

## THE TURNING OF THE WHEEL OF DHARMA

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MAN'S greatest invention is the wheel. In practical day-to-day life, the wheel has been put to use in many profitable ways. Spiritually too, the wheel represents a whole corpus of teachings to the Buddhist. Once upon a time, there were three kings, all of whom had a wheel each. The one with a golden wheel had to just send word to the people of a region that he wanted to conquer their area -- they would themselves come and receive him as their king and crown him.

The king with a silver wheel had to send his wheel to the area he wanted to conquer. Not only that, he had to physically go to the region -- he would then be accepted as king and crowned. The third king did not have a bronze wheel in keeping with the Olympic order, but had an iron wheel. This king would not only have to follow his wheel, he would also have to show off all his strength before he could impress the people of a new area to accept him as king.

The wheel that was far above all these wheels was the Wheel of Dharma or the Dharma Chakra. Into the dharma chakra or the Wheel is read the basic teachings of Buddhism. This wheel has eight spokes. They represent the noble eightfold path: right views, right resolve, right speech, right conduct, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration. These constitute Dhamma, scrupulous observance and pursuit of which helps one attain Nirvana. The spokes have sharp edges for they embody the idea that wisdom cuts through ignorance.

The rim which holds the spokes represents mindfulness and perfect *samadhi*. The centre or the hub of the wheel is *shila* or moral discipline. The whole wheel therefore represents the three *sikshas*: *shila* or discipline, *prajna* or wisdom and *samadhi* or mindfulness. The Turning of the Wheel or Dharmachakra pravartana is a phrase used to refer to Buddhist teachings.

There have been three main teachings. The well-known convention of this three turnings of the wheel derives from *Samdhinirmocana-sutra*, Elucidating the Thought of the Noble Ones. In the seventh chapter of this work, the *Bodhisattva Paramarhasamudgata* asks the Buddha what he had in mind when, on certain occasions, he had said that phenomena have true existence and on other occasions that they do not; for these statements appear to be directly contradictory. Buddha's reply crystallised as the third Turning of the Wheel, and as *Cittamatin*, or Mind Only school of thought.

The first Turning of the Wheel taught true existence, the second non-true existence and the third that some phenomena exist truly whereas others do not -- this is the classification of the scriptures into three turnings, in order to explain selflessness.

The first Turning of the Wheel forms the *Dharma Chakra Sutra* wherein Buddha taught his five disciples the four noble truths. This took place in Varanasi soon after Siddhartha attained enlightenment. These teachings became the foundations of Buddhism.

The phrase noble truth is a translation of *Arya Satya*, which actually means truth to the noble. It is truth to those who have perceived them. A common simile given is that of a small piece

of hair. If that hair is lodged on the palm, then one may not even note it, but if it gets into the eye, then it hurts. The enlightened, the noble ones are likened to the eye while the ignorant are like the palm.

The second Turning of the Wheel took place at Rajgir on the peak of the Mountain of Vultures, near Nalanda. This is regarded as *Pragya-paramita sutras* or the Wisdom of Perfection. There are six perfections, the last of them being perfection of wisdom or *pragya*. There are three kinds of wisdom: knowledge of subjects, such as medicine or the arts; knowledge of *shunyata* and knowledge that is beneficial to others, that is, possessing a skill.

The three kinds of wisdom are not necessarily progressive. They can be ends to themselves. The second Turning deals with the realisation of the ultimate nature of all phenomena and the subject of *shunyata*, or the complete whole, the void of self-existence. The third Turning is said to have taken place at different places on different topics. One of the main features of this turning *Tathagatha garbha*, which means that all sentient beings possess the potential to become Buddha.