

Excerpt From The Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism  
Lopez, Donald S., Jr., Buswell, Robert E., Jr.

“Saṃdhinirmocanasūtra. (T. Mdo sde dgongs ’grel; C. Jieshenmi jing; J. Gejinmikyō; K. Haesimmil kyōng 解深密經). In Sanskrit, variously interpreted to mean the sūtra “Unfurling the Real Meaning,” “Explaining the Thought,” or “Unraveling the Bonds”; one of the most important Mahāyāna sūtras, especially for the YOGĀCĀRA school. The sūtra is perhaps most famous for its delineation of the three turnings of the wheel of the dharma (DHARMACAKRA-PRAVARTANA), which would become an influential schema for classifying the teachings of the Buddha.

The sūtra has ten chapters. The **first four chapters** deal with the nature of the ultimate (PARAMĀRTHA) and how it is to be understood. The **fifth chapter** discusses the nature of consciousness, including the storehouse consciousness (ĀLAYAVIJÑĀNA) where predispositions (VĀSANĀ) are deposited and ripen. The **sixth chapter** discusses the three natures (TRISVABHĀVA). In the **seventh chapter**, the division of the Buddha’s teachings into the provisional (NEYĀRTHA) and the definitive (NĪTĀRTHA) is set forth. The **eighth chapter** explains how to develop ŚAMATHA and VIPAŚYANĀ. The **ninth chapter** describes the ten bodhisattva BHŪMIs and the **final chapter** describes the nature of buddhahood. Each of these chapters contains important passages that are cited in subsequent commentaries and treatises.

Perhaps the the most influential of all the sūtra’s chapters is the seventh, which discusses the three turnings of the wheel of the dharma (dharmacakrapravartana). There, the bodhisattva Paramārthasamudgata explains that the first turning of the wheel had occurred at R̥ṢIPATANA (the Deer Park at SĀRNĀTH), where the Buddha had taught the FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS to those of the ŚRĀVAKA (“listener, disciple”) vehicle. This first turning of the wheel is called the CATUḤSATYADHARMACAKRA, the “dharma wheel of the four truths.” The bodhisattva says, “This wheel of dharma turned by the Buddha is surpassable, an occasion [for refutation], provisional, and subject to dispute.” Referring presumably to the perfection of wisdom (PRAJÑĀPĀRAMITĀ) sūtras, the bodhisattva then goes on to explain that the Buddha then turned the wheel of dharma a second time for those who had entered the Mahāyāna, teaching them the doctrine of emptiness (ŚŪNYATĀ), that phenomena are “unproduced, unextinguished, originally quiescent, and inherently beyond sorrow. Commentators would call this second turning of the wheel the ALAKṢAṆA-DHARMACAKRA, “the dharma wheel of signlessness.”

But this wheel also is provisional. The Buddha finally turned the wheel of doctrine a third time for those of all vehicles, clearly differentiating how things exist. “This wheel of doctrine turned by the BHAGAVAT is unsurpassed, not an occasion [for refutation], of definitive meaning; it is indisputable.” Commentators would call this third turning of the wheel the PARAMĀRTHAVINIŚCAYADHARMACAKRA, “the dharma wheel for ascertaining the ultimate”; it is also called “the dharma wheel that makes a fine delineation” (\*SUVIBHAKTA-DHARMACAKRA). The sūtra thus takes something of an historical perspective on the Buddha’s teaching, declaring both that his first sermon on the four noble truths addressed to śrāvakas and his teaching of the perfection of wisdom addressed to bodhisattvas was not his final and most clearly delineated view. That consummate view, his true intention, is found in the third turning of the wheel of dharma, a wheel that includes, at very least, the Saṃdhi-nirmocanasūtra itself.