refuge, without other refuge; with the teachings as island and refuge, without other refuge.

9. On Long Life and Beauty for Mendicants

Mendicants, you should roam inside your own territory, the domain of your fathers. Doing so, you will grow in lifespan, beauty, happiness, wealth, and power.

And what is long life for a mendicant? It's when a mendicant develops the basis of psychic power that has immersion due to enthusiasm, and active effort. They develop the basis of psychic power that has immersion due to energy, and active effort. They develop the basis of psychic power that has immersion due to mental development, and active effort. They develop the basis of psychic power that has immersion due to inquiry, and active effort. Having developed and cultivated these four bases of psychic power they may, if they wish, live for the proper lifespan or what's left of it. This is long life for a mendicant.

And what is beauty for a mendicant? It's when a mendicant is ethical, restrained in the monastic code, conducting themselves well and resorting for alms in suitable places. Seeing danger in the slightest fault, they keep the rules they've undertaken. This is beauty for a mendicant.

And what is happiness for a mendicant? It's when a mendicant, quite secluded from sensual pleasures, secluded from unskillful qualities, enters and remains in the first absorption, which has the rapture and bliss born of seclusion, while placing the mind and keeping it connected. As the placing of the mind and keeping it connected are stilled, they enter and remain in the second absorption … third absorption … fourth absorption. This is happiness for a mendicant.

And what is wealth for a mendicant? It's when a monk meditates spreading a heart full of love to one direction, and to the second, and to the third, and to the fourth. In the same way above, below, across, everywhere, all around, they spread a heart full of love to the whole world—abundant, expansive, limitless, free of enmity and ill will. They meditate spreading a heart full of compassion … rejoicing … equanimity to one direction, and to the second, and to the third, and to the fourth. In the same way above, below, across, everywhere, all around, they spread a heart full of equanimity to the whole world—abundant, expansive, limitless, free of enmity and ill will. This is wealth for a mendicant.

And what is power for a mendicant? It's when a mendicant realizes the undefiled freedom of heart and freedom by wisdom. And they live having realized it with their own insight in

this very life due to the ending of defilements. This is power for a mendicant.

Mendicants, I do not see a single power so hard to defeat as the power of Māra. It is due to undertaking skillful qualities that merit grows.”

That is what the Buddha said. Satisfied, the mendicants approved what the Buddha said.