

The Three Turnings of the Wheel of the Dharma

Introduction

If you have attended retreats or the Saturday morning service at the Minnesota Zen Meditation Center (MZMC), you will have heard the expression, “form does not differ from emptiness, emptiness does not differ from form’ (from the Heart Sutra). If you have read Katagiri (the founder of MZMC) Roshi’s book, *The Light That Shines Through Infinity*, you will have come across statements like, ‘The spiritual path is about aligning our self with the dynamic energy that courses through the universe.’ And if you have read an introductory book or two on Buddhism, which most of you probably have, you will have read that Buddhism is about the presence of suffering in our lives, its causes, the fact that it does not have to be that way, and the details of a plan to eradicate that suffering (the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path). What are we to make of these diverse teachings in Buddhism? An explanation in Mahayana Buddhism is that there were three phases in the Buddha’s teachings that are commonly called the ‘three turnings of the wheel of the dharma.’¹ Many of you will find that explanation of the diversity of the Buddha’s teachings useful when reading Buddhist sutras, for the content of sutras varies according to which turning it is associated with.

This primer reviews the main content of each of the three turnings, assigns the sutras in the primer series to one of the turnings, and asks, is one of the turnings the Buddha’s true teaching? Notes and a bibliography are attached to aid those interested in delving more deeply into the notion that the Buddha made three turnings of the wheel of the dharma.

The Three Turnings: An Overview

As taught in the Samdhinirmocana Sutra, the Buddha shifted what he was teaching three times.¹ In the first shift, the Buddha, realizing that few would understand what he experienced in enlightenment, taught a clear-cut path to personal liberation based on the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path. In the second shift, he taught only emptiness to special groups of Mahayana Buddhists. In the third shift, he taught a revised understanding of emptiness, the value of doctrine and analysis, and the idea that an innate self (a Buddha-nature) is within all beings. As might be expected, the content of Buddhist sutras that contain the teachings of a shift changed too, as we will see. It is these three different sequential teachings that are called the three turnings of the wheel of the dharma.

Let's look now at each turning in greater detail, for it is in the details that we can more easily distinguish sutras associated with one turning or another.

The First Turning

The first turning of the wheel was set in motion when the historical Buddha delivered his first sermon to his companions, the five ascetics, at Deer Park in northern India. In this foundational teaching, which is recorded in the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta (the Sutra Setting in Motion the Wheel of Dharma) and other suttas in the Pali canon, he taught concepts like: the Middle Way to practice (between the extremes of asceticism and self indulgence); the Four Noble Truths (the Truths of suffering, the cause of suffering, the cessation of suffering, and the path – the Noble Eightfold Path (the path of right view, intention, speech, action, livelihood, effort, mindfulness, and concentration) – that leads from suffering to liberation from samsara); the two truths (the relative and the absolute); the three bodies of the Buddha (the nirmanakaya, sambhogakaya, and dharmakaya); the three jewels (Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha); the twelve links of dependent-origination (from ignorance to aging and death); the three dharma seals (impermanence, nonself, and nirvana); and the five aggregates (form, feelings, perception, mental formations, and consciousness).²

The general notion of the first turning was, since most people experience some degree of suffering in life or are otherwise distraught (for example, they cannot get what they want, are afraid of losing what they already have, or don't like what they do have), the Buddha, like a skilled psychotherapist diagnosing a patient's mental discomfort, was intent on curing that person so the person could attain liberation from cyclic existence (nirvana).

The influential Satipatthana Sutta (Sutra on the Foundation of Mindfulness) sets out in broad detail how nirvana may be achieved through *shamatha* (calming) and *vipassana* (insight) meditation. A common practice in this turning is to learn through meditation to see all human experience as impermanent and the result of multiple causes and conditions (the doctrine of dependent-origination). Through sustained effort, practitioners can become free of all attachments and attain full liberation. The concepts and the practice are described logically in a straightforward manner: a problem has been identified, a solution found, and a path to the solution clearly laid-out.

Today, the foundational texts for the first turning are the sutras and commentaries in the Pali Canon. Primers on the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta and the Satipatthana Sutta are included in the MZMC primer series.

The Second Turning

The Buddha is said to have shifted the emphasis of his teaching a second time while teaching at Vulture Peak outside Rajagala. Among second turning (now Mahayana) teachings, this turning introduced the compassionate bodhisattva who strives to bring all sentient beings to

enlightenment, maintained that the doctrine of emptiness applies not just to persons but to *all* phenomena (even ideas and concepts), and insisted that wisdom cannot be developed using conceptual knowledge alone. Because in emptiness there is no form, no feelings, no perceptions, no mental formations, and no consciousness (the five aggregates of the first turning), there can be no suffering, no cause of suffering, or no end of suffering, for the concept of suffering like all concepts is empty as well. These teachings negated the teachings of the first turning and, as a consequence, caused panic among many of the faithful who wanted the comfort of a clear guidance to liberation.

The crisis of emptiness brought on by these teachings resulted in the adoption of new forms of meditation, for if there is no goal, what is there to strive for. A primary example is *shikantaza* (just sitting) meditation in which one simply sits down (often without much instruction) and pays attention (often to the breath) without having a goal in mind other than being present in the moment.

The foundational texts of the second turning are the prajnaparamita (perfection of wisdom) sutras that begin to appear about four hundred years after the death of the historical Buddha. While emerging first in India, the second turning had its greatest impact in China and other East Asian countries. The sutras in the primer series associated with the second turning are the Heart, Diamond, and Vimalakirti sutras.

The Third Turning

Yogacara (mind-only) masters considered teachings in the second turning that denied the validity of any conceptual understanding of doctrine and that embraced stark emptiness a too limited view of the Buddha's understanding of emptiness and practice, and of the value of doctrine and analysis. The Samdhinirmocana Sutra (or The Spiritual Scripture That Unlocks The Mysteries of the Buddha's Teachings) is considered one of the earliest constructive and detailed responses to this apparent problem. Themes that run through the sutra are the nature of ultimate reality, the development of a critical understanding of consciousness, and the implications of these understandings for practice.

Along the way, the sutra contains the earliest presentation of the essentials of Yogacara Buddhism, such as the storehouse consciousness (*alaya-vijnana*), the doctrine of mind-only, and the three natures of all phenomena (*tri-svabava*) theory. It offers, too, an early, if not the earliest, explicit discussion of the three turnings of the wheel of the dharma. According to this interpretation, the teachings the Buddha gave in the first and second turnings were to groups of people with special needs. But they were not his definitive teachings, which (according to the Samdhinirmocana sutra) are described in detail in that sutra. As his definitive teachings, they are intended for all trainees, not for groups of people with special needs.

As the concept of a third turning evolved, especially in East Asia, the turning embraced the notion that all sentient beings possess the ability to attain Buddhahood because they contain within themselves an innate Buddha-nature. Since our Buddha-nature is normally obscured by defilements, the path to enlightenment involves the elimination of these defilements and the awakening of our Buddha-nature.³

As in the first turning, both *shamatha* and *vipassana* forms of meditation are used in third turning practice, but now with a different focus. While *shamatha* meditation is still initially used to calm the mind, *vipassana* meditation commonly focuses on the three natures theory of all phenomena the Buddha described in his third turning teachings. Very briefly, meditators first look at how all phenomena that arise in the mind are entirely dependent on other causes and conditions (the *other-dependent* character); then shift their focus to the *imputational* character of phenomena, which involves seeing how other-dependent objects are formed by concepts that in turn provide our illusion of reality; and finally turn their focus to the *perfected* nature of things, during which they recognize that the things they project upon the world are completely and totally illusory. This final realization gives them insight into the nondual unity and pure suchness of reality.⁴

Though emerging first in India, the third turning had its greatest impact in China and East Asia in general. In this region of the world, the turning underwent creative shifts that took place, for the most part, within the context of notions of Yogacara (mind-only) Buddhism, Chinese Taoist notions like the original pure essence, and Confucian concepts such as the innate goodness of human beings. The result was the development of uniquely Chinese Buddhist schools, such as Tiantai, Huayan, and Chan (Zen). By the eighth century, third turning thought with its focus on Buddha-nature theories had become the foremost Buddhist doctrine and practice in East Asia.

Of the sutras in the primer series, the Tathagatagarbha, Lion's Roar of Queen Śrīmālā, Samdhinirmocana, Surangama, Nirvana, Avatamsaka, Lankavatara, Lotus, and Platform sutras contain third turning teachings.

Now read through the primers on sutras in the primer series (it may take a bit of time) and note why each of the sutras is associated with one or the other of the three turnings of the wheel of the dharma.

Is One of the Three Turnings the Buddha's True Teaching?

Buddhist scholars debate whether the Buddha's teachings progressed from overly simple in the first turning to the ultimate truth in the third turning. A line of thought that supports that progression points to the changing socio-economic-political state of affairs in India from the time of the Buddha until 500 years or so after his death. During that period India went from being largely rural to having large, busy cities that were the hubs of trade, commerce, and empires – and

people at the time may have been better prepared for more sophisticated, if still unusual, teachings.

The argument over whether there was a straight-line progression in the turnings is usually couched in the contrast between definitive and non-definitive truths. While definitive teachings need no further elaboration, non-definitive teachings are not the ultimate truth, but only expedient means to help one along the path. Thus, as expedient means, non-definitive teachings may vary widely from what the Buddha realized in enlightenment. This distinction is based on the Buddha's practice of tailoring what he said to an audience to the level of their ability to comprehend what he was saying and their present needs. Within this context, some regard either the second or third turning as definitive truth and the other two turnings as very useful but not definitive teachings.⁵ Still others regard the teachings of all three turnings as equally useful, for people at different stages along the path may find teachings and practices from one or another of the turnings most useful at that stage in their travels.⁶

So what happens now? If you are a beginning to intermediate student of the Dharma, it is helpful to understand that practice in Buddhism is often divided into three activities: hearing or reading a teaching; contemplation on the meaning of the teaching; and meditation on the teaching. This primer has focused on the first two of these activities. Now it is time to meditate on the teachings within the sutras in the primer series. There are many books that discuss meditations appropriate to each turn of the wheel of the Dharma, some of which are mentioned in notes in the primer series. As useful as these books are, they are not an adequate substitute for the wisdom of a knowledgeable teacher of the Dharma. So look for a knowledgeable teacher, but make sure that that teacher attunes to your present needs rather than to the orthodoxy of their lineage. And then sit on your meditation cushion....

Notes

1. For a book-length, accessible overview of the three turnings, see Coleman (2017). For shorter, on-line overviews, see James Blumenthal, "Three Turnings of the Wheel of the Dharma," and Jay Garfield, "The Three Turnings of The Wheel of Dharma – Why They Are Each Essential to All of Us" (both last accessed on March 9, 2019). The Yogacara School is said to have proposed the initial framework of the three turnings. For the Samdhinirmocana Sutra, see Powers (1995, 2004) and the primer in this series. Tibetan (Vajrayana) Buddhism is sometimes considered a fourth turning.
2. Two books that discuss the Buddha's teachings in the first turning that I have found particularly useful in classes are Nhat Hanh's (1998), *The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching*, and Rahula's (1974), *What the Buddha Taught*. Note: the meaning of many of the terms (for example, nirvana) used in the first turning shifts from one turning to another.
3. For a review of Yogacara Buddhism and of Buddha-nature, see Williams (2009: 84-128).
4. This briefly described meditation sequence is taken from Coleman (2017), who describes it more fully within the context of third turning teachings.
5. For an example, see Hurley (2004), who recounts the conclusion of twentieth century Chinese Buddhist Master Yinhan. Members of the Critical Buddhism movement in Post World War II Japan also harshly criticized aspects of the third turning, especially the concept of Buddha-nature (see Hubbard and Swanson (1997), and particularly the articles by Matsumoto and Swanson in that edited volume).

6. An excellent accessible example of the integration of all three turnings is Nhat Hanh's *The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching* (1998). Also see, Dalai Lama and Thubten Chodron (2014), *Buddhism: One Teacher, Many Traditions*, and Joseph Goldstein's (2002) *One Dharma*.

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