Who best can re-turn the Dharma-cakra?

—a Controversy between Wŏnch'uk (632–696) and K'uei-chi (632–682)—

Shōtarō Iida

One day while engaging in the abstruse discourse with the Buddha about the shifts and turns of the Wheel of the Buddha-dharma, the Bodhisattva Paramārthasamudgata said about the three turning points:

"Bhagavan, at first in the Rśipatana of the Deer Park near Vāraṇasī, by teaching the Four Noble Truths to the adherents of the Śrāvakayāna, you, sir, set in motion the Wheel of the wonderful dharma. Although this was marvellous and rare, and neither gods nor men had previously turned this kind of dharma-cakra, it was not the final word. This led to further debates.

Then the Bhagavan’s second turning point was aimed at the adherents of the Mahāyāna because it said that since all the dharmas have no intrinsic nature, they are not really born, do not really cease and are perpetually quiescent and by nature they are nirvāṇa itself.

Although this was marvellous and rare, and neither gods nor men had previously turned this kind of dharma-cakra, it was not final word. This as well, led to further debates.

Then the Bhagavan’s third turning point was aimed at the adherents of all paths as it said that since all the dharmas have no intrinsic nature, they are not really born, do not really cease and are perpetually quiescent and by nature they are nirvāṇa itself. Since the Bhagavan turned the Wheel of saddharma with much clarity, this was very marvellous and unsurpassed, and did not become the ground for further debates."

The clarity of the third turning point was, according to the Bodhisattva Paramārthasamudgata, the teaching of the doctrine of trisvabhāva or ‘the triple aspects of reality.’

From the modern twentieth century Hermeneutic point of view, the above passage of the fifth century (?) Saṃdhinirmocanasūtra can be paraphrased as

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Who best can *re-turn* the Dharma-cakra? (S. Iida) follows:

In order to understand the diverse and apparently complex facets of the contents of Buddhist sūtras, it is essential to have the following perspective:

At first, the Pāli texts or the Archaic Buddhist scriptures emphasized somewhat the basic facts of life although the transcendental aspects of life were not lacking. That is: Buddha taught the basic analysis of the *dharmas* or psychophysical entities on which the Abhidharma has been developed. Thus, granted that the teachings were well categorized, which unfortunately led to a tendency to compartmentalization and a rigidity of analysis, with little interaction between categories.

As an antidote, the group of the *prajñāpāramitā-sūtras* were generated. The *sūtras* expressed emphatically the idea that all the *dharmas* are śūnya, i.e., devoid of permanent intrinsic nature, because they originate dependently. Thus, śūnyatā (emptiness or openness) of a thing means that it is not independent.

To maintain a fine turning of the balance of the verification and non-substantiation of the Wheel of Dharma, however, was not an easy task for some Buddhists, which resulted in the undeniable tendency of nihilism or super-nihilism (*atyanta-nāstika*).

In order to strike the middle path, the final and unambiguous turning point, the *Samādhinirmocana-sūtra* was taught, which, in turn, stopped the necessity of further turning of the *dharma-cakra*.

The foregoing view perhaps prompted the following statement of K'uei-chi:3)

"After the enlightenment, the Compassionate Buddha turned the Dharma-cakra of the Four Noble Truths at the Deer Park. He taught the Āgamas in order to eliminate the attachments to belief in internal self (*atma-drṣṭi*), which would enable those disciples of small caliber to ascend gradually to the degree of Arhat.

Some of them, however, are attached to the view of native realism in the external objects, although purged of the belief in internal self after hearing the Four Noble Truths. To those disciples, the Buddha taught the doctrine of śūnyata of all psychophysical entities (*dharmas*) at the Vulture Peak, which resulted in the Mahāyāna sūtras like the *Prajñāpāramitā-sūtras*. Thus, those disciples of the mediocre caliber were able to comprehend the Lesser Way and could aspire to the Mahāyāna.
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Following Bhagavān’s deep intent, upholding the view of non-being by suppressing the view of being, those disciples took śānyāta as the unsurpassed truth while somewhat neglecting the two aspects of reality (satyadvaya). Thus, the above state of affairs created the opposing two camps, who busied themselves over the philosophical positions of being vs. non-being without any realization of the middle way. In order to eliminate the controversy over emptiness and reality of dharmas, Tathāgata propagated the third and final turning of Dharma-cakra wherein he taught the *Sāndhinirmocana-sūtra* and others by declaring that “all the dharmas are representation only (vijñāpti-mātra).”

I submit that a contemporary of K’uei-chi named Wŏnch’uk, the Abbot of Hsi-min Monastery, developed an analytic approach to the re-turning of the Dharma-cakra superior to that of K’uei-chi. I submit that Wŏnch’uk revealed an important point regarding the *tri-svabhāva* doctrine which differentiates the second and third turning of the Dharma-cakra.

Wŏnch’uk said, “—the third Dharma-cakra thoroughly reveals three aspects of the nonsubstantiality. Furthermore, between the Second and the Third turning of Wheel, there is no difference in the depth of teaching as far as the doctrine of nir lakṣaṇa (non-characteristic) is concerned. Therefore, both belong to the teaching of the definitive meaning (nitartha). In particular, the Third turning is said to be the definitive teaching due to the doctrine of the Three aspects of reality (*tri-svabhāva*) and its related teaching. Strictly speaking, then, the *Prajñāpāramitā-sūtras* are also the sūtras of the definitive meaning. However, commonly speaking, the Prajñāpāramitā-sūtras are said to be the sūtras of neya or provisional meaning. The basis of the above statement is to be found in the following passage of the Prajñāpāramitā-sūtra quoted by Asvabhāva (fl. 510?) in his Commentary on the *Mahāyāna-saṃgraha* (Fascicle I.)

“The Lord: What do you think, Maitreya, among the Imagined aspect (parikalpita), that unreal substance is a rūpa or non rūpa?

Maitreya: It is non rūpa, O Lord.

The Lord: Among the other-dependent mode (paratantra), that conventional and verbal substance, which is based on the name and notion, is a rūpa or non rūpa?

Maitreya: It is non rūpa, O Lord.

The Lord: Among the Absolutely accomplished aspect (pariniṣpanna), that empty
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and non-substantial substance is a rūpa or non rūpa?

Maitreya: It is non rūpa, O Lord.

The Lord: By this method, Maitreya, you should know that what is imagined nature is utterly devoid of reality and the Dependent nature has a nominal, conventional and verbal reality. The Absolutely accomplished nature has the true reality on account of its empty and non-substantial nature.

It is with this hidden intent that I have taught that to speak of ‘rūpa’, etc. is to make a count of what is not-two. Another passage of a Prajñāpāramitā-sūtra is quoted in Asvabhāva’s Commentary on the Mahāyāna-saṃgraha (Fascicle IV), which reads:

“All the dharmas, from the five aggregates to the special qualities of the Buddha (Buddha-dharmas) have the three aspects of reality.”

Having presented K’uei-chi’s and Wŏnch’uk’s analyses on the Second and the Third Dharma-cakra, I am struck with the thorough and fair treatment of the subject by Wŏnch’uk as compared to that of K’uei-chi. Granted the fact that the occurrence of the trisvabhāva (three aspects of reality) doctrine in the Prajñāpāramitā-sūtras is rare and mysterious, it clearly occurred in the above mentioned Asvabhāva’s work translated by K’uei-chi’s master Hsuan-tsang. The translation belongs to the early work of Hsuan-tsang, who translated it between March 1st, 647 A.D. and June 17th, 649.

It was more than twenty years ago that I stumbled on the above important question which led me to make a fresh contribution to the scholarly world by identifying and publishing the Sanskrit passage with the late Dr. E. Conze.

Our English translation of the second quotation in the Asvabhāva’s Commentary runs as follows:

The Lord: Imagined (parikalpita) form, etc. is the false imagination which has the own-beingness of form, etc. for its object, and which is based on the name, notion, social agreement, concept, and conventional expression ‘form’, etc. with regard to the entity which is the sign of something conditioned.

Discerned (vikalpita) form, etc. is the definition of that entity which is the sign of something conditioned as in its dharmic nature mere discernment, as a verbal expression which is conditioned by discernment and to which refers this name, notion,
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social agreement, concept, and conventional expression, i.e., 'this is form', etc.

The Dharmic nature of form (dharmatā-rūpam), etc., is that dharmic nature of dhammas which is established whether Tathāgatas are produced or not, the established order of dhammas, the realm of Dharma, the absence of own-being which is characteristic eternally and through all eternity, constantly and through all time, of that discerned form because of that imagined form, the absence of self in dhammas, suchness, the Reality limit.

Wonch'uk noticed this important passage and its significance, and carefully utilized it in his re-turning of the Dharma-cakra. This took place more than thirteen hundred years ago.

Stanley Weinstein commented that K'uei-chi or "Izu-en (632-682) stands out as one of the most important Buddhist scholars of the early T'ang Dynasty."9) This is proper praise for K'uei-chi. However I have no hesitation in concluding that Wonch'uk's analysis of the re-turning of the Dharma-cakra is more thorough than K'uei-chi's.

As I have shown in the foregoing, Wonch'uk exercised keen and objective analysis on the basis of his astonishing encyclopaedic bibliographical knowledge. Thus, he also maintained that the Samdhinirmocana-sūtra is the final and last turning of Dharma-cakra. Wonch'uk's seemingly minute and detailed expositions of terminology, however, never lost sight of the whole picture. On the contrary, these mosaics of expositions clearly sketched out the complexity and dynamics of the point at issue.

Moreover, as I have already mentioned elsewhere,10) Wonch'uk's view on the Dharma-cakras turned on the imagination and scholarship of Tsong-kha-pa the founder of Dge-Lugs-pa school of Tibetan Buddhism. Tsong-kha-pa (1357-1419), studied Chos sgrub's Tibetan translation of Wonch'uk's Commentary on the Samdhinirmocana-sūtra, which, in turn, resulted in Tsong-kha-pa's magnum opus, the Drang-ba dang nges-pa'i dan rnam par 'byed pa'i bstan-bcos, legs-bshad-snying po (A treatise on the discrimination between the provisional meaning (neyariha) and the final meaning (nitarīha) entitled "the Essence of Well-said commentaries").11)

Although Tson-kha-pa's re-turning of the Dharma-cakra left a somewhat
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different trace from Wŏnch'uk's work, it certainly requires another paper, which in turn, requires another conference.

1) As for the subtitle, the direct controversy never took place as far as the historical documents are concerned. Nevertheless, there are ample evidences which suggest an indirect controversy.

2. The sole Western Language translation of the *Samdhiniromocana-sūtra* is Étienne Lamotte. Louvain: Bureaux de Recueil. Bibliotheque de l'Université. 1935.

An English translation from the Tibetan by Brian Cutillo and Geshe Jampel Thardo will be published in an English translation Series of Asaṅga's works. (Announced in *Buddhist Text Information* The Centre for Advanced Studies in World Religions. #2, March, 1975.)

This passage, therefore, is my translation of the Chinese Text translated by Hsuan tsang, ca. 647 A.D. (Taishō, Vol. XIV. No. 676).


4) Having published the monographs on Bhāvaviveka (Reason and Emptiness) and Hei-cho (Hei-cho's Diary etc.)


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1916, pp. 65–84; No. 3, pp. 505–547; No. 4, pp. 705–744.

6) The phrase ‘to make a count of what is not two’ indicates the doctrine of advaya (nondual) which avoids the two extremes.


9) Stanley Weinstein, “A Biographical Study of Tz’u-en,” Monumenta Nipponica, Vol. XV, 1959/60, pp. 119–149. With all due respect to K’uei-chi, however, “the thing which I don’t understand is, all ‘courtesies’ aside, why K’uei-chi strongly protested Hsuan-tsang’s intention of translation of all the commentaries of the Trimsika, the Thirty Verses, which is the basic text of the Yogācāra-vijñaptimātratā school. Instead, K’uei-chi suggested a critical and selective translation gleaned from the commentaries by different Indian monk-scholars in order to avoid misinterpretations and confusions. There is nothing wrong with that either, although the opportunity to read ‘un-abridged’ commentaries was lost forever. However, the thing inherently wrong was to do the above project by himself with his master Hsuan-tsang. It seems to me that the Master finally gave in.” (Three Stūpas of Chang-an), pp. 486–7.

Hakamaya Noriaki independently shares my above feeling in his recent work Genjō (Hsuan-tsang), Daizo Shuppan, 1981, pp. 311–2. Especially, Hakamaya mentions Hsuan-tsang’s nightmare, when he pondered about the abridged translation of the large Prajñāpāramitā-sūtra. (ibid. p. 301).


11) cf. Iida’s “Three Stūpas of Ch’ang An,” pp. 491–497. In North America I am aware the fact that two young scholars have been working on this very difficult text, namely, Robert A. F. Thurman (Amherst College) and Jeffery Hopkins (University of Virginia). While Thurman published a volume based on his dissertation at Harvard University in 1972, Hopkins has been working on the text with the Dalai Lama. In Japan, Katano, Michio (Otani University recently published a number of articles on the subject.

12) cf. Conze and Iida, “Maitreya’s Questions,” (pp. 232–3), “To a Mādhyamika most of the Prajñāpāramitā would be nitartha, and the “Maitreya-Chapter” neyārtha. In contrast to these scholars Tsong-Kha-pa, who usually follows Candrakīrti, in this case preferred more eclectic attitude, and decided after lengthy deliberations that the teaching of the three Laksñapāsas is as authoritatively nitartha at the remainder of the Prajñāpāramitā. He disagreed with those later Yogācārins, like Ratnakarasānti (one of Atiśa’s teachers) who had assumed the doctrine of the “Maitreya chapter” to be identical with that of the Sanñhinirmocana.”
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It is also interesting to note that Saichō (767-822), the founder of Japanese Tendai School, criticized the Three Dharma-cakras by saying, “this was nothing more than a personal theory of a bodhisattva names Shōgishō [Paramārtha-sumugata].” Saichō also left a remark on Asvabhava’s quotation of the Prajñā-pāramitā by saying, “the Prajñāpāramitā teaching of the Second Period are referred to as the doctrine of the middle path, while in fact it was K’uei-chi (532-682) who arbitrarily labeled the teachings as those representing a doctrine of insubstantiality; furthermore, these three periods reflect only the chronological order of the Buddha’s teachings and do not touch upon the problem of the relative depth or shallowness of significance; and so on.” Tamura Kōyū, “The Doctrinal Dispute between the Tendai and Hossō Sects,” Acta Asiatica, The Tōhō Gakkai, Tōkyō No. 47, 1985, p. 51.

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