Chapter 5 The Buddha's Teaching Form a Cohesive Whole[28]

As seen in chapter 4 (see Appendix), the Buddha provided a wide variety of teachings, depending on the disposition and interests of his various audiences. He taught human beings as well as celestial beings, spirits, and other life forms.

There are many ways to systematise these teachings that reveal how they form a cohesive whole and build on each other, leading us to an ever deeper understanding of the Dharma. One is according to the three capacities of practitioners (see chapter 9). Another is the four tenet systems (see chapter 4 appendix and Volume ?). The three turnings of the Dharma wheel are yet another way. The first part of this chapter focuses on the three turnings of the Dharma wheel and then turns to the topic of the authenticity of the Mahāyāna scriptures. Chapter 4 was an academic approach. Now we look at it from a Buddhist practitioners perspective.

Three Turnings of the Dharma Wheel

"Turning the Dharma wheel" refers to the Buddha giving teachings that lead sentient beings to temporary happiness within cyclic existence through to the highest goodness of liberation and full awakening. The Sūtra Unraveling the Thought describes the Buddha turning the Dharma wheel three times, each turning primarily addressing the needs of a specific group of disciples.

The teachings of the **first turning** form the foundation of Buddhist practice for all three vehicles. At the same time, they fulfil the specific needs of śrāvakas[29], who seek personal liberation. The first turning began with the Buddha's first discourse at Deer Park in Sarnath, India, during which he delineated the main framework for training the mind in the four truths of the āryas. When describing the fourth truth, the truth of the path, he taught **the thirty-seven aids to awakening**[30], which es-

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[28] This chapter is a different take on Tsongkhapa's Lamrim Chemo Chapter 2 'The Greatness of the Teaching' in HHDL's explanation of the Path.

[29] The Śrāvaka vehicle, also known as Śrāvakayāna, is one of the three main paths in Buddhism. Śrāvakayāna translates to the "vehicle of listeners" or disciples, focusing on individuals aiming for personal enlightenment primarily through listening to the teachings of the Buddha. They follow the Śrāvaka Dharma, utilise the Śrāvaka Piṭaka, and are dedicated to achieving liberation through detachment and understanding of the Buddha's teachings.

Practitioners of the Śrāvaka path are concentrating on their own liberation by attaining the state of an Arhat, a liberated being who has overcome all defilements but does not possess the omniscience of a Buddha.

In Tibetan Buddhism, the Śrāvaka path is regarded as foundational, providing essential teachings on ethics, meditation, and wisdom that are necessary for all practitioners, regardless of their ultimate goal. The emphasis is on overcoming self-centredness and developing a preliminary understanding of emptiness and the nature of reality as a basis for more advanced practices leading to full Buddhahood. Practicing the Fundamental Vehicle leading to arhatship who emphasises meditation on the four truths of the āryas.

The Śrāvaka vehicle represents an essential aspect of the Buddhist path, emphasising the importance of hearing, practicing, and embodying the teachings of the Buddha towards the goal of liberation from suffering.

[30] **The thirty-seven aids to awakening** are a comprehensive set of practices divided into seven groups that support the development of wisdom and lead to enlightenment. Each focuses on developing mindfulness, effort, concentration, and wisdom, integral for progressing on the Buddhist path towards awakening.

1. **Four Foundations of Mindfulness**: Practices for developing mindfulness of body, feelings, mind, and phenomena.
2. **Four Supreme Strivings (Right Efforts)**: Efforts to prevent, abandon non-virtuous, destructive states, and to cultivate, maintain virtuous states.
3. **Four Bases of Power**: Concentration through desire, energy, mind, and investigation to achieve spiritual powers.
4. **Five Faculties**: Spiritual faculties of faith, energy, mindfulness, concentration, and wisdom.
5. **Five Powers**: These mirror the Five Faculties but are considered in their fully developed, unshakeable form.
6. **Seven Factors of Enlightenment:** Mindfulness, investigation of the Dharma, energy, joy, tranquility, concentration, and equanimity.
7. **Noble Eightfold Path**: Right understanding, thought, speech, action, livelihood, effort, mindfulness, concentration.

tablish procedures for putting the four truths into practice. The thirty-seven aids relate to two primary methods of training, the first leading to serenity (single-pointedness of mind), the second bringing forth insight (deep understanding). To put these thirty-seven in the context of the three higher trainings[31], we begin practicing the higher training in ethical conduct to eliminate coarse negativities of body and speech. On this basis, we cultivate serenity in the higher training in concentration and insight in the higher training of wisdom.

The thirty-seven aids can be divided into seven sets—four establishments of mindfulness, four supreme strivings, four bases of supernormal power, five faculties, five powers, seven awakening factors, and the eightfold noble path—which are the principal practices. Vasubandhu in Treasury of Knowledge and Asaṅga in Compendium of Knowledge correlate their full-fledged practice with successive levels of the fives paths. In that context, they are set out sequentially. The following is Vasubandhu's presentation.

The first set is the **four establishments of mindfulness**—mindfulness of the body, feelings, mind, and phenomena. As we deepen our practice of these four, we will gain greater enthusiasm and vigour to engage in wholesome activities.

This leads us to make effort in the **four supreme strivings**—to abandon non-virtues already generated, prevent destructive actions in the future, enhance virtues that have already been generated, and generate new virtues in the future. By engaging in ethical conduct such as avoiding destructive actions and enhancing and engaging in constructive ones, we will develop a certain clarity of mind and single-pointedness.

This leads us to practice the third set, the **four bases of spiritual power**—aspiration, effort, intention, and investigation—methods to enhance our capability to remain focused single-pointedly on a chosen object of meditation.

When we have single-pointed concentration that can last for prolonged periods of time, all our other virtuous spiritual faculties will be enhanced. We will increase the **five powers**—faith, effort, mindfulness, concentration, and wisdom—and the **five forces**—the strengthening of these same five qualities. When these forces are fully developed, we will progress to practice the **seven awakening factors**—correct mindfulness, discrimination of phenomena, effort, rapture, pliancy, concentration, and equanimity. This leads us to fully follow the core of the Buddhist path, **the eightfold noble path**—right view, intention, speech, action, livelihood, effort, mindfulness, and concentration. By practicing the thirty-seven aids, our minds will be transformed, and we will attain liberation from cyclic existence.

The **second turning of the wheel** of Dharma contains the Prajñāpāramitā sūtras, the Buddha's teachings on the **perfection of wisdom**. Elaborating on the topic of **selflessness** that the Buddha described briefly in the first turning, here he

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[31] **The three higher trainings** are ethics, concentration, and wisdom. These trainings are foundational practices leading to liberation from suffering. Ethics involves moral conduct and virtues, concentration is developing mental focus and stability, and wisdom involves understanding the true nature of reality, particularly the insights into impermanence, suffering, and non-self. These trainings support each other and are considered essential for progress on the Buddhist path towards enlightenment.
The Four Immeasurable are virtues and practices that cultivate positive, expansive states of mind: loving-kindness, compassion, empathetic joy, and equanimity. These qualities are cultivated to reduce personal suffering, increase happiness, and help in the development towards enlightenment. Each quality represents a way of relating to others with deep goodwill, wishing for their happiness, empathising with their suffering, rejoicing in their successes and virtues, and maintaining a balanced and peaceful mind in relation to their experiences.

explains that all phenomena are empty of inherent existence. He also clarifies the meaning of the **truth of cessation** as the emptiness of a mind from which defilements have been eradicated. Giving an extensive explanation of the **six perfections—**generosity, ethical conduct, fortitude, joyous effort, meditative stability, and wisdom—the second turning also elaborates on the truth of the path for bodhisattvas. The principal and appropriate audience for the sūtras in the second turning of the Dharma wheel are spiritual aspirants who understand the teachings in the first turning and, in addition, aspire for the full awakening of buddhahood. Although they are not the primary audience, these teachings are also for those who seek personal liberation because a comprehensive explanation of emptiness is indispensable for all practitioners. Many of these sūtras were taught at Vulture's Peak, near Rājagṛha, India.

The **third turning of the Dharma wheel** contains two categories of sūtras.

The first furnishes further explanation of the truth of the path and presents a different interpretation of the Prajñāpāramitā sūtras' statement that all phenomena are empty of inherent existence. These third-turning sūtras were taught primarily to benefit those trainees who, although inclined toward the bodhisattva path, are not yet suitable vessels for the teaching on the absence of inherent existence. If they were to embrace the literal meaning of the Prajñāpāramitā sūtras, they would fall into nihilism by mistakenly thinking that emptiness means the total nonexistence of phenomena. For their benefit, the Buddha spoke of naturelessness (niḥsvabhāva) in relation to different natures of phenomena—the dependent, imputed, and consummate natures. Rather than think that all phenomena without exception are empty of inherent existence, the Buddha taught these trainees that different phenomena are empty of different kinds of natures. This category includes sūtras such as the Sūtra Unraveling the Thought.

The second category of sūtras of the third turning speaks of our potential to become fully awakened beings. These sūtras present and develop the clear-light nature of mind and buddha nature. This category includes sūtras such as the Tathāgata Essence Sūtra (Tathāgatagarbha Sūtra), which is the basis for Maitreya's Sublime Continuum and Nāgārjuna's Collection of Praises. The third turning of the wheel of Dharma was taught at Vaiśālī and other places in India; its main audience was both those seeking liberation and those seeking full awakening.

To summarise, the first turning of the wheel of Dharma laid out the basic framework of the Buddhist path to awakening, the four truths of the āryas. The second turning went into greater depth on the third truth, the truth of cessation, which needs to be understood in the context of the ultimate nature of the mind, its emptiness of inherent existence. In addition to having the correct view of the emptiness of the mind as presented in the second turning, a profound subject—a yogic mind that has ceased defilements—is needed. This leads to further discussion in the third turning of the fourth truth, the truth of the path—the mind that realises the nature of reality and eradicates defilements. By combining our understanding of the wisdom realising emptiness as presented in the second turning of the Dharma wheel and an understanding of buddha nature and the nature of mind as presented in the third turning of the Dharma wheel, we can gain genuine conviction in the possibility of attaining true cessation.

Some sūtras in the third turning of the wheel of Dharma speak of buddha nature and the subjective experience of emptiness, thus establishing the basis for the Va-

jrayāna teachings, which emphasise employing the subtlest mind to realise emptiness. In this way, the earlier teachings of the Buddha lay the foundation for topics that are developed more fully in later teachings, and the sūtras of the three turnings of the Dharma wheel complement each other.

The teachings of the first Dharma wheel, which emphasise the practices of the Fundamental Vehicle, form the core of the Pāli tradition. Based on these teachings, the Buddha taught the second and third Dharma wheels, which form the heart of the Sanskrit tradition. The form of Buddhism that flourished in Tibet comprises all of these teachings. For these reasons, we Tibetans believe that it is a comprehensive form of the Buddhadharma because it includes all the essential teachings of the Fundamental Vehicle, Mahāyāna, and Vajrayāna. In the Fundamental Vehicle, selflessness generally refers to the lack of a soul—a self that is permanent, unitary, and independent—or a self-sufficient substantially existent person—a person who is the controller of the body and mind. On the foundation of these teachings, the Mahāyāna describes the development of bodhicitta and the extensive practices of the bodhisattvas. In addition to the selflessness of persons, it teaches the selflessness of phenomena in detail. The special techniques described in the Vajrayāna scriptures enhance these bodhisattva practices.

Without a foundation in the core teachings of the Fundamental Vehicle, proclaiming oneself to be a follower of the Mahāyāna is meaningless. We need a broad, inclusive understanding of the Buddha's teachings or we risk saying either that they are limited in scope or that they are not authentic. It is important to understand that these vehicles and their teachings complement each other. We should embody the essence of all these teachings in our personal practice.

REFLECTION

1.The first turning of the Dharma wheel, which focuses on the four truths of the āryas, forms the foundation for Buddhist practice of all three vehicles. Also, it specifically fulfils the needs of śrāvakas, those seeking personal liberation.

2.The second turning, which includes the Prajñāpāramitā sūtras, elaborates on the meaning of true cessations and true paths and gives an extensive explanation of the six perfections. It is directed mainly toward spiritual aspirants who understand the teachings in the first turning and aspire for full awakening.

3.The third turning contains two types of teachings. The first explains the naturelessness of each of three categories of phenomena; it was taught especially for disciples inclined toward the bodhisattva path who are not yet ready for the teaching on the emptiness of inherent existence . The second explains buddha nature and the clear-light nature of the mind and leads disciples to Vajrayāna.

Is the Buddha's Word Always Spoken by the Buddha?

Arhats and other ārya disciples of the Buddha delivered some suttas in the Pāli canon. In some Sanskrit sūtras, too, the main speaker of the teaching is not the Buddha but another buddha or a bodhisattva. It is said that in the Heart Sūtra the Buddha inspired Śāriputra to ask a question and Avalokiteśvara to respond. His reply, a stunning synthesis of the Prajñāpāramitā sūtras, is considered the Buddha's word although it was not spoken directly by the Buddha. The same principle could be used to say that the Mahāyāna sūtras are the words of the Buddha, even though they did not appear publicly until a few centuries after the Buddha lived.

The idea of the Buddha's word being spoken at other times or by other people is also found in the Pāli tradition. In the Aṭṭhasālinī, Buddhaghosa said that the Points

of Controversy, one of the seven Abhidhamma texts in the Pāli canon, was the Buddha's word although it was composed by Moggaliputta Tissa around 250 BCE. About it, Buddhaghosa said:

> Now when [the Buddha] laid down the table of contents, he foresaw that, 218 years after his death, Tissa, Moggali's son, seated in the midst of 1,000 bhikkhus, would elaborate the Kathāvatthu to the extent of [that is, in accord with] the Dīgha Nikāya, bringing together 500 orthodox and 500 heterodox suttas. So Tissa, Moggali's son, expounded the book not by his own knowledge, but according to the table of contents "laid down, as well as by the method given, by the Teacher. Hence, the entire book became the word of the Buddha.

Similarly, in the Numerical Discourses (AN 8:8), Bhikkhu Uttara is said to instruct his fellow monks, "Friends, it is good for a bhikkhu from time to time to review his own failings. It is good for a bhikkhu from time to time to review the failings of others. It is good for a bhikkhu from time to time to review his own achievements. It is good for a bhikkhu from time to time to review the achievements of others."

Overhearing this, the deva king Vessavaṇa asks Sakka, the ruler of the devas, about it. Sakka then approaches Bhikkhu Uttara and asks him whether this was his own discernment or whether it was the word of the Buddha. Uttara replies with a simile, "Suppose not far from a village or town there was a great heap of grain, and a large crowd of people were to take away grain with carrying-poles, baskets, hip-sacks, and their cupped hands. If someone were to approach that large crowd of people and ask them, 'Where did you get this grain?' what should they say?"

Sakka replies that they should say, "We got it from that great heap of grain."

Uttara continues, "So, too, ruler of the devas, whatever is well spoken is all the word of the Blessed One, the Arahant, the Perfectly Awakened One. I myself and others derive our good words from him."

The Buddha's disciples who have understood well the Buddha's thought speak the Buddha's word. From this perspective, the Mahāyāna sūtras spoken by holy beings other than the Buddha can also be considered the Buddha's word. They are certainly in accord with and do not contradict what the Buddha said in the Pāli suttas.

Four Buddha Bodies

If we have had certain spiritual experiences, we will be able to relate to the accounts of spiritual realisations in the biographies of the great practitioners. These accounts give us some sense that high levels of spiritual experience may be possible. This, in turn, leads to an appreciation of the Buddha's qualities. If we think of the Buddha's awakening in purely ordinary terms, understanding his marvellous qualities is difficult. In the common historical view, Siddhārtha Gautama was an unenlightened being at birth. In the six years from the time he began meditating to his awakening under the bodhi tree, he traversed the path to awakening, from the path of preparation to the path of no-more-learning. Although seeing the Buddha as an unenlightened being who attained awakening in this life is very inspiring, from another perspective it may seem limited.

Viewing the Buddha's awakening within the framework of the Mahāyāna doctrine of four buddha bodies provides a different perspective. In this context, "body" does not refer to a physical body but a collection of qualities. The four bodies are the emanation body, enjoyment body, wisdom truth body, and nature truth body. An **emanation body** is a buddha's physical appearance as an ordinary being, which he assumes according to the spiritual dispositions and needs of particular

disciples. An emanation body manifests from a subtler **enjoyment body**, which is the form a buddha assumes in order to teach ārya bodhisattvas in the pure lands. An enjoyment body emerges from the omniscient mind of a buddha, the **wisdom truth body**. The wisdom truth body arises within the underlying nature of reality, a buddha's **nature truth body**. This is the emptiness of a buddha's mind and final true cessation actualised by that buddha. Both the mind of a buddha and its emptiness are called truth bodies because a buddha's wisdom is the ultimate true path and the emptiness of that mind is the ultimate true cessation.

Viewing this in the reverse order gives us a deeper understanding of Śākyamuni Buddha. The nature truth body—which, as emptiness and true cessation, is an ultimate truth—is nondual with the wisdom truth body—the Buddha's omniscient mind that clearly and directly knows all ultimate and conventional phenomena. Motivated by compassion, from this union of the nature and wisdom truth bodies appears a subtle form, an enjoyment body, a person who guides highly realised bodhisattvas. To guide other sentient beings whose minds are more obscured, an emanation body manifests from the enjoyment body. This is the appearance of a buddha as an unenlightened being who can communicate and interact with ordinary beings. Śākyamuni Buddha was such an emanation body. Because he appeared from the enjoyment body and ultimately from the truth body, he did not cease to exist when he passed away. The continuity of his awakened mind remains. That means that if our own inner spiritual experience reaches a certain level, we will be able to see and speak with the Buddha. From the Buddha's side, he is always ready to help, but because of our lack of merit and spiritual experience, we can't see him. For example, microscopic organisms have existed for a long time, but until the microscope was developed, we couldn't see them. When we develop spiritually, we will be able to perceive things that until now have been inexplicable to our limited way of thinking.

At first, experiences described in the biographies of great masters, such as receiving teachings from the Buddha seen in a vision, seem beyond our imagination. Although they are inexplicable to our ordinary rational mind, these exceptional spiritual experiences do occur, some during my lifetime. The great practitioner Taklung Shabdrung Rinpoche (1918–94) once told me that when he was giving the empowerments of practices of the Taklung Kagyu lineage to Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, he had a direct vision of the great lineage masters of that particular practice, who appeared vividly on the beams of the room where he was giving the empowerment. Taklung Shabdrung Rinpoche was an old lama when he told me this. Having suffered in Chinese prison for many years, he would have had no ambition to impress me by lying or inflating his experience.

A few years ago I met students and colleagues of Khenpo Acho (1918–98), a practitioner from the Nyarong region of Tibet. He was a Nyingma practitioner who studied at Sera, a Geluk monastery, and later he lived as a hermit. His primary practice was reciting the mantra of Avalokiteśvara, *Oṃ maṇi padme hūṃ*, although he also practiced Vajrayoginī and Vajrakīlaya. His close students and colleagues told me that before he passed away, he asked them not to touch his body and to keep the room closed after he died. After about a week, when they opened the door, they discovered that his body had dissolved into rainbow light. Only his monastic robes were left behind.

Although great Tibetan masters in India do not display supernatural feats during their lifetime, some do at the time of death. After he passed away in 1983, my

teacher, Yongzin Ling Rinpoche, remained in the clear-light state for thirteen days without any trace of bodily decay. Some years later, a Sakya abbot remained in the clear light for seventeen days. These extraordinary experiences are recorded in the biographies of the past masters and also occur in the present generation.

Ajahn Mun (1870–1949), a well-respected, highly realised monk and meditator in the Thai forest tradition, had visions of Śākyamuni Buddha and the arhats. Even though many people of the Pāli tradition say that Śākyamuni Buddha ceased to exist at the time of his parinirvāṇa, Ajahn Mun clearly saw him surrounded by many arhats. Such experiences are possible when our mind is purified of defilements.

The varying explanations of the Buddha presented above need not be a point of confusion for us. We do not have to choose one view and abandon the other. Rather, at various times different views may be particularly helpful. When we feel discouraged and think that buddhahood is too high, the path is too difficult and we are inadequate, it is helpful to think of the Buddha as someone born an ordinary being who experienced the problems involved in career and family life. He chose to practice the Dharma diligently and attained buddhahood. We are the same kind of sentient being that he was and have the same potential to attain full awakening.

At other times, seeing Śākyamuni Buddha as someone who attained awakening eons ago and appeared in our world as an emanation body is more helpful. This perspective gives us the feeling of being cared for and supported by many buddhas and bodhisattvas who manifest in immeasurable worlds for the benefit of sentient beings. These realised beings have accomplished what we aspire to do and can guide us on that path.

We may also think of the Buddha as the physical embodiment of all excellent qualities. Since we limited beings cannot directly perceive the inconceivable qualities of awakening, they appear in the form of the Buddha to communicate with us.

The rest of this Chapter 5 is in Appendix 5