

The Three Turnings of the Wheel of Dharma

by Renshin and Taizen Verkuilen

Shakyamuni Buddha taught for forty-five years after his enlightenment. His enlightenment opened his mind to see the entire universe as one conscious organism, made up of innumerable interdependent beings. Knowing this ultimate understanding was too much for many of his followers, he adapted his teaching methods to match the needs and abilities of his immediate audience. During his teaching career he taught on many levels. After his death they were categorized into what we know as The Three Turnings of the Wheel of Dharma.¹

The First Turning

Confirming the identity of the self: Analysis of self through the use of cognition, reflection, and observation -- Personal liberation.

In the First Turning the Buddhist practitioner undertakes an analysis of the self and its constituents in order to understand the functioning of the self, and to resolve the conditioned states that are at the root of suffering.

The First Turning of the Wheel of Dharma bore fruit during Buddha's lifetime. He formulated his initial teachings in a conceptual and logical way using the words and methods of his time. The goal was to show the fleeting ephemeral nature of existence, including human life. An analysis of the self cannot locate any self-subsistent entity. With no permanent self to perfect or defend, negotiating the path to awakening replaces striving for gain in the world. The outcome of Buddha's teaching of no permanent self if carried to completion, results in liberation from the tyranny of *dukkha*. Achieving personal liberation is known as becoming an Arhat.

A summary list of Buddha's teaching on the nature of the self:

- The Four Noble Truths are: suffering (*dukkha*) arises, suffering has a cause, the cessation of suffering is possible, and the path to its cessation is The Eightfold Path.
- The Five *Skandhas* are the constituents of the impermanent self: form, feelings, perception, impulses, consciousness
- Eighteen *Dhatu*: Form and functioning of the senses, perception, and consciousness

¹ See Reb Anderson. *The Third Turning of the Wheel*. Rodmell Press, 2012 for an in depth study of the Three Turnings.

- The Twelve Links of the Chain of Causation are ignorance, activity or behavior, karmic consciousness, name and form, sense organs, contact, sensation, desire, attachment, existence, birth, and death. The Twelve Links of the Chain of Causation provide a concise view of the cyclical nature of the causes and conditions that perpetrate the cycle of *dukkha*. Buddha taught that *dukkha* has no end, unless this cycle is understood and creative actions are taken to sever the Chain, it proceeds through birth and death, repeating itself again and again.
- Introduction to the Buddhist principles of impermanence, interdependence, and intimacy.
- Emptiness is understood as the Universe creates each being.

The Second Turning

Confirming the interdependent nature of life – Universal liberation

The teachings underlying the Second Turning were given by Buddha during his lifetime, passed down orally, and compiled in written form about 500 years after Buddha's death. The Second Turning taught the direct experience of the oneness of reality, apart from conceptual mediation.

The Second Turning views the conceptual basis of the First Turning as incomplete. Yet without the ethical basis that the First Turning generates, the Second Turning lacks emotional connection and stability. The Second Turning describes universal liberation.

Experiential understanding of universal reality:

- Recognizes the First Turning's teachings as incomplete.
- Asserts analysis and logic are not the final answer to an individual's life question.
- All mental formations and consciousness arise from mutually dependent elements.
- All phenomena are viewed as interdependent hence lacking intrinsic selfhood. ▪

Universal liberation is possible because all beings are interdependently related. ▪

Emptiness is understood as each being creates the universe.

- The universal liberation of the Second Turning is the concern of a Bodhisattva.

The Third Turning

Confirming the relationship of identity and interdependence – Intimacy

The Third Turning arose because of the necessity to resolve the seeming conflict between the personal approach of First Turning and the universal experience of the Second. The Third Turning focuses on the complementary relationship of concept and immediacy. We are creatures of both thought and experience, made whole in the experiential understanding of their interplay. The Third Turning facilitates the inner dialogue between the dualistic pairs of our makeup. *It contains the comprehensive teachings of the resolution of conditioned states, integration of freedom from conditioned states, and living that freedom.*

The Third Turning acknowledges that the personal and universal aspects are of equal importance, and must be simultaneously understood and developed. Both the personal and universal must be dealt with. The two aspects act interdependently, with an equal level of consequence.

Personal awakening seeks individual liberation, addressing one's distinct and unique requirements. It acts primarily on personal karma, the components of the self that condition an individual's personality. Personal karma has its roots in culture, education, nurturing, volitional acts, and the immediate environment. The ideal is the Arhat, an individual who achieves the goal of personal awakening. Generally speaking, the teachings for the personal aspect of awakening follow the Buddhist analysis and teaching of what constitutes the self.

Universal awakening recognizes the interconnection of all beings. It addresses the collective and ultimate characteristics of the seeker. It acts on universal karma. Universal karma is defined as the shared action of the universe conditioning an individual's life, arising from the extensive actions of those presently living and as well as all antecedent beings. The ideal of universal awakening is the Bodhisattva, one who dedicates his or her life to the spiritual liberation of all beings. The teachings for the universal aspect of awakening are the perspective of the Mahayana tradition.

Learning the Personal without the Universal deprives one of the fullness of one's insight. Without the universal, the personal tends toward the moralistic and scholastic; without the personal, the

universal stands apart from the world. Taking them together moves us toward a more complete understanding of our idiosyncratic and shared spiritual issues.

Refining the relationship of concept and realization leads to:

- Recognition of the complementary relationship and individual reality of dualistic pairs
- Unified understanding of the harmonious interplay of the Personal (First Turning) and Universal (Second Turning) aspects of the self
- Resolution of apparent contradiction of the logic of the First Turning and the experiential realization of the Second Turning. The outcome of effort is naturalness, unencumbered activities, and authentic personhood.

The First, Second, and Third Turnings of the Wheel of Dharma

First Turning: Identity Personal	Teaching	Conceptual and logical understanding of the constituents of mind and its functioning.
	Method	Thinking. Analysis of self through the use cognition, reflection, and observation.
	Result	Knowledge of Four Noble Truths, Twelve Links of the Chain of Causation, Five <i>Skandhas</i> , Eighteen <i>Dhatu</i> , etc. Life experiences are fleeting, unstable, and no permanent self can be found. Personal liberation is the goal of practice. Emptiness is understood as the Universe creates each being.
Second Turning: Interdependence Universal	Teaching	Asserts First Turning’s teachings analysis and logic are incomplete. All mental formations and consciousness arise from interdependent elements.
	Method	Not-thinking. Experiential and introspective understanding of universal reality. Not-thinking recognizes spiritual autonomy, absolute equality, and intimacy of all beings. (The term “not” or “no” in Buddhism points to the realization that all beings, events, and “things” have an interdependent nature.)
	Result	All phenomena are viewed as interdependent hence lacking intrinsic selfhood. Universal liberation arises within the recognition that all phenomena are intimately interdependent. Emptiness is understood as each being creates the universe.
Third Turning: Intimate Relationships	Teaching	Unified understanding of the harmonious interplay of the Personal (First Turning) and Universal (Second Turning) aspects of the self
	Method	Nonthinking. Recognition of complementary relationship and individual reality of dualistic pairs, their creative interchange, and the wisdom and healing that arises from their rapport.
	Result	Resolution of apparent contradiction of the logic of the First Turning and the experiential realization of the Second Turning. Outcome is naturalness, unencumbered activities, and authentic personhood. Each being retains its individuality while being in an intimate relationship with all other beings.