Three Turnings of the Wheel of Doctrine (Dharma-Cakra)

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Summary

The three turnings of the "wheel of doctrine" (*dharma-cakra*) is a Buddhist concept that has its origins in the *Discourse Explaining the Thought* (*Saṃdhinirmocana-sūtra*), a 3rd–4th century Indian Mahāyāna work. According to the schema described in this text, in the first turning the Buddha laid out fundamental precepts such as the four noble truths and dependent arising. The Buddha subsequently taught a second wheel, comprising the Perfection of Wisdom (*Prajñā-pāramitā*) discourses and related works, in which the teachings of the first wheel were subjected to the critique of emptiness (*śūnyatā*): the Buddha corrected the false impression some followers had developed that his words have a privileged truth status and transcend the limitations of mundane words and concepts. But in so doing he moved some followers toward an extreme of nihilism. And so in the third wheel he differentiated what is and is not being negated. This framework, only sketchily outlined in the *Sūtra*, was later extended and reinterpreted by Buddhist exegetes, most often as a polemical and sectarian strategy by which they valorized their own doctrines and preferred scriptures and relegated those of rivals to lower status while still acknowledging them as valid teachings of the Buddha delivered for the benefit of particular types of trainees with specific proclivities. In some tantric sources, Vajrayāna is characterized as part of the third wheel. As with the *Discourse Explaining the Thought*'s formulation, the tantric version of the three wheels presents them as sequential, with each requiring the others. Subsequent wheels build on and correct misconceptions in earlier ones, and the schema construes each successive dispensation as more profound than the preceding one(s) and as better representing the Buddha's final thought.

Cycles of Buddhist Teachings

According to Buddhist tradition, the Buddha, Siddhārtha Gautama (*c*. 485–405 BCE), attained awakening (*bodhi*) in Bodhgaya in modern day Bihar after six years of meditative practice following his decision to renounce his royal heritage and become a wandering ascetic. His

final life was the culmination of countless previous births, during which he engaged in prodigious acts of merit-making and meditation practice, leading to progressively greater wisdom and skill in teaching in accordance with the soteriological needs of various audiences. As a result of his newfound realization, he understood the workings of the world as well as how karma (Pāli *kamma*) and rebirth operate, and he freed himself from cyclic existence (*saṃsāra*). Initially fearing that what he had realized was too profound to be understood by others, he decided to pass into nirvana without teaching, but the god Brahmā remonstrated with him, pointing out that there were some people whose minds were only clouded with slight degrees of ignorance (*avijjā*; Skt. *avidyā*) and who would comprehend and profit from his instructions.

As a result, the Buddha embarked on a forty-year ministry, which began in Sarnath, near Varanasi in modern day Uttar Pradesh, where five former companions were engaged in ascetic practices in hopes of attaining liberation (*mokkha*; Skt. *mokṣa*). As he approached, they noticed a change in his demeanor: he radiated calm and understanding, and they asked him to share what he had learned. In response, he delivered a sermon referred to as the *Discourse Turning the Wheel of Doctrine (Dhamma-cakka-pavattana-sutta)*, in which he laid out what would become the essential tenets of his Dharma (doctrine).[1] The Buddha claimed that he was not an innovator: he had rediscovered fundamental truths about reality that were also understood by all past buddhas and that are true at all times and for all types of beings.

This first "wheel of doctrine" emphasized the four "noble truths" (*ariya-sacca*; Skt. *ārya-satya*): (a) that all life involves suffering (*dukkha*; Skt. *duḥkha*); (b) the origin (*samudaya*) of suffering; (c) that suffering can be brought to cessation (*nirodha*); and (d) the path (*magga*; Skt. *mārga*) for ending suffering, which involves a comprehensive reorientation of one's ideas and beliefs, practice of morality and cultivation of positive attitudes, and meditative techniques aimed at attaining mental calm and comprehension of the true nature of reality. The Buddha also taught that all compounded phenomena (*saṅkhata*; Skt. *saṃskṛta*) are impermanent (*anicca*; Skt. *anitya*) and thus subject to constant change and that all things are in a constant process of interdependent causation (*paṭicca-samuppāda*; Skt. *pratītya-samutpāda*). Another important component of the "first wheel" of teachings was the "middle way" (*majjhimā-paṭipadā*; Skt. *madhyama-pratipad*)—the path to liberation requires that one avoid extreme asceticism as well as hedonism. The notion later became a cornerstone of Buddhist philosophy, an injunction against falling into extreme views, most importantly reificationism (*sassata-vāda*; Skt. *śāśvata-vāda*) and annihilationism (*uccheda-vāda*).

This discourse became one of the most influential sermons attributed to the Buddha by his followers and encoded doctrines that became foundational for the religion that developed from teachings and practices that Buddhists traced back to him. The myriad schools and orders that regard themselves as adhering to his Dharma accept the *Discourse Turning the Wheel of Doctrine* as an articulation of core principles, but not all view it as his final or most profound teaching. Several hundred years after the Buddha's passing, a new corpus of discourses (*sūtra*) began to circulate in India, and their adherents claimed that these had been taught by the Buddha during his lifetime but were reserved for a small coterie of advanced students. Many of these were entitled "Perfection of Wisdom discourses" (*Prajñāpāramitā-sūtra*), and they purported to constitute a new and superior cycle of teaching, a "second wheel of Dharma." They retained the core teachings of the "first wheel," but often provided new interpretations, and they described practices that were

purportedly more powerful and effective than those of the preceding dispensation. The ideal of the *arhat* who seeks a personal nirvana, valorized in the Pāli canon, was denigrated in the Perfection of Wisdom discourses as selfish. They portray the bodhisattva as the supreme Buddhist practitioner, a being motivated by compassion who follows the path to liberation in order to release others from suffering.

In addition, the Perfection of Wisdom discourses subject all phenomena to a thoroughgoing critique based on analysis of their "emptiness" (*śūnyatā*) of intrinsic existence (*svabhāva*). All produced phenomena come into being due to causes and conditions external to themselves, change from moment to moment, and pass away. This is true of the minute *dharma*s that are the building blocks of complex objects, and it is equally true of the Buddha's teachings: they were propounded for particular purposes and aimed at certain types of beings in order to help them make progress on the path to liberation; but like everything produced by causes and conditions, the words of the Buddha lack inherent existence and are empty. Thus the Perfection of Wisdom critique undermined the belief of naïve practitioners who attributed an inherent truth value and reality to the Buddha's words. In the new cycle of teachings, Buddhist doctrines were characterized as heuristic devices promulgated for specific purposes, but once a practitioner has fully comprehended their purport, they should be left behind. Woncheuk (원측; Ch. Yuance 圓測, 613–696) argues that the key difference between the first two wheels is that in the former dispensation the Buddha focused on entities such as *dharma*s and made unambiguous statements about doctrines based on the four noble truths, but emptiness was "hidden." In the second wheel, emptiness was the focus, and the Buddha indicated that the categories and doctrines elucidated in the first wheel lacked substantial existence and are empty.[2]

Hīnayāna and Mahāyāna

The Perfection of Wisdom discourses relegated the teachings of the "first wheel" and their ideal of the *arhat* to an "Inferior Vehicle" (Hīnayāna) and referred to their path as the "Greater Vehicle" (Mahāyāna). The chronological discrepancy between the time of the Buddha's passing and the intervening centuries before these purportedly superior texts began to circulate in India was explained away by claiming that the Buddha taught them during his lifetime but realized that there was no one who could adequately interpret them. He arranged for them to be hidden in the undersea realm of the *nāga*s (beings with human heads and serpent bodies that inhabit watery places) until the birth of the sage Nāgārjuna (*c.* 150–250 CE). After Nāgārjuna received the texts, he began to compose treatises that elucidated the Buddha's intent. He is widely regarded in Buddhist Mahāyāna traditions as the founder and most influential exegete of the Madhyamaka (Middle Way) school, whose core doctrines are based on the Perfection of Wisdom corpus.

The notion of successive wheels of doctrine became well-established in Mahāyāna circles, but was rejected by those who were characterized as "Hīnayānists." They viewed the Mahāyāna "*sūtra*s" (a term denoting a discourse authentically originating with the historical Buddha) as forgeries, and not particularly well-crafted ones. The Mahāyāna *sūtra*s were often much longer than those of the Pāli canon, they contained doctrines and practices not attested in

sources regarded as authoritative by their rivals, and the historical discrepancy between the Buddha's death and the appearance of the new teachings was regarded by non-Mahāyānists as clear evidence of their spuriousness.

Factions also developed among communities that accepted the Perfection of Wisdom discourses as normative, along with other Mahāyāna works. Once the principle of a wheel of doctrine that supersedes an earlier dispensation was generally accepted, it was perhaps inevitable that this hermeneutical move would be further extended and that groups who identified as Mahāyānists but regarded coreligionists as propounding doctrines that were inferior to their own would relegate their rivals to a "second wheel" and characterize their own path as constituting a superior "third wheel of doctrine."

The *locus classicus* for the three wheels of doctrine schema is the 3rd–4th century *Discourse Explaining the Thought (Saṃdhinirmocana-sūtra)*, which became the main scriptural source for Yogācāra (Yogic Practice), the other major school of Indian Buddhism.[3] This is a mature work of Buddhist philosophy and meditation theory that presupposes centuries of doctrinal development. It purports to be the Buddha's final word on these matters, and it puts forward a comprehensive vision of the Dharma that has a place for the first two wheels, which are conceived as skillful teachings (*upāya-kauśalya*) appropriate to certain types of practitioners with similar proclivities. The relationship between the three wheels is one of supervenience: the third wheel is only possible because of the foundation of the other two, and its distinctive tenets build on and require those of the first and second wheels.

Robert Thurman has argued that the three wheels schema is chronological: the Buddha began teaching first wheel doctrines, then switched to second wheel discourses, and then in the latter part of his life focused on the third wheel.[4] This is not, however, how the schema is presented in the *Discourse Explaining the Thought* or other Mahāyāna works that discuss it, and it has no basis in any of the extant hagiographies of the Buddha's life. The three wheels are cycles of teaching, and all are interconnected. The second wheel would lack specificity without the first because these discourses critique first wheel tenets and develop a vision of the path in which they are integrated, but as preliminaries to the higher teachings of the second wheel. Similarly, the third wheel is described as a "wheel of good differentiations" (*legs par rnam par phye ba'i 'khor lo*) that sorts out exactly what the Buddha intended in the first and second wheels, clearing up ambiguities and establishing his final intention.[5] This is presumably why the seminal *sūtra* of this cycle is entitled *Discourse Explaining the Thought*. Chokro Lügyeltsen (Cog ro kLu'i rgyal mtshan, *c*. 9th century) comments that the title

> is designated according to the level of meaning. This *sutra* definitely delineates the meaning of the profound thought and indirect thought of the Tathāgata [Buddha] and cuts all the knots of the afflictive obscurations (*kleśāvaraṇa*) and the cognitive obscurations (*jñeyāvaraṇa*). Here, "*Ārya-saṃdhinirmocana*" is designated as the name of the *sutra*. . . . With respect to that, "*ārya*" means "one who is very distanced from all sinful nonvirtuous qualities." "*Saṃdhi*" refers to the profound thought and indirect thought of the Tathāgata. Also, in one sense the meaning of the words refers to the knots of the afflictive obscurations and the cognitive obscurations. "*Nirmocana*" refers to definitive delineation. It refers to "definitive delineation of the profound thought and indirect thought of the Tathāgata." Also, in one sense the meaning of the words means to cut completely: this refers to "completely cutting all of the knots of the afflictive obscurations and the cognitive obscurations." With respect to that, if the meaning of the words is brought together in a general way: it definitely disentangles the profound thought of the Tathāgata, and it cuts all of the knots of the afflictive obscurations and the cognitive obscurations; thus, it both explains his thought and completely cuts knots.[6]

The *Discourse Explaining the Thought* employs a number of literary and doctrinal tropes to present itself as the Buddha's final word. Unlike the discourses of the Pāli canon and many Mahāyāna *sutra*s, it is set in a celestial palace, and not one of the sites in north India that were the venues of other sermons delivered to audiences mainly comprising ordinary human (and some nonhuman) followers reported in canonical sources. The palace is only accessible to the most advanced practitioners, which ensures that the level of teaching will be appropriate to this type of audience, and not beginners. Throughout the text, its instructions are declared to be impossible for "children" (or beginners: *bāla*) to comprehend. All of the interlocutors are tenth level (*bhūmi*) bodhisattvas, which implicitly indicates that their questions will focus on rarified aspects of the later stages of the path and advanced doctrines. Much of the text is concerned with apparent discrepancies and contradictions in teachings attributed to the Buddha. The interlocutors often preface their questions by stating: "Blessed One, in the past you said X, then you said not-X; what were you thinking when you said this?" The format of the questions assumes both that all the discourses attributed to the Buddha were in fact spoken by him and that there must be some underlying thought behind them. In the first several chapters, the Buddha provides often subtle explanations to reconcile these issues, and the seventh chapter describes a hermeneutical model for comprehensively understanding the hidden intention behind the voluminous corpus of discourses attributed to the founder of their religion by Indian Buddhists.

Buddhist Hermeneutics According to the *Discourse Explaining the Thought*

Chapter seven opens with the bodhisattva Paramārthasamudgata reflecting on the Buddha's teachings: he begins with a review of pronouncements regarding the four truths and elements of the path found in Hīnayāna sources and then considers subsequent discourses that apparently undermine them:

> The Bhagavan [Buddha] has also said that all phenomena lack inherent existence, that all phenomena are unproduced, unceasing, quiescent from the start, and naturally in a state of nirvana. Then I thought, "Of what was the Bhagavan thinking when he said this?"[7]

The Buddha responds by explaining his hidden intentions in terms of three types of absence of intrinsic nature: absence of intrinsic nature in terms of character, absence of intrinsic nature in terms of production, and ultimate absence of intrinsic nature. These refer respectively to three characters (*trilakṣaṇa*): (a) the imputational character (*parikalpita-lakṣaṇa*); (b) the other-dependent character (*paratantra-lakṣaṇa*); and (c) the thoroughly real character (*pariniṣpanna-lakṣaṇa*). Woncheuk comments that Paramārthasamudgata's question implies that the two sets of teachings regarding absence of intrinsic nature in terms of character and production are mutually contradictory (*phan tshun 'gal ba*); the meaning of the query is: "Bhagavan, with respect to the statements concerning such things as nonentityness, of what were you thinking?"[8]

The first character comprises things that beings believe to be real but are in fact illusory, such as the notion of an enduring self (*ātman*): *parikalpita* is "a character posited as names and symbols, but it does not subsist by way of its own character." The other-dependent character refers to whatever "arises through the force of other conditions and not by itself." Phenomena that come into being in dependence on causes and conditions exist conventionally, but they are not ultimately real, and so they "lack intrinsic existence in terms of production."[9] The thoroughly real character is the way things really are: it is how the other-dependent is perceived when the false superimpositions of the imputational character no longer appear.

The Buddha expands on this by stating that correctly understanding the third character is a crucial factor in the path to liberation: it is a "purifying object of observation" (*viśuddhālambana*), the ultimate truth (*paramārtha*), the absence of self of phenomena (*dharma-nairātmya*), and it is an "ultimate lack of intrinsic existence."[10] When meditators take it as the focal point of their practice, it serves to eliminate mental afflictions and helps them to attain advanced states of realization and ultimately liberation from the round of birth and death. It is "all-pervasive and unitary"; it is always the same, and it is exactly what it appears to be when correctly understood, and so it can aid practitioners in their soteriological goals. Woncheuk comments that it abides in "permanent, permanent time and everlasting, everlasting time," and it is uncompounded, unproduced, and unceasing.[11]

Its constancy is the most important aspect of the thoroughly real character, and so Gadjin Nagao is mistaken in claiming that the three natures schema is based on a "principle of convertibility."[12] According to Nagao, the efforts of meditators transform the other-dependent character and bring about the actualization of the thoroughly real. No Indian Yogācāra sources of which I am aware support this notion; if the final nature were something created by human activity, it could not serve its primary function as a purifying object of observation. It would be the result of meditation practice, rather than its focal and facilitating object. This is also the consensus of the commentators on the *Discourse Explaining the Thought*, all of whom equate it with the ultimate truth and suchness (*tathatā*). Chokro Lügyeltsen explains that

> due to correctly knowing suchness, the ultimate, the selflessness of phenomena, which is a character that is everywhere of one taste, one perceives it. . . . Because superiors (*ārya*) know the other-dependent character by way of a superior's knowledge and perception, that which completely awakens, which is perceived as being inexpressible, is thoroughly established suchness, the ultimate, the selflessness of phenomena, and it has a character that is everywhere of one taste. Therefore, it is an antidote to exaggerated pride in terms of apprehended objects, this ultimate that has a character that is everywhere of one taste.[13]

According to Woncheuk, "through the power of observing this object, one also attains mental purification." He adds that a purifying object of observation has three aspects: (a) it is permanently changeless; (b) it is a nature of virtue and happiness; and (c) it manifestly accomplishes everything: "Because the ultimate truth is free from sameness and difference, you should know that it is a purifying object of observation. Why is this? Because through the power of observing this object one obtains mental purification."[14]

The Problem of Nihilism

Following the discussion of the three characters and three non-entitynesses, the *Discourse Explaining the Thought* states that the "second wheel" teachings in which the Buddha issued blanket pronouncements that all phenomena are unproduced, unceasing, quiescent from the start, and naturally in a state of nirvana were made with the three characters in mind, although they were not expressly articulated. As a result, some of the Buddha's followers fell to an extreme of nihilism and thought he was denying the reality of anything at all and that his teachings were devoid of meaning. Because of this, it was necessary to initiate a third wheel of Dharma, one that is supervenient on the previous two and that differentiates exactly what is being negated and what is not.

> Superimposing the intrinsic existence of the imputational onto the intrinsic existence of the other-dependent and the thoroughly real, sentient beings subsequently attribute conventions of the character of the intrinsic existence of the imputational to the intrinsic existence of the other-dependent and the thoroughly real. To the extent that they subsequently attribute such conventions, their minds are infused with conventional designations. . . . Due to these causes and conditions, in the future [this view of] the intrinsic existence of the other-dependent proliferates. Based on this, the afflictive obscurations give rise to further afflictions. . . . For a long time, sentient beings will wander, transmigrating among hell beings, or animals, or hungry spirits (*preta*), or gods, or *asura*s, or humans. They will not pass beyond cyclic existence.[15]

The Buddha then indicates that he teaches a progression of cycles of doctrine: the first wheel is articulated for trainees with a particular set of predispositions, and it is superseded by the second wheel, which undermines some of the implicit assumptions of certain audiences. Finally, in the third wheel he clearly differentiates his final intention for the benefit of the most advanced students. The Buddha then explains how the soteriological process works:

> I initially teach doctrines starting with the lack of intrinsic existence in terms of
> production to those beings who have not generated roots of virtue, who have not
> purified obstructions, who have not ripened their continuums, who do not have much
> conviction, and who have not completed the accumulations of merit and wisdom.
> When they hear those doctrines, they understand dependently originated compounded
> phenomena as impermanent. They know them to be phenomena that are unstable,
> unworthy of confidence, and changeable, whereupon they develop aversion and
> antipathy toward all compounded phenomena.[16]

Realizing that grasping after the dependently arisen phenomena of cyclic existence leads to
suffering and continued rebirth, the Buddha's followers turn away from them and thus engage
in ethical behavior, the foundation of subsequent practice. They attain virtuous qualities that
were not previously part of their psychophysical continuums. They then purify cognitive
obscurations and develop unswerving faith in the Buddha and his Dharma, and as a result
they advance in cultivation of merit (*puṇya*) and wisdom (*prajñā*). Despite such positive
outcomes, these trainees do not fully understand the absence of intrinsic existence in all
phenomena, and so the Buddha introduces them to the perspective of the second wheel. After
they hear the discourses of absence of intrinsic existence, second wheel practitioners develop
thoroughgoing aversion to compounded phenomena and thus make further progress in
eliminating afflictive obscurations and cognitive obscurations, the two primary obstacles to
attainment of buddhahood. Thus they are able to attain nirvana, but this is not the final goal,
according to the Buddha: his followers should understand that there is finally only one vehicle
(*ekayāna*), that of the bodhisattva who works tirelessly for the benefit of others.

Chokro Lügyeltsen comments that all will eventually develop the aspiration to benefit others:

> Because the causes of unsurpassed, perfect awakening are thoroughly ripening
> sentient beings and ripening the qualities of a buddha for oneself, those who do not
> perform those two activities lack the causes of buddhahood at that time. However, this
> is merely a difference in practice; it does not come from the nature of the mind.
> Therefore, they are referred to as "those who proceed solely to pacification" for as
> long as they have not attained the lineage of transformation into unsurpassed
> awakening and do not exert themselves in this.[17]

He adds that like all beings, they have the mental capacity to pursue the Mahāyāna path.
Their Hīnayāna practices are not a dead end: because they attain advanced meditative states,
when they make the transition to Mahāyāna, they will enter the path at the eighth bodhisattva
level (*bhūmi*) and then progress quickly toward buddhahood.[18]

Second wheel trainees become overly attached to the teachings of absence of intrinsic
existence and to their own progress on the path, and as a result fail to fully grasp the
centrality of compassion for attainment of final liberation. There is an underlying purpose to
all of the Buddha's teachings, even if it is not apparent to his followers: "My disciplinary
doctrine is explained well, is complete, and is taught with a very pure thought. With respect to
this well-taught doctrine, degrees of conviction appear among sentient beings."[19] The Buddha
further explains that the instructions of the first two wheels are of "interpretable
meaning" (*neyārtha*): they were delivered for specific audiences that would benefit from them,

but they do not represent the "definitive meaning" (*nītārtha*). Interpretable teachings serve pragmatic purposes: they help students to develop conviction in the Buddha and his Dharma and get them started on the path to liberation. According to Pudön (Bu ston rin chen grub, 1290–1364), the aim of this cycle of instruction is to remove the misconceptions of students who received the teachings of the first two wheels and had fallen into one of the two extremes.[20]

Almost as an aside, the Buddha indicates that this schema is not comprehensive and does not encompass all of his followers: some particularly intelligent and perceptive bodhisattvas have the ability to understand his hidden thought in all of the instructions they hear, and so they do not require the differentiations of the third wheel. Moreover, Tsongkhapa (Tsong kha pa bLo bzang grags pa, 1357–1419) is probably correct in his assertion that the three wheels are not pertinent to all of the Buddha's pronouncements.[21] Only doctrines that might require interpretation or that are subjects of dispute are included, and not clear-cut and unambiguous statements, such as the Buddha's Vinaya statements regarding the details and configurations of monastic robes.

The Progression of the Three Wheels

Paramārthasamudgata then summarizes the main outlines of the three wheels of doctrine, and he adds that they are not truly discrete: the Buddha skillfully integrates third wheel teachings in all of his instructions, but so subtly that only the most advanced listeners can discern them. He compares this process to adding spice to food or the background of a painting: third wheel elements pervade all aspects of the Dharma, but only trainees with a high level of realization are aware of the third wheel teachings. Woncheuk comments that these teachings, like a painting's canvas, are more than mere additions: they are the basis for everything else.[22] Like a spice that gives a recipe its distinctive flavor, definitive tenets pervade the entire Dharma and are of "one taste" in all the Buddha's discourses.[23] Paramārthasamudgata describes the process of doctrinal development:

> Initially, in the Varanasi area, in the Deer Park called Sages' Teaching, the Bhagavan taught the aspects of the four noble truths for those who were genuinely engaged in the [Śrāvaka] vehicle. The wheel of doctrine you turned at first is wondrous. Similar doctrines had not been promulgated before in the world by gods or humans. However, this wheel of doctrine that the Bhagavan turned is surpassable, provides an opportunity for dispute, is of interpretable meaning, and serves as a basis for dispute. Then the Bhagavan turned a second wheel of doctrine that is more wondrous still for those who are genuinely engaged in the Great Vehicle, because of the aspect of teaching emptiness, beginning with the lack of inherent existence of phenomena, and beginning with their absence of production, absence of cessation, quiescence from the start, and being naturally in a state of nirvana. However, this wheel of doctrine that the Bhagavan turned is surpassable, provides an opportunity for dispute, is of interpretable meaning, and serves as a basis for dispute. Then the Bhagavan turned a third wheel of doctrine, possessing good differentiations, and exceedingly wondrous, for those genuinely engaged in all vehicles, beginning with the lack of inherent existence of phenomena, and beginning with their absence of production, absence of cessation, quiescence from the start, and being naturally in a state of nirvana. Moreover, that wheel of doctrine turned by the Bhagavan is unsurpassable, does not provide an opportunity for dispute, is of definitive meaning, and does not serve as a basis for dispute.[24]

The Buddha agrees with Paramārthasamudgata's summary and adds that the teachings of the third wheel comprehensively differentiate the meaning behind the other two wheels and constitute his final thought. Trainees who comprehend them and put them into practice will generate vast amounts of merit and will make rapid progress on the path. The *sūtra* then reports that many members of the audience had breakthrough experiences as a result of being present at the auspicious occasion of the definitive teaching of the third wheel of Dharma.

Benjor Lhündrup (dPal 'byor lhun grub, 1561–1637) explains that third wheel teachings are "unsurpassable" (*bla na ma mchis pa*; Skt. *anuttara*) because there are no other *sūtra*s of definitive meaning that are superior to them. They "do not provide an opportunity for dispute" because there is no opportunity for opponents validly to argue about them in terms of the literal readings of their teachings. They are of definitive meaning because "they need not be interpreted as something else and are definitive as that meaning."[25] Tsongkhapa contends, however, that while there is no basis for controversy according to the *sūtra*, this

> should be taken as meaning that because the text indicates the existence or nonexistence of entityness, there is no place for controversy when scholars analyze whether the meaning of the *sūtra* is or is not delineated in this way; it does not indicate that there are no other controversies.[26]

Despite the clear hierarchy implied in the *Discourse Explaining the Thought*, Tsongkhapa—for whom the "second wheel" Madhyamaka teachings are definitive—refers to the Buddha's statement that some advanced trainees are able to comprehend his final intention without requiring the third wheel's instructions as evidence that the specific audience of the third wheel comprises students who are actually at a lower level than the most intelligent second

wheel trainees, who he contends are advanced Mādhyamikas. He claims that the Buddha is referring to Mādhyamikas as the sharpest trainees, and by implication Yogācāras, the main audience for the *sūtra*, are inferior in their understanding. According to Tsongkhapa,

> while the latter two wheels are similar in their instructions beginning with absence of intrinsic existence as the subject of expression, the difference in the presentation of the teaching is that the middle wheel does not differentiate what has intrinsic existence and what does not . . . because the latter wheel differentiates these, it is "possessed of good differentiations."[27]

In other words, Yogācāras need to have the Buddha's intention spelled out for them in detail, while the "sharp trainees" (viz., the most perceptive Mādhyamikas) comprehend the "one taste" of the definitive aspects of the Buddha's final thought in whatever they hear. For those who are able to perceive the basis in the Buddha's thought (*dgongs gzhi*), there is no contradiction. These advanced practitioners are not the intended audience of the *Discourse Explaining the Thought*. Benjor Lhündrup explains that for the "special trainees" of the third wheel,

> stemming from the subject matter of absence of inherent existence and so forth, the Buddha differentiated well the particulars of true establishment and non-true establishment with regard to the three: imputations, other-dependent natures, and thoroughly real natures; and thoroughly real natures are the third wheel, the wheel of doctrine of good differentiation.[28]

This is an interesting bit of doxographic jiujitsu that attempts to turn the tables on adherents of the third wheel by using aspects of the *Discourse Explaining the Thought* to yield a result different from what its hierarchical ordering of doctrines apparently intended.

The Three Wheels of Doctrine and Buddhist Hermeneutics

The three wheels of doctrine schema has been described as an important contribution to Mahāyāna Buddhist hermeneutics, one that provides a model for differentiating interpretable and definitive doctrines, but its scope is rather limited. As presented in the *Discourse Explaining the Thought*, it pertains to "second wheel" teachings in which the Buddha made blanket pronouncements about emptiness, but no attempt is made to extend this model to other aspects of the vast plethora of teachings attributed to the Buddha. Some exegetes characterize the "third wheel" as comprising doctrines associated with Yogācāra presented in the *sūtra*, including the "foundational consciousness" (*ālaya-vijñāna*) and "cognition only" (*vijñapti-mātratā*), but this link is not made in the text itself. It could be argued that by implication any doctrines in the *Discourse Explaining the Thought* are aspects of the Buddha's final thought because the treatise presents itself as a response to bodhisattvas at the highest levels of the path regarding matters of concern to them and others with similar advanced attainments, but this connection is not made explicitly.

Some exegetes extend the purview of third wheel teachings to include *sūtra*s that also contain statements to the effect that everything is cognition only (or "mind only": *citta-mātra*, a term that is used in many Tibetan doxographical works to designate Yogācāra). Other late

Mahāyāna works such as the *Discourse of the Lion's Roar of Queen Śrīmālā* (*Śrīmālādevī-siṃhanāda-sūtra*; Ch. *Shengman shizi hou yisheng dafangbian fangguang jing* 勝鬘師子吼一乘大方便方廣經) that discuss the doctrine of "embryonic buddhahood" (*tathāgatagarbha*; Ch. *rulai zang* 如來藏, the notion that all beings have an innate potential for attainment of awakening) are often included within the third wheel, even though this concept is not found in the *Discourse Explaining the Thought*.

Some Tibetan exegetes associated Vajrayāna or tantric Buddhism with the third wheel. In his doxographical work *Freedom from Extremes Accomplished through Comprehensive Knowledge of Philosophy*, Daktsang Sherap Rinchen (sTag tshang Shes rab rin chen, 1405–1477), for example, characterizes it as a supplementary, practice-oriented component of the Buddha's third wheel dispensation: "Mantra [Vajrayāna] is applied as an aid and support for the path of the third wheel, and in that way the teaching of Mantra is thus supplied in addition to the lower teachings."[29]

The three wheels schema is primarily a polemical device put forward in the *sūtra* as a means of relegating some Mahāyānists to inferior status and characterizing others who viewed doctrines and practices that would later come to be associated with the developed Yogācāra school as superior. This sort of move was emulated by other Buddhist schools that developed in East Asia and that valorized particular texts as the Buddha's final teaching and based their tenets and practices on them. In East Asia, this practice is referred to as "classification of tenets" (*panjiao* 判教, an abbreviation of *jiaoxiang panshi* 教相判釋, "differentiation of the characteristics of tenets"). In East Asia, where many schools regarded a particular *sūtra* as the supreme teaching, that text would be placed in the highest position and those valorized by rival traditions would be ranked in descending order. For example, Zhiyi 智顗 (538–597), the leading scholar of the Tiantai 天台 school, divided the Buddha's teachings into five periods:

(1) The Avataṃsaka Period (Huayan shi 華嚴時), which began immediately after his attainment of awakening, when he delivered the *Flower Ornament Discourse* (*Avataṃsaka-sūtra*; Ch. *Dafangguang fo huayan jing* 大方廣佛華嚴經); this encapsulated the essence of his understanding and is referred to by Huiguan 慧觀 (*c*. 4th–5th century) as the "sudden" (*dun* 頓) teaching, but it was too abstruse for all but the most advanced listeners.

(2) The Deer Park Period (Luyuan shi 鹿苑時; also referred to as the "Āgama Period" [Ahan shi 阿含時] because these teachings were compiled in scriptural collections called Āgamas)—roughly corresponding to the "first wheel of doctrine"—during which the Buddha decided to propound doctrines that could be widely understood.

(3) The Extensive Period (Fangdeng shi 方等時), during which he taught the "extensive" (*vaipulya*) discourses of early Mahāyāna with the intention of converting Hīnayānists to Mahāyāna.

(4) The Wisdom Period (Bore shi 般若時), in which he revealed the Perfection of Wisdom discourses and emphasized the doctrine of emptiness.

(5) The Lotus-Nirvana Period (Fahua niepan shi 法華涅槃時), during which the Buddha delivered the *Lotus Sūtra* (*Saddharma-puṇḍarīka-sūtra*; Ch. *Miaofa lianhua jing* 妙法蓮華經, commonly shortened to *Fahua jing* 法華經) and the *Discourse of the Great Final Release* (*Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra*; Ch. *Da banniepan jing* 大般涅槃經).

In these treatises, he informs students that there is finally only one vehicle, and these instructions bring together all the major threads of his previous doctrines. This classification system characterizes the teachings of the *Flower Ornament Discourse* as the most advanced dispensation of the Buddha, but Tiantai's own core scripture, the *Lotus Sūtra*, represents his mature thought and is the teaching best suited to Mahāyāna practitioners, a comprehensive presentation of doctrine and practice. The subject of East Asian classification systems would require a separate entry, but it is worth noting that they adopt the *Discourse Explaining the Thought*'s polemical move of finding a place for all of the teachings attributed to the Buddha by various groups of followers within a hierarchical structure that valorizes one particular strand as the highest and most complete while relegating those of opponents to more elementary and less developed strata.

Review of the Literature

The "three wheels of doctrine" schema is an important trope that appears in numerous Mahāyāna sources, but there has been surprisingly little study of it in secondary literature. Blumenthal's "Three Turnings of the Wheel of Dharma" provides a short summary that reflects Tibetan interpretations, and Thurman's "Buddhist Hermeneutics" discusses it in the context of an overview of Buddhist hermeneutics.[30] Problems with Thurman's presentation were noted above, particularly his assertion that the schema is chronological. This is not how it is presented in the *Discourse Explaining the Thought*, the apparent *locus classicus* for the schema. Powers' *Hermeneutics and Tradition in the Saṃdhinirmocana-sūtra* contains several chapters on the context and doctrinal ramifications of the *Discourse's* formulation of the three wheels, along with material from the two largest commentaries on the text, Chokro Lügyeltsen's (Chok ro kLu'i rgyal mtshan/Byang chub rdzu 'phrul) *Explanation of the Superior Discourse Explaining the Thought* and Woncheuk's voluminous *Expansive Explanation of the Superior Discourse Explaining the Hidden Thought*, both of which discuss the three wheels at length.[31] Neither of these has been translated, but Powers translates or summarizes most of the passages from these two works that discuss the three wheels or related concepts.[32]

The *Discourse* has been translated into English by Powers, based on the sDe dge Tibetan version and canonical commentaries.[33] Powers' thesis "The Concept of the Ultimate (*don dam pa, paramārtha*) in the '*Saṃdhinirmocana-sūtra*': Analysis, Translation, and Notes" contains a translation of the Stok Palace edition, along with extensive notes on textual variations in other Tibetan versions, including one in the Old Tibetan style.[34] Both of Powers' translations rely heavily on the commentaries of Woncheuk and Chokro Lügyeltsen, along with those of Jñānagarbha and Asaṅga.[35] Keenan's *The Scripture on Explanation of the Underlying Meaning* is an exacting translation from Xuanzang's Chinese version (Taishō vol. 16, #676), and Cleary's *Buddhist Yoga: A Comprehensive Course* is a looser translation from the Chinese that presents the *Discourse* as a textbook for meditation.[36] Lamotte's French translation, *Saṃdhinirmocana Sūtra: L'explication des mystères*, the first Western language rendering of the *Discourse*, is mainly based on a Tibetan text housed in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, which he compares with the Chinese versions.[37]

The most comprehensive analysis of the conceptually related doctrine of three natures (or characters) is Boquist's *Trisvabhāva: A Study of the Development of the Three-Nature-Theory in Yogācāra*, which examines how it is presented in the *Discourse Explaining the Thought*, the *Descent into Laṅkā Discourse* (*Laṅkāvatāra-sūtra*), and several Yogācāra philosophical treatises.[38]

The three wheels of doctrine schema is central to Tsongkhapa's interpretation of Yogācāra hermeneutics, which he presents in *Essence of Good Explanations Regarding the Interpretable and the Definitive* (*Drang nges legs bshad snying po*), which inspired at least a dozen commentaries by later Gelukpas.[39] Thurman translates and analyzes Tsongkhapa's text, in *Tsong Khapa's Speech of Gold in the Essence of True Eloquence*, as does Hopkins, in *Emptiness in the Mind-Only School of Buddhism*, which also discusses the commentarial literature.[40] Hopkins's *Reflections on Reality: The Three Natures and Non-Natures in the Mind-Only School* explores the social and doctrinal context of the three natures doctrine, presenting both Gelukpa interpretations and critiques by rival traditions, particularly the Jonangpa.[41] In the third volume of his study of *Essence of Good Explanations* and its reception by Tibetan scholars, Hopkins explores some of the issues that arose during the centuries of commentary and critique following its publication.[42]

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