The Three Turnings of the Wheel of Dharma

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Lesson 5:
Second Turning: Sūtra Foundations

Reading:
*Essence of the Heart Sutra*, by the Dalai Lama
“The Great Vehicle,” pages 41–48
Essence of the Heart Sutra

The Dalai Lama’s Heart of Wisdom Teachings

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For Students of Wisdom Academy—Not for Distribution
The Mahayana School

In order to fully understand the Heart Sutra, we must understand its place within the entire canon of Buddhist literature. The Heart Sutra is part of the Perfection of Wisdom literature, which is composed of distinctly Mahayana (“Great Vehicle”) texts. These Mahayana texts form the core of the “second turning of the wheel of Dharma.” The Mahayana teachings are rooted in the sermons that the Buddha taught primarily at Vulture Peak. Whereas the teachings of the first turning emphasize suffering and its cessation, the teachings of the second turning emphasize emptiness.

In the Mahayana school there are also teachings that come from the “third turning of the wheel of Dharma.” Within these, we can speak of two categories of scriptures: those scriptures that present an interpretive reading of the Perfection of Wisdom sutras, and those that present the theory of buddha nature (the Sanskrit word for this nature is tathagatagarbha). Because the Perfection of Wisdom literature emphasizes emptiness, the interpretative readings of them in the third turning were taught primarily for the benefit of spiritual practitioners who, although inclined toward the Mahayana path, are not yet ready to properly make use of Buddha’s teachings on the
emptiness of inherent existence. If such trainees were to embrace the apparent literal meaning of the Perfection of Wisdom sutras before seeing into the Buddha’s true meaning, they would be in danger of falling into the extreme of nihilism. It is important to know that the Buddha’s teachings are most certainly not nihilistic as that term is understood by philosophers, nor does the Buddha’s teaching on the emptiness of inherent existence entail mere nonexistence.

One way of avoiding the extreme of nihilism is by contextualizing emptiness in terms of specific phenomena. For instance, in the *Sutra Unraveling the Thought of the Buddha* (*Samdhinirmochana Sutra*), the Buddha offers a way of understanding the Perfection of Wisdom sutras by contextualizing the notion of “identitylessness.”

**Nagarjuna and the Great Vehicle**

Although the Tibetan tradition attributes the origin of the Mahayana teachings to the Buddha himself, scholars from other sects have historically expressed doubts on this matter, and some contemporary scholars do so as well. It seems that even before the time of Nagarjuna (a great Buddhist teacher in India who lived around the second century C.E.) there were contrasting opinions about this. Consequently, we find in Nagarjuna’s writings, such as the *Precious Garland* (*Ratnavali*), an entire section in which Nagarjuna attempts to prove the authenticity of the Mahayana sutras. We also find such arguments in Maitreya’s *Ornament of Mahayana Sutras* (*Mahayana Sutralamkara*), in Shantideva’s *Guide to the Bodhisattva’s Way of Life* (*Bodhicaryavatara*), and in Bhavaviveka’s *Essence of the Middle Way* (*Madhyamakabridaya*).

For our purposes, let’s examine the core of Nagarjuna’s argument: If the path taught in the first turning of the wheel—the
thirty-seven aspects of the path to enlightenment—were the only path to enlightenment taught by the Buddha, then there would be no substantial difference between the spiritual process leading to the full enlightenment of a buddha and that leading to the individual liberation attained by an arhat. Another way of saying this would be that an individual who attained nirvana (the elimination of one’s own suffering) would be identical in understanding and abilities to one who attained the complete enlightenment of a buddha. If it is the case that these two states are identical, then the only substantial difference between them would be the time it takes to attain them: In order to attain buddhahood one must accumulate merit for three innumerable eons, whereas the individual liberation of an arhat can be attained far more quickly. Nagarjuna argues, however, that such a position (that the states are identical but for the time involved) is untenable.

Nagarjuna points out that one of the metaphysical ideas current in the earlier Buddhist traditions is that at the time of the Buddha’s final nirvana, which is known as “nirvana without residue”—conventionally, the point of death—the continuum of the being comes to an end. If this were the case, he argues, then the period of time during which Buddha Shakyamuni was able to work for the welfare of other sentient beings following his full awakening, which was his primary reason for accumulating merit and wisdom over three innumerable eons, was extraordinarily short. The Buddha left his royal life at the age of twenty-nine, attained full enlightenment at the age of thirty-six, and passed away at the age of eighty or eighty-one. This would imply that the Buddha was able to work for the benefit of other sentient beings for only a few decades. For Nagarjuna, this huge disparity between the duration of the Buddha’s training and the duration of his activity after enlightenment does not make sense.
He further argues that there is no basis for positing that the continuum of an individual’s mind would come to an end upon the attainment of final nirvana, because there is nothing that can bring about the total cessation of the continuum of consciousness. He asserts that if there is a sufficient antidote to any given phenomenon or event, then that antidote can be said to cause the complete cessation of the functioning of that phenomenon or event. (For example, a sufficient antidote of a bodily poison would cause the complete cessation of the functioning of that poison.) However, insofar as continuum of consciousness itself is concerned, no event or an agent can bring about its total destruction. Nagarjuna argues that the innate mind and the defilements or afflictions that obscure its inherent clarity are two separate things. Mental pollutants—defilements and afflictions—can be eliminated by practicing the powerful antidotes of the Buddha’s teachings. However, the continuum of the mind itself remains endless.

Nagarjuna claims that not only are the teachings found in the Sanskrit Mahayana tradition more profound than the teachings of the Pali tradition, but also that they do not contradict the Pali teachings. In a sense, one could say that the Mahayana scriptures elaborate on themes presented and first developed in the earlier teachings of the Buddha, giving deeper and more detailed explanations of the ideas presented there. In this manner, Nagarjuna argues the authenticity of the Mahayana teachings.

There is a process of reflection in the Sakya teachings of the Path and Fruition (Lamdré) that is helpful in determining the validity of teachings. This tradition speaks of four valid sources of knowledge: the valid scriptures of the Buddha, the valid commentaries, the valid teacher, and one’s own valid experience. In terms of the historical
evolution of these four factors, one can say that the valid scriptures, those taught by the Buddha, came into being first. Based upon the reading and interpretation of these scriptures, many valid commentaries and treatises evolved, explaining the most profound meaning of the Buddha’s teachings. Nagarjuna’s work is an example of this. Then, based upon the study and practice of these valid commentaries, certain practitioners may have mastered or actualized the themes presented in the scriptures and their commentaries, and thereby become valid teachers. Finally, on the basis of the teachings given by such teachers, valid experience or realization grows in the hearts of practitioners.

However, one becomes able to personally verify the validity of these four sources in a different order than that in which the sources historically evolved: in order to develop deep conviction in the validity of the Buddha’s teachings, one first needs a degree of experience of them. Thus one’s own valid experience becomes the first factor. When we speak of valid experience, there can be ordinary valid experiences and special ones. Although we may not possess extraordinary kinds of spiritual experiences at present, we can all attain ordinary types of spiritual experience. For example, when we reflect deeply upon the teachings on compassion, we can feel some impact in our minds and in our hearts—we feel aroused and experience a deep sense of unbearablelness. Similarly, when we reflect on the teachings on emptiness and no-self, it may bring about a deeper impact within us. These are spiritual experiences.

Once one has such spiritual experiences, even at an ordinary level, one has a taste of what it feels like to truly have these realizations. Based on that little experience, one can more meaningfully be convinced of the validity of the great spiritual realizations
that are talked about in the sutras, in the commentaries, and in the biographies of the masters. This process of beginning with our own experience and using it to verify the teachings and the teachers is quite important; one could say, in fact, that this is the only way open to us.

In *Fundamentals of the Middle Way*, Nagarjuna pays homage to the Buddha as a valid teacher who taught the ultimate nature of reality, who embodies the principle of great compassion, and who, acting exclusively through the power of his compassion for all sentient beings, has revealed the path that will lead to the overcoming of all erroneous views. Reflecting deeply upon our own experience, we will become able to validate what Nagarjuna says for ourselves and make our own determination of the authenticity of the Mahayana teachings.

**Origins of the Great Vehicle**

After the Buddha’s death, his teachings were compiled by some of his principal disciples. This compilation actually happened at three different points in time. It is certain that the Mahayana scriptures were not part of the three compilations that today constitute what is known as the Pali canon. Furthermore, when we examine the Mahayana scriptures themselves, we find statements that seem problematic in various ways. For example, the Perfection of Wisdom sutras state that they were taught by the Buddha at Vulture Peak in Rajagriha to a vast congregation of disciples. However, if you have visited the site in present-day Raigir, it is obvious that it is impossible for more than a few people to fit onto the summit. So, we have to understand the truth of these accounts at a different level, a level
Nagarjuna and Asanga (another great Indian teacher, who lived in the fourth century c.e.) played a critical role in the compilation of the Mahayana scriptures. They are identified as its principal custodians and interpreters. However, there is a gap of at least four hundred years between the death of the Buddha and the birth of Nagarjuna, and perhaps as many as nine hundred years difference between the Buddha’s death and the birth of Asanga. We might therefore ask what it is that ensures that the Mahayana scriptures were indeed continually transmitted from the time of the Buddha to the times of Nagarjuna and Asanga. In the Mahayana scriptures, that link is the bodhisattvas, such as Maitreya and Manjushri. It is said that, in the case of Nagarjuna, it is the bodhisattva Manjushri who transmits the lineage. Bhavaviveka explicitly states in his text *The Blaze of Reasoning* (*Tarkajvala*) that the great bodhisattvas compiled the Mahayana scriptures. These accounts create a rather complex picture.

How are we to understand these statements about the origins of the Mahayana scriptures in relation to conventional notions of time? We can probably say that the Mahayana scriptures were not taught by the historical Buddha to the general public in any conventional sense.

Furthermore, it may be the case that Mahayana scriptures, such as the Perfection of Wisdom sutras, were taught to a group of a few individuals whom the Buddha regarded as most suited to receive those teachings. This accords with the Buddhist assertion that a buddha transmits teachings in ways tailored to the diverse aptitudes and diverse physiological and psychological states of practitioners.
Thus, in this context, the teachings may have been transmitted on a plane that transcends conventional understandings of time and space. In this way, we may understand the origin of Mahayana texts, and the origin of the *Heart Sutra*. 