

2 The Dīgha Nikāya: *The Discourse of the Lion's Roar of a Wheel-Turning Monarch* (ca. 5th–1st Century BCE)

Introduced by Sven Bretfeld

Introduction



Figure 1a and 1b: Two reliefs from Andhra. The left shows the indepictable Buddha represented by the Wheel of the Doctrine (*dharmacakra*) above an empty throne. The right one shows a Cakravartin, a Wheel-turning monarch, possibly Aśoka.

In the previous chapter, we encountered the most important symbol representing the religious and the political sphere: the wheel. Both religious truth as an institutionalised tradition in time and space, and the manifestation of political authority on earth are symbolised as wheels. Thus there are two wheels: the wheel of the doctrine (*dharmacakra*), see e.g. figure 1a, and the wheel of authority (*ājñācakra*), see e.g. figure 1b. The historical origin of this twin symbolism is unclear, but, in texts, both can be used as abstract metaphors similar to the European expression ‘religious and political spheres/fields.’ Both represent distinct domains of society – each with its own logic, language, organisation, and authority structure. Unlike the distinctly static European field and sphere metaphors, however, the wheel is a dynamic symbol. As long as the respective wheel is spinning, the religious community or the kingdom/empire remains

Sven Bretfeld, Norwegian University of Science and Technology, Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies

functional. It stops or disappears once the king is dead, or when a Buddha's dharma has completely been forgotten on earth.

The initial momentum of each wheel is imparted by the two figures described in the previous chapter. The wheel of the doctrine is set into motion by a Buddha, with his first preaching. The historical Buddha Gautama is believed to have done this in a park, close to the north-eastern Indian town Varanasi, where five ascetics witnessed him preaching the Four Noble Truths for the first time, eight weeks after his awakening. The wheel of authority has a concrete material symbol, called the 'wheel-treasure.' It is a kind of sculpture of a 1000-spoked wheel, which spontaneously materialises whenever a king displays the characteristics of a wheel-turning monarch. At the moment of his death, it likewise miraculously disappears.

The following passage, again from the early Buddhist scriptural collection *Dīgha Nikāya*, makes clear that a wheel-turning monarch is – unlike an ordinary king – a ruler who governs his kingdom strictly according to religious principles (*dharma*). Even his conquests of other countries happen without bloodshed, as the inhabitants of invaded countries welcome him, surrender voluntarily to his peaceful authority, and happily adopt his righteous laws. In other words, the wheel-turning monarch expands the influence of dharma in the world, and thus once again highlights the twin figuration of wheel-turning monarch and *tathāgata* (the “Thus-Come”, one of Buddha Gautama's titles). Both enlighten the world with the dharma, one with the religious instruments of a preacher, the other by political means.

Bibliographical Information

Thomas W. Rhys Davids and Joseph Estlin Carpenter, eds. *The Dīgha Nikāya*. 3 vols. London: Pali Text Society, 1890–1911. Vol. 3 (1911); 61–77.

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5. “But what, sire, is the duty of an Ariyan wheel-turning monarch?” “It is this, my son: Yourself depending on the Dhamma, honouring it, revering it, cherishing it, doing homage to it and venerating it, having the Dhamma as your badge and banner, acknowledging the Dhamma as your master, you should establish guard, ward and protection according to Dhamma for your own household, your troops, your nobles and vassals, for Brahmins and householders, town and country folk, ascetics and Brahmins, for beasts and birds.¹ Let no crime² prevail in your kingdom, and to those who are in need, give property. And whatever ascetics and Brahmins in your kingdom have renounced the life of sensual infatuation and are devoted to forbearance and gentleness, each one taming himself, each one calming himself and each one striving for the end of craving, from time to time you should go to them and consult them as to what is wholesome and what is unwholesome, that is blameworthy and what is blameless, what is to be followed and what is not to be followed, and what action will in the long run lead to harm and sorrow, and what to welfare and happiness. Having listened to them, you should avoid evil and do what is good.³ That, my son, is the duty of an Ariyan wheel-turning monarch.”

“Yes, sire”, said the King, and he performed the duties of an Ariyan wheel-turning monarch. And as he did so, on the fast-day of the fifteenth, when he had washed his head and gone up to the verandah on top of his palace for the fast-day, the sacred Wheel-Treasure appeared to him, thousand-spoked, complete with felloe, hub and all appurtenances. Then the King thought: “I have heard that when a duly anointed [p. 61/62] Khattiya king sees such a wheel on the fast-day of the fifteenth, he will become a wheel-turning monarch. May I become such a monarch!”⁴

6. ‘Then, rising from his seat, covering one shoulder with his robe, the King took a gold vessel in his left hand, sprinkled the Wheel with his right hand, and said: “May the noble Wheel-Treasure turn, may the noble Wheel-Treasure conquer!” The Wheel turned to the east, and the King followed it with his fourfold army. And in whatever country the Wheel stopped, the King took up residence with his fourfold army. And those who opposed him in the eastern region came and said: “Come, Your Majesty, welcome! We are yours, Your Majesty. Rule us, Your Majesty.” And the King said: “Do not take life. Do not take what is not given. Do not commit sexual misconduct. Do not

1 [editorial note 788 in the original] A truly Buddhist touch! Asoka, who made some effort to live up to the ideal of a wheel-turning monarch, established animal hospitals.

2 [editorial note 789 in the original] *Adhamma-kāro*: ‘non-Dhamma-doing’.

3 [editorial note 790 in the original] The word rendered ‘good’ is the same, *kusala*, as rendered just previously by ‘wholesome’. The literal ‘skilful’ is also sometimes to be preferred. A case where variation in translation is desirable — but it should be indicated.

4 [editorial note 791 in the original] All as in DN 17.

tell lies. Do not drink strong drink. Be moderate in eating.”⁵ And those who had opposed him in the eastern region became his subjects.’

7. ‘Then the Wheel turned south, west, and north . . . (as verse 6). Then the Wheel-Treasure, having conquered the lands from sea to sea, returned to the royal capital and stopped before the King’s palace as he was trying a case, as if to adorn the royal palace.’

References

- Davids, Thomas W. Rhys and Joseph Estlin Carpenter, eds. *The Dīgha Nikāya*, vol. 3. 3 vols. London: Pali Text Society, 1911. [DN]
- Warder, A.K. *Indian Buddhism*. 2nd, revised ed. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1980.

⁵ [editorial note 792 in the original] But see n.472. Warder (as n.801) has ‘rule (collect taxes) in moderation’.