

Excerpt [edited] From The Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism on The Dharma Wheel of the Four Truths - Lopez, Donald S., Jr., Buswell, Robert E., Jr. This material may be protected by copyright

Catuḥ-satya-dharmacakra. (T. bden bzhi'i chos 'khor; Pali: Dhamma-cakka-ppavattana). In Sanskrit, lit. “the dharma wheel of the four truths”; the wheel of the dharma (DHARMAČAKRA) delivered in R̥ṢIPATANA. In this first turning of the wheel of dharma, the Buddha set in motion a wheel with **twelve aspects [dvādasākāra]**, by setting forth the four noble truths three separate times. He addressed the original group of five disciples, telling them that they should not fall into extremes of asceticism or indulgence, and laid out for them the eightfold noble path.

1. He set forth the four truths the first time by saying that the five aggregates qualified by birth, aging, sickness, and death are the noble truth of suffering, craving is the noble truth of their origination, the elimination of that craving is the noble truth of their cessation, and that the eightfold noble path is the noble truth of the path leading to their cessation.
2. He set forth the four truths a second time when, in the same extended discourse, he said, “I knew well that the truth of suffering was what I had to comprehend; I knew well that the truth of cessation was what I had to realize; and I knew well that the truth of the path was what I had to cultivate.”
3. He then set forth the four truths a third and final time when he said, “I comprehended the truth of suffering, I eliminated the true origin of suffering, I realized the true cessation of suffering, and I cultivated the true path.”

There are **twelve aspects** to this triple wheel because for each of the three stages there is (1) a vision that sees reality directly with the wisdom eye that is free from contaminants, (2) a knowledge that is free from doubt, (3) an understanding of the way things are, and (4) an intellectual comprehension of an idea never heard of before. ¶

The SAMDHINIRMOCANASŪTRA calls the triple turning of the catuḥ-satya-dharmacakra with its **twelve aspects** the “first turning of the wheel.” According to its commentaries, it is a demonstration that all dharmas, the skandhas, sense-fields (ĀYATANA), elements (DHĀTU), and so forth, exist. This teaching is provisional (NEYĀRTHA) because it must be interpreted in order to understand what the Buddha really means.

A second “middle” dispensation, called “the dharma wheel of signlessness”, is the teaching of the Mahāyāna doctrine, as set forth in the PRAJÑĀPĀRAMITĀ SŪTRAS, that all dharmas, even buddhahood and NIRVĀṆA, are without any intrinsic nature. The first turning of the wheel is directed toward the ŚRĀVAKAs and PRATYEKA-BUDDHAs, who tremble at this doctrine of emptiness. The second turning is also not a final, definitive (NĪTĀRTHA) teaching.

The ultimate teaching is the final turning of the wheel of dharma, called “the dharma wheel that makes a fine delineation”, i.e., the Samdhinirmocanasūtra itself. Here the Buddha, through his amanuensis Paramārthasamudgata, sets forth in clear and plain language what he means: that dharmas are endowed with three natures (TRISVABHĀVA) and each of those is, in a distinctive way, free from intrinsic nature (niḥsvabhāva).

The doctrine of the first, middle, and final wheels of dharma is not intended to be a historical presentation of the development of Buddhist doctrine, but the first turning does loosely equate to the early teachings of the Buddha, the second to early Mahāyāna, and the third to the emergence of the later YOGĀCĀRA school of Mahāyāna philosophy. In Tibet, there is no argument over this first turning of the wheel of dharma: it is always understood to refer to the basic teachings of the Buddha for those of a HĪNAYĀNA persuasion. There is, however, substantial argument over the status of the second and third turnings of the wheel.

From other sources:

The Twelve aspects of the four Noble truths [**dvādasākāra**] represent a deeper understanding of each truth through three stages:

1. realizing the truth,
2. recognizing the task associated with the truth, and
3. confirming the accomplishment of the task.