

Three Turnings of the Wheel of the Dharma



Buddha's very first teaching at Deer Park to the first five disciples.

By James Blumenthal

The “three turnings of the wheel of the dharma” mark three historical points at which new developments in Buddhist thought emerged in India. “Turning the Wheel” is a metaphor for the setting in motion of new teachings. Though the teachings of all three turnings are said to have been spoken by the historical Buddha, the second and third turnings, those characterized as Mahayana, were not publicly known until centuries after the passing of Shakyamuni Buddha.

The language of the three turnings was first found in the most famous sutra from the third turning, *The Sutra Unraveling the Thought*. In that sutra, a disciple respectfully asks the omniscient Buddha about what appears to his limited mind to be a contradiction in the Buddha’s teachings. He asks the Buddha to explain why he explained that things do exist in the teachings from the first turning of the wheel and that they are empty of true existence in the second turning of the wheel. The Buddha’s response to this question forms the basis of the third turning of the wheel. Tibetans traditionally frame the new developments, which formed the basis of new philosophical schools such as the Middle Way school (second turning) and the Mind-Only school (third turning), in this way to help make sense of the different presentations on the nature of reality found in the Buddhist canon. It is traditionally explained that the Buddha taught the different turnings to different disciples according to their propensities and capacities for understanding.

The first turning includes those teachings given by the Buddha in the earliest historical period of Buddhism in general, and Buddha Shakyamuni’s teaching career in particular. Many of these teachings are fundamental to all schools of Buddhism such as the four noble truths, the eightfold path, selflessness (*anatman*), dependent-arising, impermanence, the five aggregates, etc. Perhaps the most famous of the many discourses (Pali: *sutta*, Sanskrit: *sutra*) of the Buddha from the first turning is the one that records the Buddha’s very first teaching at Deer Park to the first five disciples entitled *The Turning of the Wheel of the Dhamma Sutta*. In actuality, virtually all of the contents of the Pali version of the Buddhist canon, that version utilized by Theravada Buddhists of Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia today, are considered by Tibetans to be teachings from the first turning of the wheel.

Tibetans mark the beginning of the second turning of the wheel with the public emergence of *The Perfection of Wisdom Sutras*. Traditionally, this corpus of sutras¹ are said to have been retrieved by Nagarjuna (c. 1st C.E.) from the *nagas* (mythical serpent-like beings) who had been entrusted to preserve the most profound of the Buddha’s teachings until the prophesized Nagarjuna appeared to retrieve and teach them. Unlike the first turning teachings, where the Buddha taught selflessness of persons, but also taught that entities do

¹ There are several *Perfection of Wisdom Sutras* including those in 100,000 stanzas; 25,000 stanzas; 8,000 stanzas, *The Heart Sutra*, etc.

exist in the way that they appear, the Buddha introduced a new and more profound philosophical description of reality in *The Perfection of Wisdom Sutras*. In these texts, the Buddha taught that all persons *and* phenomena are characterized, not merely by selflessness, but by the more subtle and profound term, emptiness (*shunyata*). In other words, everything is utterly empty of, or lacking, any independent, unchanging essence, absolute nature, or any own way of being in and of itself. Nagarjuna systematized the insights of *The Perfection of Wisdom Sutras* into a philosophical view known as the Middle Way school (Madhyamaka), which Tibetans generally describe as the highest philosophical presentation of reality.

The third turning of the wheel derives from a group of sutras that became publicly known around the fourth century and were utilized by the great master, Asanga (300-390 C.E.) in his systematization of the Mind-Only school (Chittamatra/Yogachara). The Mind-Only school is also a Mahayana philosophical school in that it asserts the emptiness of persons and phenomena. However, the specific description of emptiness in the Mind-Only school differs from that of the Middle Way school. The Middle Way school defines emptiness as an object's lack of any independent, permanent essence or nature in and of itself. The Mind-Only school defines an object's emptiness as a lack of an essence that is utterly distinct or separate from that of the consciousness perceiving it. For the Middle Way school, phenomena are empty of their own unchanging nature. For the Mind-Only school, phenomena are empty of subject-object duality. They do not have a nature that is different from the nature of the consciousness that perceives them. The most famous sutra sources, among many, for this school of thought are *The Sutra Unraveling the Thought* and *The Descent into Lanka Sutra*. ❁

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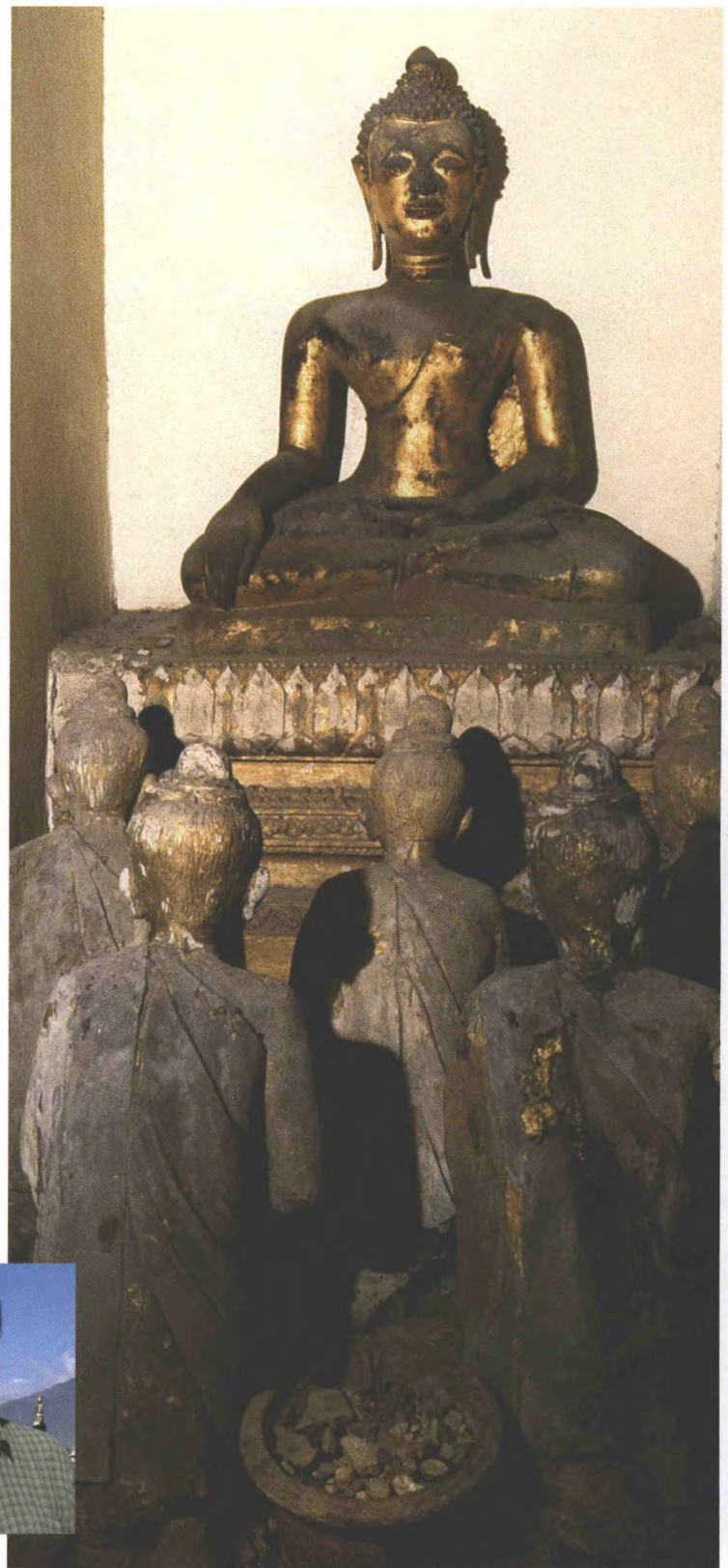


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