

The three turnings of the wheel¹

Professional scholars who not only enjoy their work, but also love the Dharma, can inspire us to see Buddhism in very beneficial ways. Jay Garfield, a specialist in Buddhist philosophy, some years back, wrote on the benefits, even necessity, of grounding ourselves in early Buddhism, or at least, not denigrating it, when we are drawn to later forms of Buddhism.

We invariably owe our knowledge of the Dharma to the goodness of our teachers, wise writers, and, of course, the Buddha himself, for having left behind a precious body of teachings and practices. Often enough, I write things which are unorthodox, and some people think that I have deviated from what are commonly held. Aristotle once criticized his own teacher, Plato, “We love our friends dearly; we love truth all the more.”² So, sometimes I say things in ways that you might find surprising, even shocking, and it’s okay for you to criticize me.

In this reflection, for example, I’ve noticed that few followers of Mahayana (which includes the Vajrayana) ever read suttas and commentaries of the Sāvaka tradition, that is, the Pali teachings, or what is called “early Buddhism.” This is not only true of Mahāyāna practitioners and enthusiasts, but this attitude is also found amongst scholars. We often deprecate the teachings of what we call the “first turning,” that is, the teaching of the historical Buddha, as recorded in the Pali canon.

Sometimes, we are *explicit* in our deprecation: “I only read Mahāyāna texts. These other teachings are just for people who are not wise enough to read the Mahāyāna.” Or, more *implicitly*, we might say, “I can’t find any good books on early Buddhism,” or “I’m too busy with my important Mahāyāna texts to read that.”

Sometimes, we even use the word “**Hīnayāna**,” meaning “the inferior vehicle.” So, we see ourselves as the “superior” vehicle. What does this tell about our compassion, even humility? It is even more embarrassing when the Hinayanists themselves use “Hīnayāna” when speaking of themselves, and say that they have no problem with such a word: for, that is just what it is!

In fact, some of us look at Mahāyāna so narrowly, that we, for example, don’t even read Yogācāra texts or sutras. These are Mahāyāna texts, because we are taught very often that the highest teaching is the Madhyamaka, the teachings of **the second turning of the wheel**, following the Perfection of Wisdom (Prajñāpāramitā) Sutras. We think: “I should concentrate on the very highest teaching and not worry about the teachings that I think of as lower.” This is, of course, a dangerous form of deprecation, too.

Of course, this isn’t our fault, we are not bad people. This is a natural outgrowth of the way that these texts are often talked about within a tradition. When we talk about the three turnings of the wheel, we are often told: “The first turning of the wheel was taught for people of lower capacity, and the second turning of the wheel was for people of much higher capacity. The third turning was for people who were of the highest capacity.” We think that we have very high capacity, and are without any pride – and because of this, we don’t need those inferior teachings.

Very often, our view of the three turnings of the wheel as being teachings for people of different capacities arises from the need to resolve apparent inconsistencies in the Buddha’s teachings. For instance,

¹ This reflection is based on some key ideas from Jay Garfield’s inspiring and thoughtful paper, “The three turnings of the wheel of Dharma – Why they are each essential to all of us,” Berlin, 2011. http://info-buddhism.com/Three_Turnings_of_The_Wheel_of_Dharma_Jay_Garfield.html.

² A paraphrase of *Amicus Plato, sed magis amica veritas*, a [Latin phrase](#) that translates as “Plato is my friend, but truth is a better friend.” The maxim, often attributed to Aristotle, is a paraphrase of the *Nicomachean Ethics* 1096a15: “Where both are friends, it is right to prefer truth.”

in the Sandhinirmocana Sūtra, a classic Yogācāra text and a popular text that the famous 14th century Tibetan teacher, Tsongkhapa, appeals to in his understanding of how to think about the vehicles. It's put this way – the Bodhisattvas say: “Hey, listen Buddha, sometimes you said there is a self, sometimes you said there is no self. Sometimes you said things are empty, sometimes you said things aren't empty. This seems to be contradictory. What's going on?”

Now, whatever Buddhist tradition we follow, we think of it as being “**Buddha word**” (*buddha, vacana*). If we can accept this reality with some generosity and humility, then, we will see that the three turnings are actually different ways of looking at the same teaching. It helps tremendously here, too, that we understand that there really are only **two kinds of teachings**, that is, those whose meanings are explicit (clear in themselves) (*neyy'atha*) and those whose implicit meanings need to be drawn out (*nī't'attha*).³ Let us briefly examine how we can apply this two-truth approach to understanding the “three turnings of the wheel.”

THE FIRST TURNING OF THE DHARMA WHEEL was by the Buddha himself. It took place in northern India, and is recorded in **the Dhamma, cakka Pavattana Sutta** (S 56.11), the Discourse on the Turning of the Dharma Wheel, given to his first disciples, the 5 monks.⁴ Basically, it presents the 4 noble truths in all their 12 aspects. The Buddha then taught for 45 years, and much of his precious teachings have been preserved in the Pali canon down to this day. This is the time when the Dharma was discovered (or “invented,” if you like), and without this first turning of the wheel, clearly, there would be no other wheels to turn!⁵

We can think of **THE SECOND TURNING OF THE WHEEL** as setting out the idea of emptiness in terms of objects of knowledge. The second turning also involves an understanding of ethics based on compassion rooted in this emptiness. The foundation texts of the second turning are the Prajñāpāramitā Sūtras, which include the Diamond Sutra and the Heart Sutra. These texts are believed to have been taught by the Buddha all at once on Vulture Peak. Scholars, however, think that they were composed some 600-700 years after the Buddha.

So, it's our choice how we want to think of these texts. For myself – and scholars like Garfield – we will say that we believe deeply that Buddhism calls us to be critical and to think and weigh all evidence. Accepting that these texts were composed by great sages later on does nothing to undermine their authenticity, their profundity or their holiness – that is, if we practise the good that they teach us.

Here, it helps to remember that compassion is always – must always – be at the root of the teachings of the second turning of the wheel (or in any of the turnings). In the Heart Sutra, for example, we see Sāriputra addressing none other than Avalokiteśvara himself (or herself, if you think of the Bodhisattva Guanyin, his Chinese form). In other words, we have Compassion listening to Wisdom. Also note that Sāriputra here is the Sāriputta of the first turning of the wheel.

A key idea in the Heart Sutra is that “form is empty, that emptiness is form, that form is not different from emptiness, and that emptiness is not different from form.” The same is said of feeling, perception, formations and consciousness. We know all this very well to be referring to the “5 aggregates” (which

³ The Sanskrit equivalents of the terms are respectively *neyārtha* and *nītārtha*. See **Neyy'attha Nī't'attha Sutta** (A 2.3.5+6), [SD 2.6b](#).

⁴ S 56.11 ([SD 1.1](#)).

⁵ Logically, we can also say that the Dharma wheel (like the proverbial wheel), once discovered or invented, need not be discovered or invented again. Once the wheel has been turned, it “cannot be stopped” (*appaṭivattiyam*, literally, “not to be turned backwards,” ie, irreversible), says the Dhamma, cakka Pavattana Sutta (S 56.11,18), [SD 1.1](#). This also means that there is neither need nor possibility of turning other “wheels,” unless we are taking a different vehicle on a different route altogether. But we leave this interesting approach for another occasion.

constitute our mind and body). This is a key teaching in the first turning of the wheel: so there is no contradiction here at all.

Form and the other aggregates are empty of what? They are empty of essence, empty of inherent existence, empty of independence. They are empty because they arise only in dependence on causes and conditions, and disappear, too, when those causes and conditions cease. They are empty because they are merely mentally made up, conceptually constructed. They have no reality of their own, and depend on their parts, and how we think of them.

But, why then, say, in the second line, that emptiness is form? We are not saying that this page we are reading is illusory, but its emptiness is real all right. This page does not exist in itself, only the emptiness does (as it were). However, if there is no page before us, there is also no emptiness of the page before us. I can't say: "Here's a page of my reflection. Take it, but I'll keep the emptiness." Emptiness, in short, is a property of the page. We cannot make this page more real than the emptiness that it is. So, we have to take this emptiness seriously.

The Sūtra continues with these third and fourth lines: "Form isn't different from emptiness, emptiness isn't different from form." What does that mean? It's not just that form is empty and that that emptiness is the emptiness of form. Look at our body, for example: we are made up of stuff (we are physical), and we are made up of parts (limbs, organs, tissues, cells, oxygen and so on). We are made up of parts, and depend on the parts to exist. It all depends on causes and conditions. Our parts first came from our parents; then, we take food, and soon. So, without those parts and processes, there is no us; and we are no different from the parts and processes: we are them!

If we understand we are made up of parts and processes, we can also understand that we do not exist in ourself. We are not really alone (although we can think we are). We exist because our parents exist, and other beings exist, and the world exists. If any of these parts should fail in some way, we would be affected, too. So, it is our task to see that all parts are in order and working together harmoniously (at least, we should try our best to do so). This is, in fact, the very essence of the idea of compassion. Hence, we cannot really separate compassion from all the emptiness we have spoken about.

THE THIRD TURNING OF THE WHEEL is often characterized by the teaching of Mind Only (*citta,mātra*). Its root texts are the Saṃdhinirmocana Sūtra and the Lankāvatāra Sūtra, which scholars believe were composed a few hundred years after the Prajñāpāramitā Sūtras, probably in about the 3rd or 4th CE, based on ideas that came from the first turning of the wheel. Their teachings form a set of very important philosophical texts composed by philosophers like Dignāga, Dharmakīrti, and especially Vasubandhu and Asanga.

"Mind Only" here does not mean that only the mind, nothing else, is real. Even if we like this idea, it is only one way to read those texts, and it may not even be the best way to understand it. We can also think of "Mind Only" as saying that the mind is the only thing we need to worry about, or the mind is the only thing we can actually work on, or the actual nature of our experience is only the experience of the mind. When we think about it this way, we may discover something very deep about how we think, and how subjective (imaginative in terms of thinking) we can be.

Now, let's look deeper into this interesting and difficult idea. Let's look at this page again. We might think that it is "outside" of us. Yes, the screen or page does exist out there, but this is not really very helpful. I can close my eye before this page, and learn nothing. In other words, it is when I "see" the page inside "me," that is, my mind (there is no real "me" other than that).

Here again, we must take care not to misunderstand that the page can exist in itself (nothing, in fact, can). Whether I am reading this page on a computer screen or on a piece of paper, this page depends on a lot of conditions. There must be light in the room, and my eyes should be directed and focused to it.

My mind has to work in a certain way to understand what I see and what I am reading. So the page is really an experience that is causally dependent. And don't forget that we have put all this together, and to do that I had read what Jay Garfield wrote down from what he experienced in his own mind, and so on. There's really neither beginning nor ending here, except for the way we think about it all. This is called subjectivity.

Finally, I want to say that all this reflection shows me why study is so important to our practice. Sometimes people say: "I don't have time to study the suttas. They are too difficult for me. I would rather do my own practice." Or, other people say: "I don't have time for practice. I've got to study these texts or do this or that thing."

To study is to learn. Learning is practice, and practice is learning. We cannot really see study and learning as being separate. We cannot – if we treasure wisdom and happiness – think that learning is only about this part of us, and not that part. There's something to learn about ourselves no matter what happens to us.

The Buddha has offered us all these teachings, and wise teachers have tried to present these teachings so that we can understand them better – and, more importantly, practise them. If we have taken refuge in the 3 jewels – the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha – then we need to at least study what they really are. In fact, there is really only one refuge, to which even the Buddha himself goes⁶ – that is, the Dharma itself.

To take refuge in the Dharma is to actually study it. Even if we pile up all the Dharma books we have, or our library has, and circumambulate that sacred pile with palms in lotus gesture, or fully prostrate before it, we still learn nothing. The Buddha teaches us how to hear the Dharma for ourselves. That is why the Buddha's disciples are called "hearers" (*sāvaka*), the original meaning of the word.

It does not matter which turning of the wheel we turn to: numbers don't count, only the turning does. If we only talk highly about "our" wheel, or even worship it in the most elaborate ways, the wheel stops turning. A wheel that does not turn is a useless piece of wood and metal. But every time we study the Dharma, we practise the Dharma – then we are turning the Dharma wheel ourselves.

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[an occasional re-look at the Buddha's Example and Teachings]

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⁶ See **Gāraṇa Sutta** (S 6.2), [SD 12.3](#).