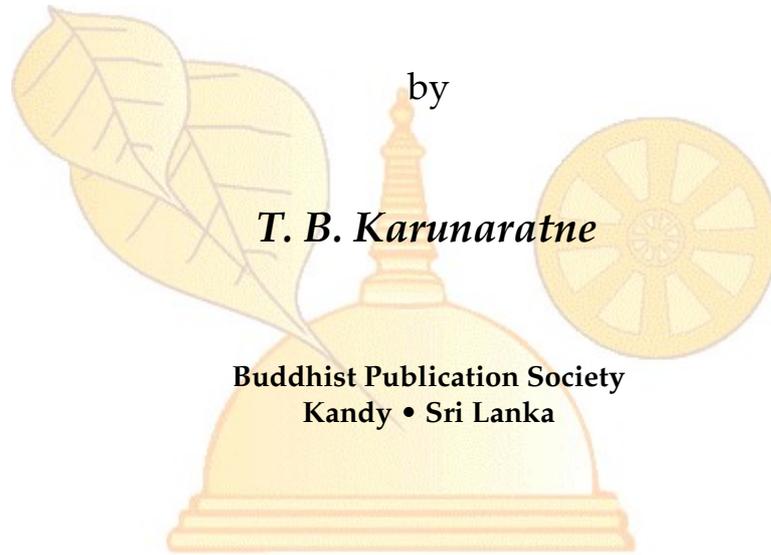


The Buddhist Wheel Symbol



by

T. B. Karunaratne

**Buddhist Publication Society
Kandy • Sri Lanka**

The Wheel Publication No. 137/138

First published: 1969.

BPS Online Edition © (2008)

Digital Transcription Source: BPS Transcription Project

For free distribution. This work may be republished, reformatted, reprinted and redistributed in any medium. However, any such republication and redistribution is to be made available to the public on a free and unrestricted basis, and translations and other derivative works are to be clearly marked as such.

The plates reproduced here are drawings by the author.

Contents

The Buddhist Wheel Symbol.....	3
I. The Ratana-Cakka.....	3
II. The Dhamma-Cakka.....	10
III. The Lakkhaṇa-Cakka.....	12
IV. The Bhava-Cakka.....	13
V. The Significance of the Wheel.....	14
Plates.....	16

The Buddhist Wheel Symbol

All ancient religions have in the course of time developed many symbols to express various doctrinal concepts visually. Buddhism does not lag behind in this sphere but in fact has given rise to many new symbols in addition to what it has derived from the common Indian heritage. To these symbols which were adopted from pre-Buddhist India, Buddhism has given new interpretations to suit its own purpose. Of these, the *dhamma-cakka*, the ever moving Wheel of Law, is the most prominent symbol of the Buddhists.

The Pali commentaries of Sri Lanka refer to a number of wheels recognised by Buddhists. Buddhaghosa mentions *sampatti-cakka*, the wheel of happiness, *lakkhaṇa-cakka*, the wheel symbol on the soles of the Buddha's feet, *rathaṅga-cakka*, the chariot wheel, *Iriyāpatha Cakka*, the wheel of movement or postures, *dāna-cakka*, the wheel of liberality, *ratana-cakka*, the ideal wheel of a universal monarch, *dhamma-cakka*, the wheel of law of the Buddha, and *urasi-cakka*, the wheel of torture.¹ To this list Gurulugomi² adds *praharaṇa-cakra*, the discus, *asani-cakka*, the wheel of thunderbolt, *dāru-cakka*, the wheel-right's wooden wheel, and *saṃsāra-cakka*, the Wheel of Life. The last mentioned wheel is also known as *bhava-cakka*, the Wheel of Becoming. In our discussion on the iconography of the wheel, universally accepted as the distinctive symbol of Buddhists from very early times, we are concerned mainly with the *ratana-cakka*, the *dhamma-cakka*, the *lakkhaṇa-cakka* and the *saṃsāracakka* or the *bhava-cakka*.

The *ratana-*, *dhamma*, and *lakkhaṇa-cakkas* in their unadorned forms are identical, and are represented in art in the likeness of a chariot wheel (*rathaṅga-cakka*), whereas in their elaborate or perfect forms (*sabbākāraparipūraṇaṃ*) the *ratana-cakka* and the *dhamma-cakka* assume the same form while the *lakkhaṇa-cakka* differs from the former in detail. The *saṃsāra-* or *bhava-cakka*, differing in form as well as in significance, is a later development (see Chapter IV).

I. The Ratana-Cakka

The *ratana-cakka*, the ideal wheel, is described as the divine wheel that appears to one who is destined to be a *cakkavatti-rājā*, a universal monarch. In this connection it must be mentioned that the Buddha is considered the spiritual counterpart of a universal monarch. A universal monarch is the ideal layman (*āgārika-ratana*). He is the highest among those who enjoy worldly pleasures (*kāmabhogīnaṃ aggo*). On the other hand, the Buddha is the ideal recluse (*anāgārika-ratana*), the highest among those who have removed the covering of defilements (*viwaṭṭacchadanānaṃ aggo*). Both the Buddha and the universal monarch are possessed of the *mahāpurisa-lakkhaṇa*, the auspicious marks of a Great Being. It is said that a person born with such marks is destined to either be a universal monarch or a Buddha, an Enlightened One, depending on the course of life each one prefers to pursue. A universal monarch is blessed with the seven unique possessions (*satta ratana*), namely the ideal wheel (*cakka-ratana*), the ideal elephant (*hatthi-ratana*), the ideal horse (*assa-ratana*), the ideal gem (*maṇi-ratana*), the ideal wife (*itthi-ratana*), the ideal householder (*gahapati-ratana*), and the ideal counsellor (*parināyaka-ratana*).³ Of these, the ideal wheel is the most important, because the appearance of this is the first indication that the king has become a universal monarch.

¹ Papañcasūdanī, Part 2, p. 27 ff. (P.T.S.).

Sampattiyāṇaṃ lakkhaṇaṇca—rathange iriyāpathe
Dāne ratana dhammūra—cakkādīsu ca dissati.

² *Dharmapradīpikāva* edited by the Venerable Weliwitiye Soratha Maha Thera, p. 186.

³ *Dīgha Nikāya*, Vol. II, p. 172, (P.T.S.).

It is stated that a king having perfected the ten virtues of a universal monarch observes the eight precepts on a full-moon day and then retires to the top-most floor of his mansion, when the divine wheel rises from the eastern Ocean and comes through the sky like a second full moon. It circumambulates the mansion where the monarch awaits its arrival, and appears close to the window within his sight. When the monarch sees it, he pays it due homage and sprinkles water over it from a golden vessel and wishes it to go forth. On the command of the monarch, the great wheel starts on its mission and the conquest of the world begins. From the time the *cakka-ratana* appears, the monarch concerned is entitled to the designation *rāja cakkavatti*—the sovereign mover of the wheel—and along with his retinue he follows it through the sky. Wherever the wheel goes the kings of those regions pay homage to the wheel and accept the suzerainty of the universal monarch. Just as a universal monarch causes the ideal wheel to turn, the Buddha too sets the Wheel of Law (*dhamma-cakka*) in motion.

The *Mahā Sudassana Suttanta* of the *Dīgha Nikāya* describes the ideal wheel of a universal monarch as having a nave (*nābhi*), thousand spokes (*sahassārāṇi*) and a felly (*nemi*)⁴ When the sculptors represented the wheel symbol on the Asokan capitals they seemed to have followed the description as given in *Dīgha Nikāya* (Pl. II, Fig. 2). This impression of the wheel set the pattern for later sculptors who elaborated on it (Pl. II, Figs. 3, 4 and 5).

The elaborate or perfect form of *cakka-ratana* which is identical with the *dhamma-cakka* is depicted in art with certain details that are normally not found in ordinary forms of the wheel symbol.⁵ The component parts of an ordinary *cakka* are the nave, the spokes, the felly and *nemi maṇi*, the bubble-like features adhering to the rim, in between the spokes. On the other hand, at Sāñchī, Bārhut and Amarāvati there are representations of the perfect form of *ratana-cakka* displaying certain features, of which the most characteristic are the adornments round the felly of the wheel, which to my knowledge, no one has so far interpreted satisfactorily. In this respect Pāli and Sinhalese literary works of Sri Lanka give a vivid description of the perfect form of the *ratana-cakka* explaining what these features are and what they signify. For example, in *Sumaṅgalavilāsinī*, Buddhaghosa (5th century A.C.) describes the perfect form of the *ratana-cakka* thus:

“As this wheel is possessed of divine qualities it is described as ‘*dibbaṃ*’; as it has thousand spokes it is said to be *sahassāraṃ*; as it has a nave and a felly it is said to be ‘*sanābhikaṃ, sanemikaṃ,*’ as it is perfect in every respect it is described as ‘*sabbākāra-paripūraṃ.*’”

The nave, by reason of which the *cakka-ratana* is described as having a nave, is made entirely of sapphire. In the centre of the nave there is a hole lined with silver, and in it indentation clean and shining, which appears like the teeth of a smiling face. The outer rim of the nave is made of silver and it has the resemblance of a full moon with a hole in its centre. Around the hole of the nave decorative lines are shown clearly. Thus the nave of this *cakka-ratana* is perfect in every respect.

The spokes, by reason of which the *cakka-ratana* is described as having thousand spokes, are all made of seven kinds of precious jewels. They shine like the rays of the sun. The knobs and the decorative line work are well marked on them. Thus the spokes of the *cakka-ratana* are perfect in every respect.

The felly, by reason of which the *cakka-ratana* is described as having a felly, is made of pure and polished, deep-red coral. The circular lines demarcating the joints of the felly shine like a strip of pure *jambunadi* gold reddish in hue. Thus the felly of the *cakka-ratana* is perfect in every respect.

⁴ Ibid., p. 172.

⁵ Sir John Marshall and A. Foucher, *The Monuments of Sāñchī*, Vol. 3, Plate LXXIV, Fig 3. a.

Around the felly of the *cakka-ratana* there are one hundred coral shafts—one shaft in-between every set of ten spokes. These coral shafts are hollow inside and have holes on the surface as in flutes. When the wind blows, these shafts produce notes as sweet as the music of the five musical instruments played upon by a talented musician. These melodious notes are lovely, enticing, desirable, and intoxicating. Surmounting these shafts are white umbrellas (*chatta*), and on either side of these there are two spears (*satti*) to which garlands are fastened. Thus surrounding the felly of the *cakka-ratana*, there are one hundred white umbrellas and two hundred spears supporting garlands. Inside the two holes on either side of the hub of the *cakka-ratana* there are two faces of lions, from the mouths of which issue forth a pair of pearl garlands as thick as the trunks of two mature palm trees, and which are resplendent like the rays of the moon, surpassing in beauty the heavenly river. At the end of these pearl garlands there are two tassels woven of red fluff, resembling the early morning sun. When the *cakka-ratana* together with these two garlands goes forth revolving in the sky it appears as if three wheels are revolving together. Thus is the ideal wheel perfect in every respect.”⁶

It must be mentioned that one of the key words in the text quoted above has been rendered incorrectly in the Pāli Text Society (P.T.S.) edition of *Sumaṅgalavilāsini* as well as in *Mahābodhivaṃsa*. Describing the features that adorn the felly of the wheel, the P.T.S. texts run as follows: “*Tassa kho pana pavāla daṇḍassa uparisetacchattaṃ ubhosu passesu samosarita-kusuma-dāmānām dve pantiyo ti; evaṃ samosarita-kusuma-dāma-panti satadvaya-parivāra-setacchatta-dhārana-pavāla-daṇḍa-satena ...*”⁷ According to this reading, attending on the white umbrella there are rows (*panti*) of garlands, and altogether there are two hundred such rows. Evidently this conveys a wrong idea. Here the correct reading as found in Siamese and Burmese script editions of the particular texts is as follows: “*Tassa kho pana pavāla-daṇḍassa upari-setacchattaṃ ubhosu passesu samosarita-kusumadāma dve sattiyo ti; evaṃ samosarita-kusuma-dāma-satti-satadvaya-parivāra-setacchatta-dhārana-pavāla-daṇḍa-satena ...*”⁸ ‘*Kusumadāma-satti*’, meaning a spear bearing garlands, as found in the latter editions, is correct for it conveys the correct sense. Moreover, the Sinhalese translation of *Mahābodhivaṃsa* known as the *Sinhala Bodhivaṃsaya* (13th century A.C.), translates the corresponding passage thus: “*E pabalu daṇḍu mattehi dhavalcchatrayakā dālayehi elvana lada maldam āti aḍayaṭi dekekā dekekāyi mese elvana lada maldam āti aḍayaṭi desiyakin pririvarana lada dhavalacchatra siyayak darannāvu ...*”⁹ As evidenced by the above passage, the *Sinhala Bodhivaṃsaya* is clear on this point and renders the Pāli word ‘*satti*’ as ‘*aḍayaṭi*’ (Sk. *ardha-yasti*) meaning a short spear. The author of the Pāli *Mahābodhivaṃsa* has incorporated in his work the passage directly from *Sumaṅgalavilāsini* itself. The reading ‘*kusumadāma-panti*’ may have been a scribe’s error which the editors of the P.T.S. texts have accepted as the correct form.¹⁰ Moreover, as the ensuing pages will show, the iconographical features of the wheel symbols also prove the correctness of the Siamese and Burmese script editions of *Sumaṅgalavilāsini* and Pāli *Mahābodhivaṃsa*.

The description of the *cakka-ratana* in *Sumaṅgalavilāsini* as well as in the Pāli *Mahābodhivaṃsa* and its Sinhalese version clearly indicate that a perfect form of the *cakka-ratana* (in this case *dhamma-cakka* is also implied) has one hundred white umbrellas attended by two hundred spears bearing garlands right round its felly. Now let us focus our attention on some of the actual representations of the wheel and other relevant decorative elements depicted in the earliest specimens of Buddhist art, which have a bearing on our discussion. Some of the elaborate wheel symbols from Sānchi, Bārhut and Amarāvati display certain decorative

⁶ *Sumaṅgalavilāsini*, Part 2, p. 617 ff. (P.T.S.), (Commentary to the *Mahāpadāna Sutta*).

⁷ *Mahābodhivaṃsa*, (P.T.S.), edited by S. Arthur Strong, p. 68.

⁸ *Mahābodhivaṃsa*, Sinhalese script edition by the Venerable P. Sārānanda Thero, 1898, p. 206.

⁹ *Sinhala Bodhivaṃsaya*, edited by the Venerable Baddegama Dhammaratana Thera, pp. 204–205.

¹⁰ *Mahābodhivaṃsa*, (P.T.S.), p. 67 ff. In a footnote ‘*satti*’ is given as a variant reading.

elements such as *nandipāda* or *triratana* symbols and semi-circular features in alternating positions right round the felly of the wheel (Pl. II, Figs. 3, 4 and 5).

At the outset it must be mentioned that nowhere in Indian or Sinhalese art has the umbrella (*chatta*) and spear (*satti*) been depicted in association with the wheel symbol exactly as described in the texts quoted above. But there are instances where this motif in separate form—i.e. umbrella attended by two spears (*satti*) bearing garlands or flags is depicted. Bas reliefs from Sāñchī and Sri Lanka show stūpas surmounted by umbrellas attended by spears as described (Pl. III, Figs. 8 and 9). Sāñchī has reliefs where processions etc. are depicted showing people carrying spears to which garlands are fastened exactly as described in *Sumaṅgalavilāsini* and other texts (Pl. III, Fig. 11). Spears in all these instances invariably terminate in the triple-pronged (*triśūla*) form commonly referred to as *nandipāda* or *triratana*. However, it must be mentioned that '*satti*' can mean a spear with a single blade (*śūla*) as well. In this connection umbrellas displaying two garlands hanging from either end of the canopy are also important (Pl. III, Fig. 12 b). This form of the umbrellas can be interpreted as another mode of representing the umbrella and spear motif. It is significant that such umbrellas are depicted as surmounting the wheel symbol at Sāñchī and elsewhere (Pl. VI, Fig. 19). Bearing these facts in mind when we trace the evolution of the decorative motifs edging the felly of the wheel symbols under discussion, we can clearly see the connection between the literary tradition in Sri Lanka and the earliest specimens of Buddhist art of India.

In depicting an umbrella on the felly of a wheel, it has in course of time degenerated in form, as usual in art. The umbrella even in its most elaborate form has been already highly stylized when depicted in early sculpture at Sāñchī and Bārhut (Pl. III, Fig. 12 a and b). It is usually flat and wheel-like in shape and clearly shows the spokes that support the ribs of the umbrella. Two garlands are shown as hanging from either side. Pl. III, Fig. 12 c, shows an umbrella from a coin, where the garlands have apparently merged with the umbrella proper thus giving it the resemblance of an arrow head. The spokes and the shaft too have lost their distinctive features and have become a support of the canopy tapering downwards. Pl. III, Fig. 12 d shows that the height of the shaft has been further diminished and the umbrella is reduced to a mere semi-circle. All that remains of the spokes and the shaft of the umbrella are the two arches within the semi-circle. Pl. III, Fig. 12 e shows a further development where the umbrella has lost all its significance and has been depicted as a leaf motif. Pl. III, Fig. 12 f is a similar conventionalised umbrella from a Tibetan *dharmā-cakra*. Here the shaft and the spokes are represented by three short lines radiating from the centre. Pl. III, Fig. 12 g shows a modern adaptation of the same. It has lost all vestiges of an umbrella and is merely a semi-circle.

Just as the umbrella in this position gradually diminished in height and ultimately lost all vestiges of the shaft leaving a semi-circular bubble or a leaf ornament to represent the *chatra* (umbrella), it can be explained that the spear which originally bore garlands, also lost both the garlands and the shaft leaving the characteristic symbol *satti*, single *śūla* or *triśūla* (*nandipāda* or *triratana*) to represent the spear (Pl. III, Fig. 12 a, b, c, d and e).

This brief introduction explaining the conjectural evolution of the umbrella and spear motif will be of assistance in understanding how the elaborate umbrellas and spears, the latter bearing garlands, around the felly of the *ratana-cakka* gradually lost their original forms and were reduced to more or less geometric patterns. Thus we see that the bubble and the triangle (*śūla*) or three-pronged spear (*triśūla*) pattern edging the felly of the wheel is in fact the conventionalised umbrella and spear motif described in *Sumaṅgalavilāsini*. Hence these symbols can be described as perfect forms of the *ratana-cakka*, here used to represent the *dharmā-cakka*, the Wheel of the Law. F. C. Maisey, A. Foucher, Sir John Marshall and other reputed scholars

have identified these features as umbrellas and *nandipādas*.¹¹ But as I have pointed out, it is in the light of *Sumaṅgalavilāsinī* and other literary works preserved in Sri Lanka that their exact nature and the significance can be satisfactorily interpreted.

The following examples of wheel symbols, each bearing a circle of highly stylised umbrellas and spears edging the felly of the wheel, clearly show various ways in which the elaborate or perfect forms of the wheel have been depicted in art. A. Foucher in *The Beginnings of Buddhist Art* has cited a number of wheel symbols from ancient Indian coins of which one shows knob-like external features right round the felly (Pl. IV, Fig. 14).¹² He identifies these features as umbrellas. Here the umbrella being the more prominent symbol stands alone unaccompanied by spears. Pl. II, Fig. 6 shows a Tibetan *dharmā-cakra* where the umbrellas have been reduced to semi-circular features with three short lines radiating from the centre, reminiscent of the ribs and the shaft of the umbrella.

The recent adaptations of this type of *dharmā-cakras* have done away with this last vestige and have retained only the semi circle which is more or less like the knob-shaped end of the spokes projecting through the felly of the wheel (Pl. II, Fig. 7). In spite of the fact that these semi-circular features bear no resemblance to umbrellas, there is no doubt that they are derived from the original *chatra* symbols. However, any further distortion, for example the elongation of the *chatra* symbol to look more like a rod, is undesirable as it will definitely interfere with the significance of the wheel as a symbol.

Pl. II, Fig. 4 shows a wheel from Sāñchī displaying *chatta* (umbrella) symbols alternating with *nandipādas* or the so-called *triratana* symbols. Here the *nandipāda* occupies exactly the same position in which, according to the *Sumaṅgalavilāsinī* account of the *ratana-cakka*, spears (*satti*) bearing garlands are to be depicted. In some wheels, instead of a *nandipāda*, a triangular member is shown (Pl. II, Fig. 3). Just as *nandipāda* stands for a spear (*satti*) terminating in a three-pronged member (*triśūla*), the triangular feature too stands for a spear terminating in a single *śūla*. In short, the spear (*satti*) is represented by either a *śūla* or *triśūla*. It appears that Buddhists referred to *nandipāda* or *triratana* by the term *satti* (Sk. *śakti*). Sir John Marshall maintains that the detail of umbrellas edging the felly was directly copied from the original wheel from Sārnāth.¹³ Sir Arthur Cunningham too, in his conjectural reconstruction of the wheel that once crowned the arch (*torāṇa*) of the Bārhut stūpa, depicts it incorrectly as a bubble in between the umbrellas.¹⁴ Evidently both these scholars have treated it as a meaningless piece of decoration. According to the texts cited in this connection, the number of spears should be twice the number of umbrellas. To be exact, there should be one hundred umbrellas and two hundred spears (*satti*) bearing garlands. But unlike in a literary description, in art if two spears are depicted side by side it would interfere with the artistic rendering of the design. Hence on aesthetic grounds, it is permissible to depict one spear in place of two mentioned in the texts. Thus these wheels with an edging of umbrellas and spears on the felly actually represent the perfect form of the Wheel (*sabbākāra-paripūra-ratana-cakka*) of the universal monarch. At Sāñchī, Bārhut and Amarāvati they are used to represent the *dhamma-cakka*.

In later representations of wheels both the pattern and the emphasis on the symbols show a marked change. In the examples mentioned earlier, the spear (*satti*) whether as single-pointed (*śūla*) or three pronged (*triśūla* or *nandipāda*) weapon, is represented on a smaller scale when compared with the umbrella, to show that it occupies a subordinate position. On the other hand there are wheels especially from Amarāvati displaying *satti* symbols very prominently, whereas

¹¹ Sir John Marshall and A. Foucher, *The Monuments of Sāñchī*, Vol. I, p. 189.

¹² A. Foucher, *The Beginnings of Buddhist Art*, Plate I.

¹³ Sir John Marshall and A. Foucher, *The Monuments of Sāñchī*, Vol. I, p. 109.

¹⁴ Sir Arthur Cunningham, *The Stūpa of Bārhut*, Plate XVII.

the umbrella has been reduced to a very insignificant and stylised semi-circular feature cramped between the former symbols (Pl. II, Fig. 5). In another wheel the umbrella has been totally converted into a leaf pattern, which clearly shows that by the 2nd century A.C. some sculptors in India had already forgotten the original significance of these features. By this time it appears that the spear (*satti*) as a symbol has grown in importance and even superseded the umbrella. Just as there are wheels with an edging of umbrellas around the felly, there are also wheels which display spear heads (*satti*) in place of umbrellas (Pl. IV, Fig. 16). *Satti* (spearhead) has been used here in its truly symbolic form.

The umbrella and the spear head, in alternating positions around a circle, is found in the earliest specimens of Indian art, as is proved by the impressions on ancient coins where this feature is very clearly represented (Pl. IV, Fig. 15).¹⁵ Here the umbrella and the spear-head (*satti*, *triśūla*, *nandipāda*) although highly conventionalised are prominently shown while the wheel, a mere disc without spokes, is comparatively very insignificant. Nevertheless the transition from this form to the more elaborate form of the *dhamma-cakka* is not difficult to trace.

It is well known that the umbrella is a symbol of sovereignty. Thus in the *ratana-cakka* of a universal monarch it signifies his sovereignty. Spears (*satti*) bearing garlands stand in attendance (*parivāra*) on an umbrella emphasizing its importance as a symbol. In this respect it must be mentioned that *satti* (Sk. *śakti*), also signifies regal splendour and power. It is said that a universal monarch with the assistance of his *ratana-cakka* conquers the universe (*ajitam jināti*),¹⁶ thus bringing into subjugation other monarchs. The circle of umbrellas attended by *sattis* (spearheads) edging the felly of the wheel symbols, just described, signifies this subjugation of the universe by the universal monarch. Here, the number hundred as mentioned in *Sumaṅgalavilāsini* is important, for ancient writers usually refer to hundred kings ruling India. The hundred kings here symbolised by hundred umbrellas, generally stand for all the kings of the universe. When Buddhists adopted the umbrella symbol they took for granted the symbolism it originally possessed and added something more—a specific Buddhist significance. Buddhists generally recognize three kinds of umbrellas, namely, the human (*mānusī*), divine (*dibba*) and spiritual emancipation (*vimutti*). Thus the umbrella depicted in association with *dhamma-cakka* actually signifies *vimutti-chatta*. The umbrella and the spear-head (*satti*) motif on the felly of the *dhamma-cakka* signifies that the Buddha as *saddharma-cakravarti*, the universal monarch of the Norm, has conquered the world and established a spiritual overlordship over the world. In brief, the perfect form of the Wheel (*ratana-cakka*) signifies the universal monarch's sovereignty over the Universe, and the Buddhists adopted the same form of the wheel to signify the Wheel of the Law of the Buddha. Although the wheel symbols discussed in the previous pages conform to the description of the ideal wheel of a universal monarch, in art they have been used to depict the *dhamma-cakka*.

The above discussion on the iconographical features of the wheel symbol, I suppose, proves that it is quite in conformity with the tradition to depict umbrellas and spear-heads (*satti*) on the felly of the *dhamma-cakka*, although in Sri Lanka this type of wheel has not been discovered so far. The modern designs of the wheel symbol with a trace of encircling umbrellas are recent adaptations most probably based on Tibetan *dharma-cakras*. Apparently those who designed them were unaware of the significance of the knob-like projections which are really the highly stylised umbrella symbols edging the fellys of the wheels. Next, the question arises whether it interferes with the idea of motion (*pravartana*) of the wheel to depict the umbrellas and spear-heads (*satti*) on the felly of the wheel. Although the wheel symbol has been created after the cart wheel (*rathaṅga-cakka*), according to the texts it is supposed to go revolving through the sky.

¹⁵ A. Foucher, *The Beginnings of Buddhist Art*, Plate I.

¹⁶ *Papañcasūdani*, Part III, p. 365. (P.T.S.).

Buddhaghosa describes this in detail thus:¹⁷ “This *cakka-ratana* proceeds through the sky, not very high but just above the summit of trees, so that those who accompany the *cakka-ratana* (through the sky) are able to enjoy the fruits, flowers and tender leaves of the trees, at their pleasure. Also the *cakka-ratana* moves at a height that is neither too high nor too low so that people on earth are able to point out and say, ‘That is the king; that is his deputy and that is his commander in chief!’ Both the writers who described the *cakka-ratana* in literature and the artists who depicted it in art considered it as a wheel that is supposed to move through the sky, and the umbrellas and the spears (*satti*) bearing garlands that adorn the felly were not considered an impediment to its revolving movement (*pravartana*).

The felly of an ideal wheel is also described as studded with gems (*nemi maṇi*).¹⁸ Elsewhere, they are referred to as *maṇika*, meaning a bowl-shaped gem. On the Asokan wheels these are represented as bubble-shaped ornaments attached to the inner side of the rim of the wheel, in between the spokes. *Samantakūṭavaṇṇanā* refers to spokes adorned with pot-shaped and bubble-shaped ornaments (*ghaṭika-maṇikāvaliḥi susanṭhitā*).¹⁹ In Indian architecture, sometimes pillars are depicted as springing from or terminating in vases (*pūrṇa-ghaṭa*) symbolic of abundance. Here it is implied that the spokes of a wheel symbol are depicted as pillars which terminate in pot ornaments.

In describing the perfect form of the *cakka-ratana*, *Sumaṅgalavilāsini* states that in addition to other features the holes in the nave of the wheel have two lion faces from the mouths of which issue forth two pearl garlands.²⁰ The lion face in this position has been actually depicted in an arch surmounting a *stūpa*. The indentation on the inner side of the rim of the arch around the lion face is clearly represented. (Pl. IV, Fig, 17).

Dhamma-cakkas which display garlands hanging from the wheel are also met with. Pl. VI, Fig. 19 shows a *dhamma-cakka* shrine in which the garlands hanging from the nave are prominently displayed. Another *dhamma-cakka* from Sāñchī shows that garlands form an important feature in the scheme of decorations (Pl. V, Fig. 18). Four garlands are shown as hanging from two pegs (*nāga-danta*) above the *dhamma-cakka* and two others from the stems of two lotus buds acting as pegs. The wheel is depicted as surmounted on a seat of three lions and from the mouths of two of the flanking lions a pair of garlands issue forth thus bringing to one’s mind the description in *Sumaṅgalavilāsini*, which says that two pearl garlands issue from the mouths of two lion heads that are set in the holes on either side of the nave of the wheel.

It is said that the nave of the *cakka-ratana* is constructed of sapphire (*indra-nīla-māṇikyā*). The *Dīgha Nikāya* also refers to gems adorning the rim of the wheel. Benjamin Rowland states that the naves of the wheels on Asokan capitals were originally set with gems of various colours.²¹ *Sumaṅgalavilāsini* describes the wheel as constructed of precious jewels, stones and metals of various colours.²² It is stated that the hole in the nave of the *cakka-ratana* is lined with silver, the spokes are constructed of seven kinds of precious jewels and the felly of the wheel is made of red coral. Thus red, blue, white, and yellow are prominently displayed in the scheme of colours employed in the wheel. These colours which are symbolical in purpose have been intentionally employed thus enhancing the magical qualities of the wheel.

¹⁷ *Sumaṅgalavilāsini*, Part II, p. 617 ff.

¹⁸ *Sumaṅgalavilāsini*, (P.T.S.), Vol. 2, p. 447.

¹⁹ *Mahābodhivaṃsa*, (P.T.S.) ed. by Arthur Strong p. 67. Also see *Samantakūṭavaṇṇanā* edited by the Venerable M. Nānissara Thera, p. 765.

²⁰ *Sumaṅgalavilāsini*, (P.T.S.), Part II, p. 618.

²¹ Sir Benjamin Rowland, *The Art and Architecture of India*, p. 41.

²² *Sumaṅgalavilāsini*, (P.T.S.), Part II, p. 618.

Although no single wheel symbol has been depicted exactly as the perfect form of the *cakka-ratana* described in the *Sumaṅgalavilāsinī*, the instances of pearl garlands hanging from the hub of the wheel, garlands issuing from the mouths of lions forming the seat on which the wheel is placed in position and the front view of the wheel with garlands issuing from either side of the hub as well as from the lion face that is framed within the dented rim of the nave, are clear indications that the artists of ancient India have depicted various aspects of the perfect form of the *ratana-cakka* conforming to a certain accepted scheme as reflected in literature. This clearly proves that *Sumaṅgalavilāsinī* has preserved a tradition that was well known in India as early as the 1st century A.C. or even earlier.

II. The Dhamma-Cakka

The iconographical features of the wheel described above are that of the ideal wheel (*ratana-cakka*) of the universal monarch. Nevertheless the representations of the Perfect forms of the wheel symbol in Buddhist art that conform to the description of the *ratana-cakka* actually depict the *dhamma-cakka*, the Wheel of Law of the Buddha. Nowhere in Indian art has the perfect form of the *ratana-cakka* (i.e. that of the universal monarch) been depicted although a number of bas-reliefs showing the universal monarch with his seven Ideal Possessions (*satta ratana*) are found in India as well as in Sri Lanka. In these illustrations the wheel symbol is depicted in its unadorned form.²³

The earliest Buddhist monuments that have the *dhamma-cakka* symbols are the Asokan Pillars. Of these the most important one is from Sārnāth, the fragments of which are preserved in an archaeological museum. However, a bas-relief from Sāñchī shows exactly how this Asokan pillar would have looked like (Pl. V, Fig. 18). The Wheel is mounted on a seat of three adorned lions which in turn stand on a circular plinth adorned with four animals, lion, elephant, bull and horse. In between the animals, four smaller wheels are depicted. The plinth is mounted on a lotus-shaped bell. In later examples, the *dhamma-cakka* is depicted as mounted on a *satti* (*nandipāda*) (Pl. I, Fig. 1) and the lotus-shaped bell assumed the shape of a *pūrṇa-ghaṭa*. This elaborate capital is placed on a tall, slightly tapering pillar. Commenting on the symbolism of the Sārnāth pillar, Dr. Benjamin Rowland says, "The Sārnāth column may be interpreted, therefore, not only as a glorification of the Buddha's preaching symbolised by the crowning wheel, but also through the cosmological implications of the whole pillar as a symbol of the universal extension of the power of the Buddha's Law as typified by the sun that dominates all space and all time, and simultaneously an emblem of the universal extension of Mauryan imperialism through the Dharma. The whole structure is then a translation of age-old Indian and Asiatic cosmology into artistic terms of essentially foreign origin and dedicated, like all Asoka's monuments, to the glory of Buddhism and the royal house."²⁴

Although the *dhamma-cakka* was used to depict the doctrine in general, it primarily stood for the first sermon of the Buddha. It is stated that the Buddha delivered the *Dhamma-cakka Pavattana Sutta* to the group of five monks at the Deer Park at Bārānasi. In early art this incident is illustrated by a wheel flanked by a pair of deer. The Buddha as well as the group of five monks was not shown, in conformity with the then prevalent tradition. But later, when the Buddha images came to be used, whenever this incident of the first sermon was depicted, the *dhamma-cakka* with or without the deer was depicted on the seat of the Buddha. In most of the Gupta and Mathurā Buddha images this motif is represented. Later, with the development of "Buddhology," this simple motif developed into a highly complicated form where the *dhamma-*

²³ Heinrich Zimmer, *Art of Indian Asia*, Vol. 2, Pl. 37.

²⁴ Sir Benjamin Rowland, *The Art and Architecture of India*, p. 42.

cakka is shown as surmounted on a pillar of which the base is in the world of divine serpents, where the male and female serpents are shown as paying homage to it. Two divine serpents are shown in the act of holding the pillar in position. The wheel is shown in front view with two garlands hanging from either side of the hub. The pillar rises through a cavity in the earth's crust and its upper portion is shown as appearing in the human sphere; two devotees and a pair of deer are seen paying homage to the wheel. Just above the wheel, the Buddha is depicted in heroic dimensions seated on a throne attended by divine beings. Here too the group of five monks is not represented. Two additional *dhamma-cakkas* are seen at the background on either side of the Buddha image.²⁵

At Amarāvati, a number of bas-reliefs show elaborately carved *dhamma-cakkas* surmounted on pillars at the foot of which an empty seat is prominently depicted. On the footstool, the footprints of the Buddha are displayed. These pillars in complete form signify the Buddha and are iconographically related to the fiery pillars depicting the Buddha. Human as well as divine beings are shown as paying homage to the monument which is an elaborately carved pillar on which the *dhamma-cakka* is prominently displayed.²⁶

A number of bas-reliefs from Sāñchī and Bārhut show the *dhamma-cakka* in a shrine. In Pl. VI, Fig. 19, the *dhamma-cakka* is placed on a flat seat and a royal umbrella is raised above it. Inside the shrine two men are shown in the attitude of worshipping the wheel while just outside the shrine pedestrians as well as people on elephants, horses and chariots are seen circumambulating the shrine. Evidently, they form the fourfold army—namely the elephants, cavalry, chariots and the infantry—of the king who is depicted as visiting the shrine in a chariot.

Sir Arthur Cunningham, on inscriptional evidence, describes this bas-relief as illustrating the visit of King Pasenadi Kosala, a contemporary of the Buddha. It is believed that the shrine is an illustration of the *punyasālā* he is supposed to have built for the use of the Buddha.²⁷ However, this illustration and other similar ones bring to one's mind the description of how the universal monarch, accompanied by the four-fold army and his retinue, followed the *cakka-ratana* on its voyage of conquest.

Although the *dhamma-cakka* primarily symbolised the preaching of the first sermon and thereby the doctrine in its wider sense, it was also used to represent the Buddha himself. It is well known that during the earliest phase of Buddhist art, the Buddha or the Bodhisatta in his last life on earth, was never represented in human form but by a symbol such as the Wisdom Tree (*bodhi*), the Wheel of the Law (*dhamma-cakka*), the *stūpa* or the footprint (*pāduka*). Thus among the representations of the *dhamma-cakka* in art, there are a few that can be interpreted as iconic representations of the Buddha. For instance many of the wheel symbols depicted as placed on a pedestal or housed in a shrine, actually represent the Buddha (Pl. VI, Figs. 19). Here the *dhammacakka* can be interpreted as *dhammakāya* of the *trikāya* doctrine of Mahāyāna Buddhism. Dr. Ānanda Coomaraswamy has pointed out that although in the Pāli canon the *Trikāya* doctrine had not yet developed, there are occasional references in the *Dīgha Nikāya* and the *Sutta Nipāta* to the concept of *Dhammakāya*. In the *Dīgha Nikāya* the Blessed One is spoken of as *dhammakāya* or *brahmakāya*²⁸ and in the *Samyutta Nikāya* the Buddha says "He who sees Dhamma sees me, who sees me sees the Dhamma."²⁹

²⁵ Heinrich Zimmer, *Indian Asia*, Vol. 2, Pl. 80.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, Vol. 2, Pl. 96.

²⁷ Sir Arthur Cunningham, *The Stūpa of Bārhut*, p. 110.

²⁸ *Dīgha Nikāya*, (P.T.S.), Vol. III, p. 84.

²⁹ *Samyutta Nikāya*, (P.T.S.), Vol. III, p. 120.

III. The Lakkhaṇa-Cakka

The *lakkhaṇa-cakka* is described as the auspicious mark on the soles of the feet of the Buddha. It is said that Buddha's palms are also marked with the wheel symbol. In its unadorned form the *lakkhaṇa-cakka* is identical with the ordinary form of the *ratana-cakka* and *dhamma-cakka* (Pl. VII, Fig. 20), but in its perfect form it is a highly elaborate symbol, surpassing in detail even the perfect form of the *ratana-cakka* of the universal monarch.

Buddhaghosa describes the *lakkhaṇa-cakka* thus: "Cakka means the wheels on the soles of the feet of the Buddha; the spokes and the felly are mentioned in the canonical texts (i.e. Pāli); by *sabbākāraparipūraṃ* these special features are intended; in the centre of the wheel that is in the middle of the sole there is the nave; surrounding the nave there are the circular lines; at the opening of the nave there is the covering sheath; the hole of the nave is seen; also there are the spokes and the circular lines round the spokes; the felly is seen; the bowl-shaped gems on the nave are seen; all these are mentioned in the canonical texts. Further details are not given there; these should be known as follows: attending on the wheel there are the spear (*satti*), *śrīvatsa* (*sirivaccha*), conch (?), (*nandī*), *svastika* (*sovatthi*), ear-rings (*vaṭaṃsaka*), powder box (*vaḍḍhamānaka*), pair of fish (*maccha yugala*), auspicious seat (*bhaddapīṭha*), elephant goad (*aṅkusa*), mansion (*pāsāda*), triumphal arch (*toraṇa*), white umbrella (*setacchatta*), sword (*khagga*), palm-leaf-fan (*tālavanṭhaka*), cluster of peacock feathers (*mora-hattha*), fly whisk (*vāla-vījanī*), diadem (*uṅhīsa*), cluster of gems (*maṇi-paṭṭha*), garland of flowers (*sumana-dāma*), blue water lilies (*nīluppala*), red water lilies (*rattuppala*), white water lilies (*setuppala*), red lotus (*paduma*), white lotus (*punḍarīka*), filled vessel (*puṇṇa ghaṭa*), filled bowl (*puṇṇa pāti*), ocean (*samuudda, cakravāṭa*) mountain range (*cakkavāla*), Himalaya forest (*Himavā*), Mount Meru (*Sineru*), moon (*candimā*), sun (*sūriya*), stars (*nakkhatta*), four great continents (*cattāro mahādīpā*), two thousand islands that surround them (*dve parittā dīpā sahaṣṣāni*) and the universal monarch together with his retinue (*rājā cakkavatti saseno*); all these are attending on the wheel."³⁰ In later texts more signs, generally referred to as 108 in number, are added. For example, in addition to those enumerated by Buddhaghosa in *Sumaṅgalavilāsini*, Gurulugomi in *Dharmapradīpikāva* mentions as auspicious marks, animals such as lions, tigers, bulls as well as mythical creatures like *kinnaras*, *makarās*, *garudās*, various kinds of birds and divine beings like gods of the six heavens, Brahmas of the sixteen Brahma worlds.³¹

The perfect form of the *ratana-cakka* has only a few of these auspicious signs such as the umbrella, spear (*satti*), and garlands attending on it whereas this definition of the *lakkhaṇa-cakka* shows that all that is representative of this Universe, the auspicious symbols, the earth with its flora and fauna, the universal monarch together with his seven ideal possessions, the heavenly bodies such as the sun, moon and the stars, and finally the heavens and the Brahma worlds themselves, are depicted as attending on the wheel symbols on the soles of the feet of the Buddha.

The *lakkhaṇa-cakka* is symbolic of the supremacy of the Buddha. Buddhaghosa in describing the quality of *asādhāraṇa-ratana*—extraordinary gem—with reference to the Buddha, says that between the animate and inanimate objects of value (*ratana*), the animate ones are superior; among the animate the human beings are superior; of human beings men are superior to women for the latter attend on men; of men recluses (*anāgārika-ratana*) are superior to laymen because *rājā-cakkavatti*, the highest among laymen (*āgārika-ratana*), pays obeisance to recluses; among various grades of recluses the Buddha is the highest. The *lakkhaṇa-cakka* depicts this supremacy of the Buddha, for, from the inanimate objects of value (*aviññāṇaka-ratana*) to the

³⁰ *Sumaṅgalavilāsini* (P.T.S.), Part II, p. 445.

³¹ *Dharmapradīpikāva*, edited by the Venerable Weliwitiye Soratha Mahā Thera, p. 5.

highest of the divine beings the Brahmas, are depicted as attending on the *lakṣhaṇa-cakka* on the soles of the feet of the Buddha.³²

In art the *lakṣhaṇa-cakka* has been depicted from very early times in association with Foot Prints (*pādukā*) of the Buddha, which have been used to signify the Blessed One. In these the wheel is identical with the ordinary form of the *ratana-cakka* or *dhamma-cakka*. However, in the later phase of Sāñchī and at Amarāvati and Mathurā elaborate forms of the *lakṣhaṇa-cakka* are met with. Pl. VII, Fig. 20 shows a *pādukā* marked with the *lakṣhaṇa-cakka* attended by a spear (*satti*), a *svastika* (*sovattika*), and an auspicious seat (*bhadra-pīṭha*). One of the most elaborate of the earliest *lakṣhaṇa-cakkas* is from Sri Lanka (Pl. VI, Fig. 22). It displays a spear-head (*satti*), an umbrella (*chatta*), a *śrīvatsa* (*śrīvacccha*), an auspicious seat (*bhadra-pīṭha*), a conch (*saṅkha*), a cluster of peacock feathers (*mora-hatta*) or a palm leaf fan (*tālavaṅṭhaka*), standards and banners (*dhaja-patāka*), an elephant goad (*aṅkusa*), a filled vase (*puṇṇa-ghaṭa*) and a pair of fish (*macchayugala*) surrounding the wheel which is in the centre of the sole, while the *svastika* is repeated on the tips of the five toes. However, the most complete form of the *lakṣhaṇa-cakka* is found in the Far Eastern countries such as Siam (Thailand) and Cambodia.³³ An elaborately carved specimen of the Buddha's footprint from Ankor Wat in Cambodia shows practically all the 108 auspicious signs that attend on the *lakṣhaṇa-cakka*.

IV. The Bhava-Cakka

In the ṛgveda the wheel of Sūrya, the sun, has 12 or 5 or 360 spokes, signifying the months, seasons or days of the year respectively.³⁴ Thus it signifies the year as measured by the sun in its course. When the wheel was first used as a Buddhist symbol, it was not known whether the component parts of the wheel signified any particular aspect of the doctrine. It appears that it originally represented broadly the entire doctrine and particularly the First Sermon which is really a synopsis of the Teaching. Its thousand spokes referred to in the texts actually depicted the rays of the sun, and the earliest wheel symbols have proportionately a large number of spokes to depict this particular feature. In later wheel symbols the number of spokes is generally reduced, but apparently they do not signify any particular aspect of the doctrine. However, the Tibetan Wheel symbols have eight spokes which most probably signify the Eightfold Path (*ariya-aṭṭhaṅgika-magga*), and the modern wheel symbols generally have the same number of spokes.

The Tibetan *bhava-cakka* or *saṃsāra-cakka*, the Wheel of Becoming or Wheel of Life, illustrates a particular aspect of the Dhamma, namely the doctrine of Dependent Origination (*paṭicca-samuppāda*) and thereby the doctrine of rebirth. The Tibetan version of the Wheel of Life conforms to the description given of it in the *Divyāvadāna*,³⁵ a Buddhist Sanskrit work of the Sarvāstivāda school. This work describes the origin of the *bhava-cakka* and the manner in which the picture is to be made. The Wheel is shown as being in the grip of a three-eyed demon wearing a tiger's skin, who symbolises impermanence (*aniccatā*). The wheel consists of three concentric circles of which the innermost, corresponding to the nave of the wheel, depicts three animals, a bird (dove or cock), a snake and a pig, each catching the tail of the animal in front, symbolising lust, hatred and delusion respectively. The next circle, which is the largest of the three, corresponding to the area occupied by the spokes of a wheel, is divided into five or six segments in which the destinies (*gati*) of living beings, i.e. the realms of their rebirth, are shown

³² *Paramatthajotikā*, p. 216, (Sinhala script edition).

³³ J.R.A.S. (C.B.), Vol. XXXI, pp. 384–387. Also see foot note.

³⁴ A.K. Coomaraswamy, *The Elements of Buddhist Iconography*.

³⁵ *Divyāvadāna*, edited by E. B. Cowell and R. A. Neill, (1886), p. 300.

in detail. The last circle, which is the felly of the wheel, is divided into twelve sections depicting the twelve links of Dependent Origination.³⁶

Though in Theravāda literature there is no mention of an actual pictorial execution of a "Wheel of Life," yet the concept of comparing Dependent Origination to a wheel is not unknown. In the *Path of Purification (Visuddhimagga)*, the famous commentator Buddhaghosa Ācariya says:

"It is the beginningless round of rebirths that is called the 'Wheel of the round of rebirths' (*saṃsāracakka*). Ignorance (*avijjā*) is its hub (or nave) because it is its root. Ageing-and-death (*jarā-maraṇa*) is its rim (or felly) because it terminates it. The remaining ten links (of the Dependent Origination) are its spokes (i.e. karma formations [*saṅkhāra*] up to process of becoming [*bhava*])."³⁷

In another passage of the same work, the components of the wheel are associated with the twelve links of Dependent Origination in a slightly different way:

"Its hub is made of ignorance and craving for becoming (*bhavataṇhā*); its spokes consist of formations of merit etc. (*puññādi-abhisāṅkhāra*); its rim is ageing-and-death; it is joined to the chariot of triple existence (*ti-bhava*) by piercing it with the axle made of the origin of cankers (*āsava-samudaya*).³⁸ This Wheel of the Round of Rebirths has been revolving throughout time that has no beginning."³⁹

Elsewhere in the same work it is said:

"Becoming's Wheel reveals no known beginning;
No maker, no experiencer is there;
Void with a twelve-fold voidness, and nowhere
It ever halts; for ever it is spinning."⁴⁰

As it has been rolling on from time immemorial "its times are three, i.e. past, present and future. The first two (of the twelve) factors as given in the Pāli text, namely ignorance and formations, belong to the past time; the following eight, beginning with consciousness and ending with becoming, belong to the present time; the last two, birth and ageing-and-death, belong to the future time."⁴¹

V. The Significance of the Wheel

In order to understand the significance of the wheel it must be remembered that it was in some form or other originally connected with the solar disc. In the ṛgveda, Sūrya is described as a chariot having one wheel.⁴² It is this solar symbol conceived as a chariot wheel that later became the weapon of Vishnu, the deified form of Sūrya, the world-conquering divine wheel of the universal monarch and the Wheel of Law of the Buddha. Further, in the ṛgveda, Mitra (another form of Sūrya) is described as the eye of the world. Thus the sun traversing through space is conceived as the eye that watches and illuminates the entire world.⁴³ Hence in one sense the wheel (*cakka*) as well as the eye (*cakṣu*; Pāli: *cakkhu*) are synonymous. In this connection it is

³⁶ *Marg*, Vol. XVI, No. 4, pp. 19 ff. Plate facing p. 25.

³⁷ *Visuddhimagga*, (text ed. P.T.S.), Vol. I, p. 198. (*The Path of Purification*, tr. by Ñāṇamoli, VII.8).

³⁸ See Majjhima Nikāya, Sutta 2: "With the arising of cankers there is the arising of Ignorance."

³⁹ *Visuddhi Magga*, Vol. I, p. 198, (Translation: Ch. VII, §7).

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, Vol. II, p. 576, (Translation: Ch. XVII, § 273).

⁴¹ *Ibid*, Vol. II, p. 578, (Translation: Ch. XVII, § 287).

⁴² A. A. Macdonell, *The Vedic Mythology*, pp. 31 and 88.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

interesting to note that the realisation of the Truth is very often described as *cakkhuṃ udapādi*—the eye of wisdom dawned. Here the eye is the wisdom (*paṭivedha-ñāṇa*)

In this connection the interpretation of the term “turning of the wheel of Dhamma” in the commentaries of Buddhaghosa is of significance. Here the wheel is conceived as intellect, knowledge, wisdom, insight (*ñāṇa*) which is twofold—*paṭivedha-ñāṇa*, the wisdom of self-realisation of the Truth and *desanā-ñāṇa*, the wisdom of proclamation of the Truth—both of which are a prerogative of the Buddha. *Paṭivedha-ñāṇa* is further explained as born of intellect (*paññā bhāvitam*) and bringing the fruit of Holiness (*ariyaphalāvaham*) to oneself. On the other hand, *desanā-ñāṇa*, the wisdom of the proclamation of the Truth, is born of compassion and brings forth the fruit of Holiness in the disciples (*karuṇāphalabhāvitam sāvakanam ariyaphalāvaham*). The former is supermundane (*lokuttara*) and the latter mundane (*lokiya*).⁴⁴

Paṭivedha ñāṇa is further explained as that which is in the course of being realised (*uppajjamānam*) and that which is realised (*uppannam*).⁴⁵ From the time when the Bodhisatta as the hermit Sumedha at the feet of the former Buddha Dīpaṅkara resolved to achieve Perfection, up to the time of realisation of the Path of Arahantship (*arahatta magga*), the *dhamma-cakka* is described as being in the course of realisation. The moment when he finally realised the fruit of Arahantship (*arahatta phala*) at the *Bodhi-maṇḍala*, the *dhamma-cakka* was realised. Similarly, *desanā ñāṇa* too is twofold. It is described as being proclaimed up to the time Aññākoṇḍañña, one of the group of five monks to whom the Buddha preached the First Sermon, reached the fruit of Arahantship. The moment when he obtained the fruit of Arahantship the *dhamma-cakka* is described as proclaimed (*pavattitam*). Thus the turning of the wheel of law in Buddhism has the sense of realising (*paṭivedha-ñāṇa*) and proclaiming the truth (*desanā-ñāṇa*).

Now it is clear that the wheel symbol is used to signify the doctrine as well as many other concepts associated with Buddhism. As the ideal wheel of the universal monarch, it assists him to conquer the world by righteous means. It is his symbol of power (*ājñā-cakra*). In Buddhist doctrine it symbolises the doctrine as well as the Buddha as *dhammakāya*. Then it signifies various other concepts such as the cycle of births (*saṃsāra* or *bhava*) in close association with the doctrine of Dependent Origination (*paṭiccasamuppāda*). Thus the wheel symbol came to be accepted as the most appropriate symbol of the Buddhists, both in physical as well as metaphysical spheres. Hence the ancients described the wheel—both in the sense of *ratana-cakka* as well as *dhamma-cakka* as:

Rich in ornamentation, incalculable in value,
Unparalleled, a sight rarely seen,
Associated solely with supreme beings,
It's aptly called Ratana, a gem supreme.

*Cittikataṃ mahagghaṇca—atulaṃ dullabha dassanaṃ, Anomasattaparibhogaṃ—Ratanaṃ tena pavuccati.*⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Manorathapurāṇī, (P.T.S.), Vol. I, p. 120.

⁴⁵ Papañcasūdanī, (P.T.S.), Vol. 2, p. 26.

⁴⁶ Sāratthapakāsinī, (P.T.S.), Vol. 3, p. 152. (Commentary on Saṃyutta Nikāya).

Plates

PLATE I Fig. 1: A perfect form of the Wheel sustained by a *Satti* (*nandipāda*), Sāñchī; 1st century A.C.

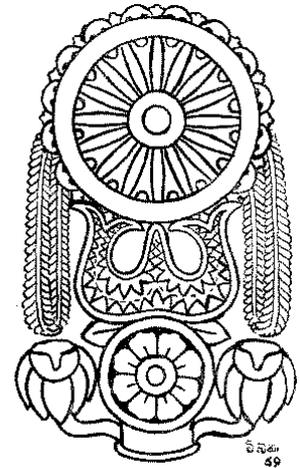


Fig. 1
Plate I

PLATE II Fig. 2: Asoka Wheel, Sārnāth; 3rd century B.C.

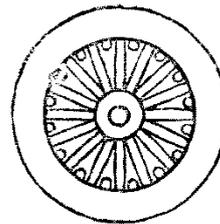


Fig. 2

Fig. 3: A wheel adorned with *chatta* and *satti* motif, Sāñchī; 1st c . A.C.

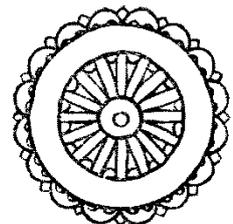


Fig. 3

Fig. 4: Eight-spoked wheel, adorned with *chatta* and *satti* motif, Sāñchī; 1st century A.C.

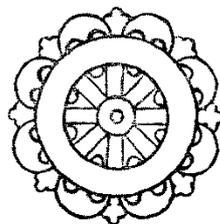


Fig. 4

Fig. 5: Wheel adorned with *chatta* and *satti* motif, Amarāvati; 2nd century A.C.

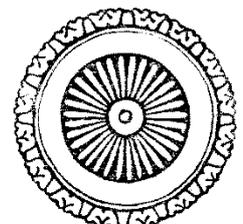


Fig. 5

Fig. 6: Tibetan *dharma-cakra*.

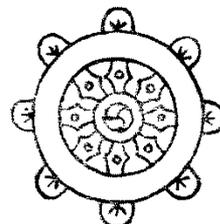


Fig. 6

Fig. 7: A modern wheel symbol.

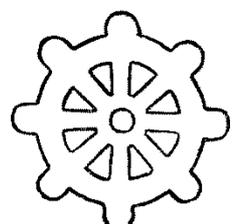


Fig. 7

Plate II

PLATE III

Fig. 8: Stūpa surmounted with chatta and satti, the latter bearing flags, Sāñchī; 1st century A.C.

Fig. 9: Stūpa surmounted with chatta and kusumadāma-satti, Sāñchī; 1st century A.C.

Fig. 10: Satti bearing a flag—detail from a bas-relief, Sāñchī; 1st century A.C.

Fig. 11: Kusumadāma-satti; detail from a bas-relief, Sāñchī; 1st century A.C.

Fig. 12: A diagram showing the evolution of the chatta and satti motif.

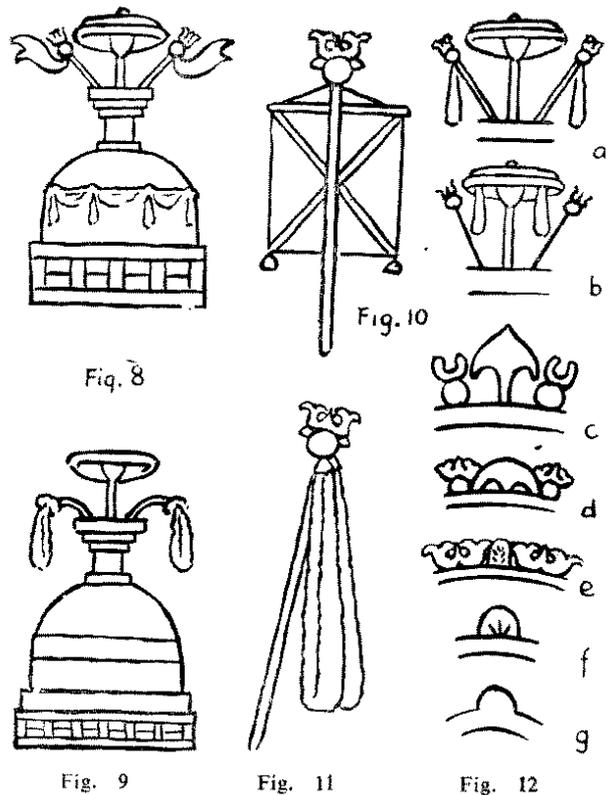


Plate III

PLATE IV

Fig. 13: Solar symbol from a coin; 3rd century B.C.

Fig. 14: Wheel adorned with a circle of chattas, from a coin; 3rd century B.C.

Fig. 15: Chatta and satti motif from a coin; 3rd century B.C.

Fig. 16: Wheel adorned with satti; 1st century A.C.

Fig. 17: Lion face within an arch—a detail from a bas-relief, Amarāvati; 2nd century A.C.

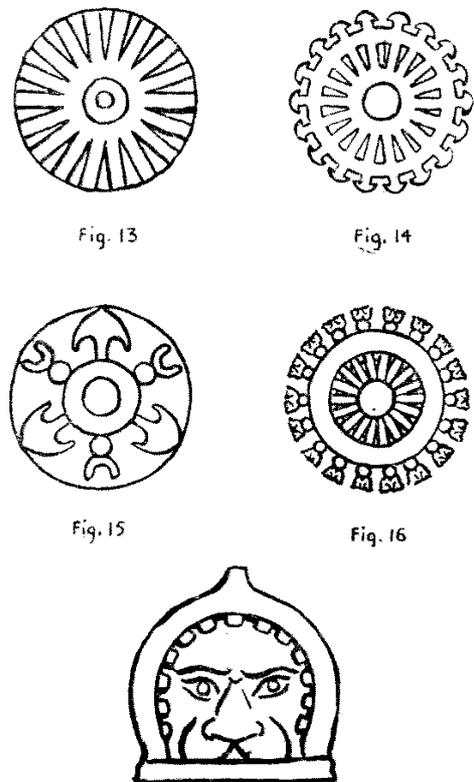


Plate IV

PLATE V

Fig. 18: Wheel on a lion pillar adorned with garlands, Sāñchī; 1st century A.C.



Fig. 18

Plate V

PLATE VI

Fig. 19: Dhamma-cakka shrine
—a bas-relief from Bārhut; 2nd
century A.C.



PLATE VII Fig. 20: Foot Print, Amarāvati;
2nd century A.C.

Fig. 21: Foot Print, Amarāvati;
2nd century A.C.

Fig. 22: Foot Print,
Anurādhapura; 2nd century
A.C.

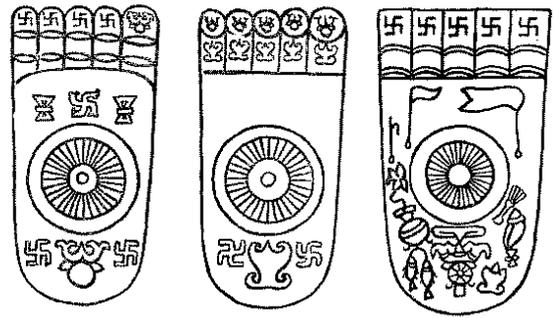


Fig. 20

Fig. 21

Fig. 22

Plate VII

Figure Sources

Figs. 13, 14 and 15 are drawn after Figs. 5, 6 and 13 of Plate I of *The Beginnings of Buddhist Art* by Alfred Foucher.

All illustrations from Sāñchī are drawn from photographs appearing in *The Monuments of Sāñchī* by Sir John Marshall and Alfred Foucher.

For the originals of Figs. 20 and 21 see *Sculpture from Amarāvati in the British Museum* by Douglas Barrette and *The Buddhist Stūpa at Amarāvati and Jaggeyyapeṭa* by J. Burgess.

Fig. 19 is after an illustration from *The Art of Indian Asia* by Heinrich Zimmer.

Fig. 22 is a freehand drawing after a piece of sculpture from the National Museum of Sri Lanka, Colombo.

The Buddhist Publication Society

The BPS is an approved charity dedicated to making known the Teaching of the Buddha, which has a vital message for all people.

Founded in 1958, the BPS has published a wide variety of books and booklets covering a great range of topics. Its publications include accurate annotated translations of the Buddha's discourses, standard reference works, as well as original contemporary expositions of Buddhist thought and practice. These works present Buddhism as it truly is—a dynamic force which has influenced receptive minds for the past 2500 years and is still as relevant today as it was when it first arose.

For more information about the BPS and our publications, please visit our website, or contact:

The Administrative Secretary
Buddhist Publication Society
P.O. Box 61
54 Sangharaja Mawatha
Kandy, Sri Lanka
E-mail: bps@bps.lk
Web site: <http://www.bps.lk>
Tel: 0094 81 223 7283
Fax: 0094 81 222 3679