

The Three Turnings of The Wheel of Dharma – Why They Are Each Essential to All of Us

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I DON'T KNOW very much, and so everything that I do have to say today is something that I owe to the goodness and the grace of my teachers, and I also know that there will be many mistakes. You can give the credit for what is useful to my teachers and you can blame the mistakes on me. I sometimes say things that I know are not orthodox, and so sometimes you will hear me very consciously deviate from things that are commonly said even within the lineage within which I have received teachings. That is because basically my background is in Western Philosophy, and for me the model of a Western Philosopher is always Aristotle, who said when he criticized his own teacher Plato: "Well, we love our friends dearly; we love truth all the more", and so sometimes I maintain things in directions that you might find surprising, and it's okay for you to criticise me.

I've been asked to talk about the three turnings of the wheel of Dharma and why they are each important to all of us. I'm happy to be talking about that because it is a question very close to my own heart, and that I think is important for us both in terms of scholarship coming to understand Buddhism, and also very deeply to anybody involved in Buddhist practice.

Many of you consider yourselves practitioners of the Mahāyāna. Few of you read suttas and commentaries in the Śrāvakayāna tradition, from the Pali tradition. I'm not happy about that, so this is where I want to begin. I think that there is a great danger for many of us who practice in the Mahāyāna tradition that we sometimes develop an attitude – and it's an attitude which is not altogether beneficial either in terms of our scholarship or in terms of our practice – and that is the attitude of deprecating the teachings of the first turning, the teachings in the Śrāvakayāna vehicle. That deprecation is sometimes explicit: we say: "I only read Mahāyāna texts. These are just for people who are not wise enough to read the Mahāyāna"; or implicit, where we might not necessarily speak or explicitly think negatively about Śrāvakayāna texts, but they just don't turn up on our desk: we just don't read them; we don't study them. We say: "Oh, I'm too busy with my important Mahāyāna texts to read that".

Sometimes we even use that word "Hīnayāna". Even if we don't mean it that way, it's important to remember that in using that word we are always explicitly deprecating because the word "hīna" means "inferior" or "lower". It is as though we talked about people around us saying: "Oh, I have my great friends and I have my inferior friends. I'm not saying bad things about my inferior friends, they are just inferior". That would be problematic.

But let me say that things go even further, because many of us who are Mahāyāna practitioners rarely even read Yogācāra texts or Yogācāra sūtras. And these are even Mahāyāna texts, because again we are taught very often that the highest teaching is the Madhyamaka teaching, the teachings of the second turning of the wheel following the Prajñāpāramitā sūtras, and we think to ourselves: “I should concentrate on the very highest teaching and not worry about the teachings that I think of as lower”. That of course is also a form of deprecation.

Of course this isn't our fault, we are not bad people, but this is a natural outgrowth of the way that these texts are often talked about within the tradition. When we talk about the three turnings of the wheel in much Indian and Tibetan and often Chinese hermeneutics, we are often told: “Well, the first turning of the wheel was taught for people of lower capacity and the second turning of the wheel was taught for people of much higher capacity and the third turning was, well, that was taught for people who thought they were of high capacity but then it didn't quite work and so they had to slip back to this other one, so they are really kind of medium”; and we all know, each of us knows that: “Really I'm a person of very high capacity, and without any pride, and because I have absolutely no pride, and very high capacity, I don't need those lower teachings”.

Very often, the reason in the tradition, the reason that this understanding of the three turnings of the wheel as being teachings for people of different capacities comes to be, is because of the need to resolve apparent inconsistencies in the Buddha's teachings. For instance in the Sandhinirmocana Sūtra, which is a very classic Yogācāra text but also a very classic text that Je Rinpoche 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?”; and the way to resolve these has often been to distinguish the teachings into different cycles and say “Well, some people need to hear this, some people need to hear this, and some people are able to hear this. In Sanskrit this distinction is drawn in terms of teachings that are *neyārtha* versus teachings that are *nītārtha*: teachings that require interpretation or commentary or supplementation versus teachings that can be taken literally, just as they are.¹

So let me begin by asking you this question: When we think about the three turnings of the wheel, are they each or are they not each Buddhavaccana, the speech of the Buddha? And of course the answer is that all this is all Buddhavaccana. Even when we look at the texts that all of us might regard as the most profound, most definitive: the Prajñāpāramitā Sūtras, and in particular the Mother Sūtra, the eight-thousand-line Prajñāpāramitā; when that text asks: “What is Buddhavaccana?” “What is the speech of the Buddha?” The answer is given: “The speech of the Buddha is anything spoken directly by the Buddha, anything inspired directly by the Buddha, anything spoken in the presence of the Buddha and approved of by the Buddha, or anything that is fully consis-

¹ Any of you who are familiar with Christian biblical hermeneutics or Jewish biblical hermeneutics will recognize this device of trying to reconcile apparent tensions in scripture by saying: “Well, these require special interpretation, but those can be taken literally; these are for the children but those are for the grown-ups.” This isn't unique to Buddhism, but we are here in a Buddhist context, and I honestly believe that this way of thinking about the three turnings of the wheel of Dharma has not been entirely beneficial, and that there is a better way to think about things.

tent with the intent of the Buddha.” So a question we each need to ask ourselves, maybe every day, is: am I too good, am I too smart, am I too realised to listen to Buddhavaccana? If the answer to that is yes, go, enjoy the sunshine! But if the answer to that is no, then we need to take Buddhavaccana seriously, regardless of which turning of the wheel it is comprised of. To help us do that I would like to suggest to you a different way of thinking about the relationship between the three turnings of the wheel, not in terms of *neyartha* and *nītārtha*, not in terms of higher or lower or medium, but rather in terms of three different subject matters, or three different ways of looking at the world: in terms of which the Buddha chose to teach. I think you will see that each of these ways of looking at the world is important, and I find the sūtras and the shastras contained in each of these approaches to be extremely beneficial.

The idea that I am going to be outlining in the next few minutes is not, I don’t think, at all original to me. I was led to it by a remark His Holiness the Dalai Lama made in a teaching where he set out this idea that it was time to pay more attention to all three turnings because they seem to approach these different domains, and I went home and thought a lot about that idea and went back to these teachings, to these different sets of texts in that light, and I’ve come to believe that His Holiness is absolutely right about that, and that when His Holiness says that, it really calls us to a complete re-appraisal of how many of us – myself included – have thought about these teachings and how they are often treated in commentarial literature.

So let me set this out in brief, and then we will work in more detail. In brief, we can say that the teachings of the first turning set out for us the general characterisation of the nature of reality, the general characterisation of Samsara, its causes, and the means for release from Samsara; the second turning teachings set out the nature of emptiness from the side of objects of knowledge, and the third turning teachings set out an understanding of emptiness from the side of the subject of knowledge. I think that if we see things this way, we see the three sets of teachings as complementary to one another rather than as in competition with one another and therefore as important to each of us.

First Turning

Now let us begin by thinking about the teachings of the first turning. The first turning of the wheel of Dharma by the Buddha took place at the site of Sarnath outside Varanasi, and it was accomplished through a sutta known as the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta, the sutta of, or the Discourse of the Turning of the Wheel of Dharma that was delivered to the Buddha’s five initial disciples – I am sure you all know this, and of course the initial teachings of that sūtra are elaborated in enormous detail by the succeeding Pali texts: the discourses that the Buddha gave for the next forty-five years of his human life on earth, as well as in the Pali commentaries and scholastic texts. I want to focus for the next few minutes just on two texts within that tradition: one, the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta itself, and the second a later commentarial text called the Questions of King Milinda that records a possibly historical, part possibly fictional interaction between the monk Nāgasena and a Bactrian king.

If you have not read the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta, you should do so immediately. This is the sutta where the Buddha first announced the Four Noble Truths and delivered the results of his insight and awakening. This is the most important sutta in the entire Buddhist literature. If you are sent to a desert island and you get to take one text with you and you are trying to decide whether to take the Heart Sūtra or the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta, give the Heart Sūtra to your best friend and take the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta, because that will guide your practice.

So, in the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta the Buddha begins by teaching “This entire world is characterized by suffering”. When a lot of people hear this they say: “Oh my God! That’s so depressing! What a depressing religion! What a depressing philosophy! I wanna go some place else. The world is actually very nice: there are blue skies, nice people, I am young and healthy, and life is basically good”. They must say “Shut up Buddha! This is just a total downer”, But ... it’s not. And in fact when the Buddha articulates in the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta that the world is characterized by suffering, he makes that very specific: he says that not being able to get what we want is suffering – and of course as the Rolling Stones said “You can’t always get what you want.” Having things that you don’t want is suffering, aging is suffering, death is suffering, separation from those that you love is suffering; and anybody who honestly believes that he or she is living in a world where you are always going to get what you want, you are never going to get what you don’t want, you’re going to be perpetually young and everybody is always going to be nice to you and you will never suffer loss, then you really do need to wake up to the reality of the world; and even if you believe that the life that you have right now is pretty good, just think about what’s happening maybe only a few kilometers from here, or maybe a few doors from here where people really are living lives in great pain, lives of great privation, lives of great uncertainty, lives of sadness; and then you have a choice. You can decide: “Well, that’s them, not me. So I’m not suffering, they are”; or you can suffer the pain of knowing that that’s happening. If the latter, then you too are suffering. If the former, you are suffering from serious mental illness.

The Buddha continued that suffering doesn’t just happen, it’s not a random event, but suffering, like everything else, is brought about by causes and conditions. The immediate conditions of suffering, the Buddha argued, are desire, attraction and aversion, but those attractions and aversions are based on a more fundamental confusion about the nature of reality. That confusion, he taught, isn’t just an absence of knowledge, but a positive superimposition of a false view of reality over the reality that we experience.

We find ourselves in a world in which all phenomena, including ourselves, are impermanent and constantly changing; in which all phenomena including ourselves are dependently originated and depend upon countless causes and conditions for their reality; a world in which all phenomena including ourselves are selfless and don’t have any core or essence; nonetheless, we attribute permanence to things; we attribute independence to things; we attribute substantial existence to things. That’s an act of cognitive superimposition.

I think of this as a mental reflex: something wired into our brains, but which by doing we cause suffering for ourselves because we take ourselves to be separate from other things, substantially existent, going on forever, independent and important. And we teach each other this. We teach our children: “You have to be independent! Stand on

your own two feet!” But of course, nobody is independent; nobody stands on their own feet. Where did you get your feet? You got them from your parents. We build this kind of structure of independence, substantiality, difference from the world, a longing to be permanent, that drives the cosmetics industry for instance, and that becomes our source of suffering.

That’s all the bad news, the first two truths, but then there is some better news. Given that we live in a world constituted by suffering, suffering that we bring about ourselves by our own cognitive activity, there is a way to cease suffering. There is a way to escape suffering, and that is to reverse that cognitive activity; and the reversal of that cognitive activity requires fundamental transformation of our minds.

In order to accomplish that, in the fourth Truth the Buddha lays out what we call the Eightfold Path to Nobility. The eightfold path is not a set of eight commandments instead of the Ten Commandments; it’s actually a very interesting structure. I think of it from a Sanskrit point of view as being eight *vastus*, eight domains, eight areas of concern. What the Buddha doesn’t tell you to do is to do this, don’t do this, do this, don’t do this, but rather: pay attention to these things. Pay attention to your action: your action can either cause suffering or cause happiness; pay attention to what you say, to your speech: your speech can either cause suffering or cause happiness; pay attention to how you earn your living: some ways of earning a living are conducive to happiness and release of suffering, some cause more suffering; pay attention to your views: the way you think about the world is not morally neutral.

A lot of people are puzzled by that: why is the right view part of an ethical discipline? Think about it for a minute. There are certain things that are simply immoral to believe, right? Beliefs that cause pain and suffering. Suppose, for instance, that I think that women are basically dumb and useless and can’t study: then as a teacher I am horrible; I have got an immoral view; I have got a view that causes suffering to those around me. Or if I am a decent feminist then I have got a positive view that can actually benefit the world. So the Buddha emphasised that all of these things: the way we think, the way we meditate, the amount of effort we put into things, the way we earn our livelihood; all of these things are things that we do that can cause happiness or cause suffering. The Eightfold Path asks us to examine our lives constantly, reflectively through thought, and meditatively through deep kinds of concentration that actually transform the way we take up with the world, in order to achieve a release from suffering and to enable others to be released from suffering.

This is but the briefest summary of one very small sutta in the Pali canon, but you can begin to see that here what the Buddha is doing is laying out for us the general framework within which to think about our lives and practice. It is a very profound framework, a framework that challenges us to think and live in ways that are very contrary to those in which many of us live. I think none of us is too good to pay attention to this.

I am going to only mention some things that happen in the Questions of King Milinda so that I can move on to the second and third turnings. In this beautiful little text a number of metaphors are introduced for understanding the ideas developed in the Pali Canon, and that can really deepen our understanding. For instance when the king asks

Nāgasena: “Gee, you Buddhists teach this doctrine of no-self. If there is no you, who should I pay homage to? Who wears the robes? Who does the practice?”

And Nāgasena famously asks: “Hey king, how did you get here? Did you walk or did you come in a chariot?” and of course the King says: “Well, I came in a chariot.” Then Nāgasena says: “So was the chariot identical to the wheels? Was it identical to the axle, identical to the seat? Where was the Chariot that you came in? Was it all of these pieces together? What was it?” Then of course the king says: “No, the chariot isn’t the wheels, the chariot isn’t the seat, the chariot isn’t the axle and so forth: the chariot is just a name that we use to talk about all of those things when they are assembled and functioning together.” Then Nāgasena says: “Just so, I’m not my hair, I’m not my teeth, I’m not my feet, I’m not all of these pieces, I am not different from all of these pieces: then my name is just a designation that I use to talk about all of these things when they’re functioning together.” By doing this, The Questions of King Milinda gives us a wonderful understanding of what it is to exist, but to exist selflessly.

There are many other beautiful and very useful similes in this text, which I suggest that you read, but I mention this one only because many of us who study in the Mahāyāna are familiar with this chariot simile. We find it in Candrakīrti’s *Madhyamakāvātāra* in the sixth chapter, and many of us think: “Aha, this is a definitively Mahāyāna idea.” But I mention this to point out that Candrakīrti is taking it from the Śrāvakayāna. Candrakīrti isn’t so arrogant as to say: “I won’t read Śrāvakayāna texts.” He is happy enough to read them and to borrow from them. And if Candrakīrti can read them, so can you.

Second Turning

Now having convinced ourselves that we should all be reading first turning texts, let’s turn to the second turning and understand what some of its characteristics are. As I said, we can think of the second turning as setting out the idea of emptiness from the standpoint of objects of knowledge. The second turning also involves an understanding of ethics from the standpoint of compassion grounded in an understanding of this emptiness. I want to mention briefly some of what we can learn from two important second turning texts. The first is the Heart of Wisdom Sūtra which is a wonderful sūtra to read because it is a nice condensation of the much longer and sometimes more difficult eight-thousand-line Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra. The second text I’ll mention just a little bit about is one that I have to mention anytime I talk, and that is Nāgārjuna’s Mūlamadhyamakakārikā, but I’ll just talk about a couple of verses in that text.

Now, maybe I should say a word or two about the Prajñāpāramitā sūtras themselves, the foundation texts for the second turning. The foundation texts for the first turning are the Pali sūttas. For the second turning they are the Prajñāpāramitā sūtras, as well as a few other sūtras such as the Vimalakīrti. All of these arose some time around the beginning of the first millennium, about one hundred years before the Common Era, and they seem to have been pretty much in the current form by about the second century of the Common Era.

Of course, what I have just said is a bit heterodox. Within the tradition, these texts are regarded as having been taught by the Buddha pretty much simultaneously on Vulture Peak while the Buddha was on retreat there, but there is always a bit of a difference between the way these texts are regarded traditionally and the way that, shall we say boring academic people who study texts think about their origin, and it's your choice. You can think of them canonically as having been spoken by the Buddha on Vulture Peak, that's fine, or you can think of them more historically as having been composed some six or seven hundred years after the Buddha's death, as this new philosophical movement was being generated in India. It's your choice.

For myself I will say that I believe deeply that Buddhism calls us to be critical and to think and weigh all evidence, and I believe that accepting that these texts were composed by great sages later on does nothing to undermine their authenticity, their profundity or their holiness; but that is just my view. To get even more heretical, I'll point out that most contemporary scholars believe that the Heart Sūtra was in fact composed in China and translated back into Sanskrit, so things even get more complicated, but it's still a beautiful, profound and very holy text, and I still want to talk to you about it because it is a text that is of the utmost importance to understanding Madhyamaka.

When we encounter the scene of the Heart Sūtra, the scene is set on Vulture Peak, which is this wonderful place you can visit in Bihar, a very wild and beautiful spot. The Buddha is there with an enormous assembly of Bodhisattvas and celestial beings, and the Buddha is engaged in a very particular meditation. We usually translate the name of this meditation as "the meditation on the enumeration of phenomena", that is he is really considering the enormous diversity of constantly arising and ceasing dependent phenomena in the world.

Then the disciple Śāripūtra asks a question to a very particular bodhisattva. All of you know the Heart Sūtra: you might not know the Dharmachakrapravartana, but you know the Heart Sūtra. Which bodhisattva does Śāripūtra address? Chenrezig; Avalokiteśvara. This is a really important moment in the Heart Sūtra. It's significant that it is Avalokiteśvara. You might expect, given that this is a perfection of wisdom sūtra, to find Mañjuśrī brandishing his sword somewhere in the Sūtra because it is Mañjuśrī who is the bodhisattva of perfect wisdom, but Avalokiteśvara, Chenrezig is the bodhisattva of compassion and I take it to be a very important message of the Heart Sūtra that here at the heart of a sūtra on wisdom we have the embodiment of compassion: that the only motivation for developing the kind of wisdom that is being articulated in the Prajñāpāramitā Sūtras that is worthy at all is the motivation of compassion: that we try to gain wisdom in order to be able to benefit sentient beings, not just to say get a good grade in a course or to get a Ph.D. or to become a great scholar. The motivation for wisdom is compassion.

The question Śāripūtra asks Avalokiteśvara is "How should somebody who wants to practice the profound perfection of wisdom practice? How should you practice if this is what you want to do?" And inspired by the Buddha, Avalokiteśvara replies: "Somebody who wants to practice the profound perfection of wisdom should see phenomena in the following way:" And then of course we encounter the four famous lines at the center of the Heart Sūtra: you should see that "form is empty, that emptiness is form, that form is not different from emptiness and that emptiness is not different from form".

We could spend many days talking about the Heart Sūtra because there is so much to say, but we do not have many days, so I am going to say a few very specific things. When we begin by talking about form and the other aggregates, we are talking about the objects of our knowledge, the things that we encounter, things around us. When we say that form is empty, we are saying that these things are empty. But empty of what? They are empty of essence, empty of inherent existence, empty of independence. And we can say that they're empty in a number of ways. These things are empty because they lack essence; these things are empty because they arise only in dependence on causes and conditions and disappear in dependence on those causes and conditions; these things are empty because they are merely conceptually imputed; because the identity that they have, like the identity of the chariot, is an identity that comes from the side of the subject, from our imputation, not from themselves. There is nothing from the side of the object that makes it the object it is, and that remains permanent and independent. That's the fundamental reality of objects of experience.

But why then say that emptiness is form? That is a very different claim, because you might say: "My gosh, form is empty! This microphone – the one in my hand – is completely empty! That means it doesn't exist! That means there is no microphone in my hand!" That would be wrong, because the emptiness of the microphone depends upon the microphone. We do not want to say the microphone is illusory but its emptiness is real: that the microphone doesn't exist inherently but its emptiness does. If there is no microphone in my hand, there is no emptiness of any microphone in my hand. Emptiness is not some thing hidden behind here. I can't say: "Here, you take the microphone, I'll keep the emptiness", because emptiness is a property of the microphone. Because it is, it tells us that we can't reify the emptiness because to reify emptiness would be to deprecate form, to deprecate real things; so the second line in the Heart Sūtra says take reality seriously! It might be empty but it's the only reality you've got! To grasp the emptiness, as if it's the reality behind it, is to toss away the only world you have.

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 happens to be empty and that emptiness happens to be the emptiness of form. Try to understand what it is to be a physical thing like a microphone: what is it to be made of stuff, to be physical. It is to be made up of parts and to depend for its existence on parts. That is part of what it is to be a physical object. No parts, no object. It's to depend upon causes and conditions. That's part of what it is to be a physical object: if you don't make a microphone, you don't get a microphone.

It's also to be dependent on imputation, because anything like that is part of a vast continuum of things. To carve it out as a single entity in my consciousness is a cognitive activity. So to be a microphone is to be empty. In general, to be physical is to be empty. But then let us ask ourselves "Well, what is it to be empty?" Well, to be empty is to depend upon parts; to be empty is to depend upon causes and conditions; to be empty is to depend upon mere imputation. But that's just what we said to be physical form is. Form and emptiness don't just happen to be related. They are the same thing. This is the profound unity of the two truths in Madhyamaka that tells us what the character of objects of knowledge is. To be an object of knowledge is to be conventionally, empiri-

cally real, and to be ultimately empty. That's the lesson we get from the Prajñāpāramitā Sūtras.

It is very good that I am now holding an empty microphone because if I'd been given a non-empty microphone I would have been in real trouble. It would be causally inert, incapable of being acted upon, or of acting. Now, Nāgārjuna picks up these points in a very profound way in Mūlamadhyamakakārikā. In the twenty-fourth chapter of Mūlamadhyamakakārikā, in the eighteenth and nineteenth ślokas, Nāgārjuna says: "Whatever is dependently originated, that's emptiness: that being a dependent designation is the Middle Way. Since there is nothing that is not originated dependently, there is nothing that is not empty." In saying this, Nāgārjuna is emphasizing that emptiness and dependent origination are not two distinct characteristics of objects of knowledge: they are the same characteristic of objects of knowledge; that once again when we understand what it is to be an object, what it is to be a phenomenon, something that we can know, whether our self or something external to us, every object of knowledge can be known only because it is dependently originated, only because it depends upon causes and conditions, only because we can impute an identity to it: that is, only because it's empty. That doesn't mean that phenomena don't exist. Emptiness isn't non-existence: it's the only mode of existence that phenomena can have.

In the fortieth and final verse of that chapter Nāgārjuna says: "Whoever understands dependent origination understands suffering, and its origin, and its cessation, and the path." There Nāgārjuna is drawing this profound connection between the understanding of dependent origination and the understanding of the Four Noble Truths. He says that if you understand dependent origination, you understand the Four Noble Truths; but since dependent origination and emptiness are the same thing, that also means that if you understand emptiness, you understand the Four Noble Truths. It also of course means that if you don't understand emptiness and dependent origination, you don't understand anything. Now, notice that Nāgārjuna at the end of this very important chapter comes back to the Four Noble Truths, the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta. The Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta was something Nāgārjuna took seriously: he was not too good to read that text. If Nāgārjuna wasn't too good to read that text, we're not too good to read that text.

Now, Śāntideva in the Bodhicaryāvatāra, maybe the most beautiful text composed in the Mahāyāna, draws explicitly the very profound connection between an understanding of the emptiness of the objects of experience and the cultivation of compassion. Śāntideva – and this is a long and complex story, one we don't have time to tell tonight but we'll tell more of tomorrow night – emphasises that we don't need to ask the question: "Why should I be compassionate?" Rather the question that we need to ask is: "Why would I ever want to be egoistic?" We all know that suffering is bad, so you don't need a reason to think that you want to eliminate suffering; but you would need a reason to think: "When I look all over the vast universe of sentient beings there's actually only one of them whose suffering is important enough to eliminate. Guess who it is? It's not you. It's me. I'm the only one who has suffering that's worth eliminating.

Well, people tend to fight about who that unique individual is whose suffering is worth alleviating. Śāntideva's point is that you actually need a reason to believe that you are so important, and in fact we all give ourselves a reason. The reason that we give our-

selves is the reality of the distinction between self and others, our substantial existence and difference from everybody else: the fact(sic) that my happiness doesn't depend upon your happiness, that I am completely independent, and this very reasonable view that I am permanent, independent, substantial and the rest of you are just a bunch of stuff.

Śāntideva points out that that's the only reason you could be rationally egoistic, and so the way to dissolve egoism is not to sort of say: "Let's everybody be nice now!" – it doesn't work – but rather to cultivate the view of emptiness, to cultivate the understanding of the emptiness of all objects and phenomena because then egoism doesn't have a ground to stand on, and then compassion naturally arises because what compassion is the commitment to alleviating suffering. That we already have: we know that suffering is bad. The only trouble is the construction of the barrier between ourselves' and others' suffering. That's a conceptually constructed barrier. That's a barrier that's only possible if you don't understand emptiness, and so that's why there is this deep connection in the Mahāyāna between the understanding of the nature of all phenomena as empty, and the spontaneous development of compassion.

It should be clear why we should all study second turning texts: second turning texts are important for developing the profound view of emptiness, for developing the profound understanding of the nature of our objects of experience, and for cultivating the very best possible moral sentiments we have. But notice: nothing that we have talked about in the second turning is inconsistent with anything we talked about in the first turning; it's rather supplementary. It deepens the idea of view, it extends the idea of path, but it does not in any way undermine or reject anything taught in the first turning suttas.

Third Turning

Now, the third turning of the wheel of Dharma is often called the turning characterised by the teaching of Mind Only, and the foundational texts for that turning are the Saṃdhinirmocana Sūtra and the Lankāvātāra Sūtra, which the scholars believe came to be composed a few hundred years after the Prajñāpāramitā Sūtras, probably in about the third or fourth century of the Common Era – canonically they are held to be taught by the Buddha during his lifetime, again you can think about this any way you like – and a set of very important philosophical texts composed by philosophers like Dignāga, Dharmakīrti, Vasubandhu and Asanga, with the view really articulated most deeply by Vasubandhu and Asanga, who were half-brothers, and by their great commentator Sthiramati (Loten in Tibetan), who really did a great deal to systematize the teachings of the masters.

Often when we hear the term "Mind Only," we tend to think that the way to understand this view is that the mind is real and nothing else is real, that only the mind is real. It is possible to read those texts that way and that is certainly one of the interpretations we can adopt, but it is not by any means the only or maybe even the most useful way to understand the term. We can also think of the phrase "Mind Only" as saying the mind is the only thing you need to worry about, or the mind is the only thing you can actually work on, or the actual nature of your experience is only the experience of mind; and if

we think about it this way we suddenly discover a very profound teaching about the nature of our own subjectivity.

By the way, when we think about it this way we see an important analogy between the third turning and certain second turning texts. In the Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Sūtra when the question is asked “How do you purify a Buddha field?” the answer that the Buddha and Vimalakīrti give is: “You purify your mind.” That is if I want to make the world I experience into a world of pure Buddha action, I don’t do that by transforming each of you and providing some psychotherapy and a little cosmetic surgery here and there and maybe beautifying the environment, I transform myself. I am the only thing I can work on. My mind is the only thing I can work on.

In the Bodhicaryāvatāra when Śāntideva says: “The world is covered with thorns and rocks and it’s very painful to walk on: I could cover the whole world with leather or I just could put on a pair of shoes,” Śāntideva is pointing out that the transformation that we are after when we are involved in moral transformation is fundamentally the transformation of ourselves. In this way when we think of Mind Only as saying: “The only thing you need to worry about is your mind and in fact the only thing you can transform is your mind,” we see a teaching that is much more consistent with the second turning. Now we’ll begin talking about how to understand that in more detail.

Let’s turn now to one of the chapters of the Saṃdhinirmocana Sūtra, and this is the Paramārthasamudgata chapter where the bodhisattva Paramārthasamudgata asks the Buddha: “Hey Buddha, you’ve said these things that seem to me to be contradictory, because you’ve said that sometimes things have the nature of arising from causes and conditions, that sometimes things have the nature of having these particular kinds of characteristics, and sometimes you say things are empty of any nature. What were you talking about? It sounds like you were being inconsistent.”

In his answer the Buddha says: “That was a great question, Paramārthasamudgata! Let me explain!” and he explains by distinguishing three natures that phenomena have, and three naturelessnesses, or three kinds of emptiness that phenomena have, arguing that each of the natures that things have are coupled with one of the naturelessnesses: one of the kinds of emptiness. In doing this he provides a very deep explanation of the nature of our experience, that is of what emptiness is like from the side of the subject, an examination of what our minds do to phenomena.

This account of the three natures is developed in much more detail by Vasubandhu in two very important texts. One is his treatise in thirty stanzas Trimśikākārikā. The other is his treatise Trisvabhāvanirdeśa or discourse on the three natures, and in those texts he develops this theory in much more detail. What I’m going to do is to step back from the details and talk about what the three natures are and the three kinds of emptiness, and show you how those provide a model of how our mind works and/or emptiness looks from the subject side.

The three natures are these: the first one is in Sanskrit called the parikalpita-svabhāva or the imagined nature, the second one paratantra-svabhāva or the dependent nature, and the third one the pariniṣpanna-svabhāva or the perfected or the consummate nature. The three kinds of emptiness distinguished in the Saṃdhinirmocana Sūtra are:

emptiness with respect to characteristics, emptiness with respect to production, and ultimate emptiness. Now what we need is a good example, so we're going to take the cup. In particular what we are going to look at is how I actually experience the cup, and I want to do this just in a very ordinary, boring way from the standpoint of modern science for a moment.

So here I am gazing fondly at this beautiful cup, and instinctively I think that I am experiencing immediately an external object that is smooth, round, has beautiful flowers on it, contains water and so forth; and if I asked you, if I were right you would say: "Yes, you've got it exactly!". But on reflection, even if we haven't studied a word of Dharma, we know that that's wrong. I am going to tell you a sad story. In fact here's what's happening. Light is bouncing off some object out there, it's being bent by the lens of my eye, passed through a bunch of liquid in my eyeball, where it's causing electrical activity among nerve cells on the back of my eye. I'm not making this up: it's in scriptures that we all trust, the scriptures of modern science!

What then happens? Nerve impulses go up my optic nerve into my brain. They go into my occipital cortex, where various visual processing happens, and they interact with the parts of my brain that are involved with language and with motor control to give me the labeled cup and to get my hand to grasp it. I want to make it clear that in order to see this cup I need some light but it is very dark in my brain. So whatever's happening in my brain, I don't have a cup in there; and the cup itself is not penetrating my skull and if it did I'd be in big trouble; so where I take myself to be directly experiencing an external object, all that's really happening is bunch of complicated brain activity that is generating an image and a word and a bunch of action based upon some electrical activity in the back of my eye caused by some thing or other.

This is actually extremely profound, even though it's just science, and this is actually what the Saṃdhinirmocana Sūtra and Vasubandhu are talking about. The imagined nature of the cup, the way that I imagine the object of my experience to be, is that it is external and that it is dualistically related to me as subject, that it is different from my subjectivity. But that's merely an imagined nature. That's something that I project, because all I immediately experience is an image and a name. The image and the name are somewhere in my brain not outside. You can't drink water from an image and a name, but I think that what I am grasping is something from which I can drink water. That's the imagined nature. I imagine my experience to be external to me, by a mental reflex I project it outside of me but that projection is not part of what I experience at all. What I experience is mind only. It's only in my mind. Where else could experience be? Experience can't be somewhere outside of me – that would be crazy.

That's the first nature of the cup – its imagined nature – and it corresponds to the first emptiness of the cup. When it's called emptiness with respect to characteristics it means that the cup I experience is empty of all of the characteristics I ascribe to the external cup. I think the external cup is solid and round and beautiful and can be seen; but the cup I experience is something happening in my brain. All those neurons firing are not solid, are not round, are not particularly beautiful and cannot be seen. So the cup that I experience is empty of the characteristics that I attribute to it, and that is emptiness with respect to characteristics and it constitutes the imagined nature of the cup.

But we can say more about my experience of the cup: it depends upon countless causes and conditions, many of which are not made of porcelain. Many of those causes and conditions have to do with my own eyes, with the fact that there is light in the room, with the way that my brain works, with blood pumped by my heart ... all of those causes and conditions. So, we also say that the cup has a dependent nature. My experience of the cup depends upon all these phenomena, even though I don't recognize that dependency in the cup as I perceive it, and that corresponds to the second emptiness of the cup: the emptiness in terms of causality, the emptiness in terms of dependence. So, the cup that I experience is causally dependent, whereas the cup that I take, that I posit, is empty of all of those phenomena. It seems to be a porcelain thing outside of me. I continue to think that I'm experiencing external objects when in fact I am experiencing something that arises due to all of these causes and conditions.

Now, in the Saṃdhinirmocana Sūtra and in the Trisvabhāvanirdeśa we read that the consummate nature, the final nature of the cup, is that the dependent nature is empty of the imagined; and so what we now say is that experience of the cup that depends on all of these conditions is empty of that imagined external cup: the dependent cup in my mind is empty of subject-object duality, it's not separate from me, it is empty of externality; and so we say that that is the ultimate emptiness of the cup. The ultimate emptiness of our experience is that even though we always take our experience to be constituted by something outside of us, in fact, if we pay attention to science or to Buddhism, if we pay attention, what we experience is our experiences: just mind.

Of course this has implications for practice and for ethics as well. The more we practice, especially the more we practice the kind of mindfulness that we are encouraged to practice in the Pāli canon, the more we see that what we attribute to our experience is different from the experience itself; and so when I find somebody who I find really annoying, who starts to make me really angry, and I say: "That person is an annoying person, that person causes anger", I can direct myself back to my experience, and ask "Where does that experience come from?" That experience depends upon internal causes and conditions. The *person I experience* is not external to me. The *experience* of the person is mind only. I can't change the external person. The only thing I can change is my mind, the person I experience. Mind is all I have to work with. Mind is the basis of practice, and that's why Yogācāra, the third turning is so important, and once again nothing we've said about the third turning is inconsistent with anything we said about the second turning. One gives us an understanding of objects, the other gives us an understanding of the subject. Each of them is consistent with everything we saw in the first turning, which gives us the general framework, or the structure, of reality within which we exist.

So I'm suggesting that we really drop the whole neyartha-nitārtha distinction, the idea of definitive texts and texts that require interpretation; the whole idea of one wheel as being Buddhism for dummies and the other being Buddhism for middle-sized people and the other one being Buddhism for us; that we stop deprecating any Buddhavaccana; and that we recognize that when the Buddha taught these things he meant every word of it and that every word of it is important for us, not just important for us theoretically, but deeply important for our practice because we all live in a world constituted by suffering and constituted by the sources of suffering and we all need a path of liberation

from that suffering; we all live in a world in which that path requires us to understand the objects of our experience, and we all live in a world in which the only way that we can practice that path is by working on the only thing we have: our own minds.

The final thing I want to say is that for me this also illustrates why study is so important to practice. Sometimes people say: “I don’t have time to study those texts, I need to do my practice.” And other people say: “I don’t have time for practice. I’ve got to study, I need to learn these texts.” Study is practice and practice is a kind of study. Just as I don’t want anybody here to ever disparage a single syllable of Buddhavaccana I don’t want anybody to ever disparage the practice of study as part of the Buddha’s path. The Buddha offered all of these teachings. All of us are accustomed to taking refuge in Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. If the refuge prayer isn’t hollow, than to take refuge in the Buddha is to actually care about what the Buddha taught. To take refuge in the Dharma is to actually *read* it.

It’s one thing to show respect for books by circumambulating them, but you really don’t learn very much by circumambulating books! It’s one thing to show respect for the Buddha by prostrating, but the Buddha didn’t teach so that you would prostrate, the Buddha taught so that you would hear. And when we show respect for Sangha, it’s a wonderful thing to prostrate and to stand when our teachers enter the room, but to show respect for a teacher is actually to listen what he or she says and to think about it. I teach at a college. If my students came in and prostrated to me and then walked around their books and then went to sleep while I talked, what use would it be showing up for work? So my final message is this: if all Buddhavaccana, first turning, second turning, third turning is important, open the books and read!

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