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# On the Problem of the Origin of Cakravartin

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## *Abstract*

*There are scholars who maintain on occasion that the original position of Buddhism is not concerned with the real problems in society, politics, economy and so on. However, examining the various sūtras we can find evidence that, historically, Buddhism expressed very positive concerns about the actual problems facing society. Such thought is well expressed in the idea of Cakravartin or Universal Emperor who can realize the ideal empire by governing according to the Dharma, that is, the highest Truth. This paper expounds on Cakravartin in order to establish a foundation for studies in the political thought of Buddhism. Thus, in this paper, I have scrutinized anew two kinds of conflicting hypothetical theories: The Problem of the Theory of the Pre-Buddha Age and the Post-Aśoka Age. Accordingly I have reached the conclusion that the archetype of Cakravartin was formed in the Buddha's Age and it had greatly influenced the king Aśoka, and conversely, after Aśoka's Age it was inspired and developed by Aśoka's political and religious activities as a model.*

## **I. Introduction**

There are some people who think that the main concern of religions is the otherworld rather than this world since they do, fundamentally, pursue the ultimate reality. Especially as far as Buddhism's pursuit of the final cessation or *Nirvāṇa* from *saṃsāra*, there has been some misunderstanding that Buddhism is a kind of nihilistic thought. Therefore some scholars have maintained at times that the original position of Buddhism is not concerned with the real problems in society, politics, economy and so on. However

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through the sūtras, we can find evidence to the contrary. Historically Buddhism expressed very positively concerns about the actual society, politics and economic problems. Particularly, such thought is well expressed in the idea of Cakravartin or Universal Emperor who can realize the ideal empire through governing according to the Dharma, that is, the highest Truth. Cakravartin, the actual leader of politics, is described in the same way as the Buddha who is the spiritual leader of religion. Both have been seen always as counterparts of each other or as indispensably interconnected. Cakravartin is not different from the Buddha, in other words, we can say that Cakravartin reflects the secular aspect of Buddha. These descriptions of Buddha are illustrated in the vast literature written in various periods from the *Nikāyas* to later commentaries. With regard to those literatures, we can guess that, of the greatest importance is the meaning and position of Cakravartin in the history of Buddhism.

When we attempt to study the political thought of Buddhism, a knowledge of Cakravartin is very necessary. Accordingly this paper aims at considering Cakravartin in order to establish a foundation for studies in the political thought of Buddhism. Thus, in this paper, I have scrutinized anew two kinds of conflicting hypothetical theories.

## II. The Origin of the Idea of Cakravartin

In the literal sense of the word, Cakra-vartin, originally comes from the Pāli 'Cakkavattin', and means the 'noble emperor rolling the wheel'.<sup>1</sup> It characterizes an ideal to construct a perfectly peaceful empire in which justice and compassion are culminated, just as a mystical wheel goes on to the end of the world.

From what period did this idea arise? Today there is a conflict between two theories; The theory of the Pre-Buddha Age and the theory of the Post-Aśoka Age.<sup>2</sup> In the case of Korean Buddhist scholars, the former pre-

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<sup>1</sup> The word 'cakka' means 'wheel', and 'vattin' means 'rolling' or 'controlling' which is the adjective derived from the root 'vat' same with 'vṛt' in Sanskrit. The usage as 'cakka-vatti' is because of declension.

<sup>2</sup> In Pāli tradition such as *Dīpavaṇṇa* and *Mahāvāṇsa*, the period of Aśoka is considered as about two hundred years later from the Buddha's Parinibbāna. Whereas in Chinese sources such as *Aśokāvadāna*, as about one hundred years later from it.

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dominates.

## 1. The Problem of the Theory of the Pre-Buddha Age

Professor Dong-wha Kim states the following:

In India, before the Buddha was born, there spread abroad the latter (the ideal of the great politician of wisdom). According to the Sūtras in Early Buddhism, there are many stories concerning Cakravartin (Dong-wha Kim, 1973: 33-34).

This attests to the idea that Cakravartin existed before the Buddha. Prof. Jeong-sik Hong also gives an opinion as following:

Cakravartin is an ideal emperor who receives the treasure of the wheel from heaven, and governs his territory and people with the right intention and the right law. So the fact that the ideal of Cakravartin appeared in the Buddhist Sūtras shows that the Buddhists in that time considered their ideal emperor as Cakravartin and looked forward to meeting him with sincerity (Jeong-sik Hong, 1973: 83).

Prof. Jeong-bae Mok has given an opinion that among the Śākya tribe there seemed to be a kind of idea of Buddha as the idea of Messiah in Hebrew (Jeong-bae Mok, 1987: 338). Even though Prof. Mok does not mention Cakravartin directly he elucidates clearly that there was already the ideal of Buddha. When we are reminded of the fact that the idea of Cakravartin is the counterpart of the idea of Buddha (U. N. Goshal, 1959: 73), it is possible to consider Prof. Mok's claim that there was already the ideal of Cakravartin with the idea of Buddha in the Age of the Buddha.

Among western scholars, there are many people who support this idea. Varma made it clear that the idea of Cakravartin was formed before the Aśoka Age; he asserted that king Aśoka was influenced by the political thought of Buddhism, and tried to model himself on Cakravartin (Vishwanath Prasad Varma, 1973: 350). According to Varma, in *Aitareya Brahmana* the ideal of Cakravartin was formalized at first, then there accumulated more abundant meanings and contents with the Buddha's missionary movement. He reasserted that the Buddha's positive missionary movement influenced the activities of the kings in his time indirectly as Zoroaster's ethical movement stimulated the political passions of the Persian kings (*Ibid.*, 350-351). Jan Gonda, Charles Drekmeire and John S. Strong also

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thought that the idea of Cakravartin could be traced back to at least the 10th century B.C., and this idea was treated as very important especially in Buddhism but later by other non-Buddhistic areas too (John S. Strong, 1989: 350). On the other hand, there is the claim that the idea of universal monarchy took place in the fourth or third millenniums B.C. before the invasion of Aryans (Heirich Zimmer, 1959: 134).

I would like to examine the bases on which those scholars depend, and whether their grounds of argumentation are valid. The bases of the assertion are generally divided into four kinds.

Firstly, most of them have relied on the orthodox scriptures of Buddhism, especially on the Sūtras in Early Buddhism of which the most representative is *Sūtra of the Practice of the King Cakravartin*, in the fifth volume of Chinese *Āgamas*. A typical paragraph in this Sūtra follows:

Once upon a time, there was a king named *Drdhasati*. He originally belonged to the caste of *ksatriya* who had the custom of baptism. He could have become the Cakravartin, and governed all of the world. In that time, he most flexibly administered his territory and instructed his people with the law of virtue. He was the most superior one among all men, and was possessed of seven kinds of treasure (T. 1 39b).

Further to this, we can enumerate additional Sūtras of great importance as follows: in Chinese sources, *Ch'ang-ê-han-ching* Vol.15; Vol.18; *Chung-ê-han-ching* Vol.11; Vol.41; *Tsa-ê-han-ching* Vol.27, and in Pāli literatures especially in *Ch'ang-ê-han-ching*, 17., 26., 30., and in *Chung-ê-han-ching*, *Balapaṇḍita Sutta* and so on.

The second basis is the legend of the stargazer's prophecy in the biography of the Buddha. A representative paragraph is the following:

Thus, if one who has 32 kinds of noble characteristics will stay at home, then he will be Cakravartin. And if he will renounce the worldly life, then he will be the great master instructing gods and people by attaining the wisdom that can know all the knowledge, called sarva-jñāna (T. 3, *Kuo-ch'ü-hsien-yin-kuo-ching*, 627b).

References with the same meaning are found in other various scriptures (Dong-wha Kim, 1973: 36).

Thirdly, we can note the idea of Past Buddha. Buddhism and Jainism do not consider the Buddha or the Vardhamāna as the only Buddha or *Jina*, since in Buddhism the Buddha is the seventh Buddha and in Jainism Vardhamāna is the twenty fourth *Jina*. Moreover, examining the rescript in

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the Nigāli Sāgar inscription, we can find that king Aśoka extended the stupa of Konagamana Buddha, who is believed to be the fifth Buddha, to double size.

Lastly, we can find further evidence in other literature. For example, the fifth chapter in *Suttanipata*, titled *Pārāyanavagga*, said the following:

In all kinds of *Vedas*, we can find the 32 kinds of characteristics of the greatest sage and those are successively explained one by one. .... If he will stay at home, then, he will conquer the whole earth and govern without the arms.<sup>3</sup>

On the other hand, the names of Cakravartin can be found in *Maitrī Upaniṣad* (S. Radhakrishnan, 1968: 797). There would appear to be definite evidence in the four reasons mentioned above, for the assertion that the idea of Cakravartin was established before the Buddha's birth. But some problems are found when we interpret and treat these sources with an analytical understanding on the history of Buddhist scriptures and with a text-critical method.

As already known, since the Buddha's Age, the scriptures of Buddhism have been handed down not in written form but by recitation from memory. The tradition of recitation did not arise in Buddhism, rather it was the general culture of ancient India. Brahmanism, which has a longer history than Buddhism at least by one millenium, had the tradition of recitation because of various reasons.<sup>4</sup> Even though the general view is that the Buddhist scriptures were established in written form through the third congregation or *saṅgīti* patronized by the king Aśoka, this view lacks evidence. Nowadays, the most persuasive view is that they were first

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<sup>3</sup> "Āgatāni hi mantesu mahāpuruṣalakṣaṇa dvattin sā ca vyākhyātā samattā an upubbaso" (PTS., *Suttanipata*, p.193). Originally in the Korean version of this article, I accept the translation by an eminent Korean monk, Beob-Jeong sunim. However, in this sentence, the word 'mantesu' is the locative case of the word 'manta' which means 'incantation', 'scripture' or 'vedas'. Therefore, I think that it would be better to change the expression 'all kinds of vedas' into merely 'various vedas' or 'vedas'.

<sup>4</sup> Gögen, Mizuno, *Kyoten: Sono Seiritzuto Denkey* [*Sūtras, Its Establishment and Development*], Tokyo: Kōsei Publishing Company, 1990, p.109. Ancient Indians believed that the written book could be stolen by thieves or burned by fire. Furthermore they opposed to write the scriptures down because it could be taught to the untouchables.

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printed in Sri Lanka in the first century B.C. (*Ibid.*, 111-112). Considering the history of Buddhist scriptural development and as already known, of the division of sectarians in the Abhidharma period, we can guess the possibility of corruption in the scriptures. They might not have reflected the situation of the Buddha's Age as it was. It is a well-known fact that there might be some possibility of addition and omission in the extant Buddhist scriptures. The 1144th Sūtra in the 41st volume of *Tsa-ê-han-ching*, known as the earliest among four kinds of Chinese *Āgamas*, notes the situation of the Post-Buddha period (T.2., 302c-303c), and such is similar with several other Sūtras from Chinese sources (T.2, 180a-182a).

The second difficulty in accepting the theory of the Pre-Buddha Age is that most of the biographical works of the Buddha were established later than the other Sūtras, and they included many fictitious factors because they are fundamentally created as literary works.

The third weak point of the theory is the idea of Past Buddha. Of course, it is evident that the thought of the seven Past Buddhas appeared in Buddhist scriptures such as the first volume of *Ch'ang-ê-han-ching*. So there might already be the idea of Past Buddhas in the Buddha Age. However, it is possible that the idea was established after the Buddha Age under the influence of the image of Śākyamuni Buddha. When we are reminded of the situation of that time in which many ascetics had practiced asceticism and meditation with the consciousness of purpose, it is a random guess that there are no ideas such as Buddha or Jina. In addition, it is interesting that Pārśva, the latest historical Jina before Mahāvīra, lived in the eighth century B.C. (Hee-seong Kil, 1984: 50).

The last material is much more encouraging. *Suttanipata* is known as one of the earliest, in which the fourth and fifth chapters are evaluated earlier than other chapters (Jae-chang Lee, 1982: 103). In addition to this, other sources give the theory a logical basis; for instance, *Maitrī Upaniṣad*, *Purāṇas* and so on.

## **2. The Problem of the Theory of the Post-Aśoka Age**

This theory is not popular among Korean Buddhist scholars. It has been raised by scholars such as Rhys Davids, Hunter, A.L.Basham, Hajime Nakamura, et al. In the case of Basham, he writes in his famous work, *The Wonder That was India*, as follows:

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In the period of the later Vedas, though there is no evidence that a really large Indian kingdom existed at the time, the possibility of a realm reaching to the sea was recognized, perhaps as a result of what Indians had heard of Babylonia or Persia. With the Mauryas the possibility was realized, and though they were soon almost forgotten, they left behind them the concept of the Universal Emperor (*Cakravartin*), which was incorporated into Buddhist tradition, and blended with later Vedic imperialistic ideas, was taken over by orthodox Hinduism (A. L. Basham, 1991: 84).

Here Basham emphasizes that the idea of *Cakravartin* was established no earlier than the Maurya Dynasty. Nakamura also says:

Among Buddhists and Jains the idea of *Cakravartin* was colored by the mystic and religious atmosphere, in a later period it was cognized as the mythological figure having important meaning. The legend that this ideal emperor will govern all of India was definitely established after the unification of Maurya Dynasty, thus did not appear in the scriptures of Buddhism and Jainism (Hajime Nakamura, 1969: 192-193).

If it is so, what is the problem with this assertion?

As the basis of his argument, Basham mentioned two factors; one is the fact that there had never been an immense territory before the Maurya Dynasty. The other is the ideal which appeared in *Cakkavatti Sihanāda Suttantta*. But Basham's view cannot be a final one, since it is possible that the ancient Indians could have dreamed of that kind of Great Empire without any historical experience. As Basham himself announced, *Cakkavatti Sihanāda Suttantta* could have influenced king the Aśoka as much as his image influenced the idea of *Cakravartin* (A. L. Basham, 1991, 84). Therefore, Basham failed in establishing a strong basis.

Nakamura also noted two reasons. The first is that there is no idea of *Cakravartin* in the earlier scriptures both of Buddhism and Jainism. And the second is that the idea of *Cakravartin* in *Kalpa Sūtra* of Jainism is strongly opposed to Brahmanism (JS, SBE 22, 1909: 225). This reflects the fact that the idea was established after the Age of Kautilya, the prime minister of Maurya Dynasty, because in his Age Brahmanism had held hegemony in various fields.

I cannot agree to the first reason; *Suttanipata*, one of the representative scriptures in the Early Buddhism, already contained the idea of *Cakravartin*

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(SP, Chapt. 3,7., Ver. 548-553). Specifically in the fifth chapter, we can find the paragraph:

In the Vedas, there are 32 kinds of characteristics of a perfectly great figure. And those are explained successively.

For the second reason, I think that there might be some problems in interpretation, since the hegemony of Brahmanism had a long history. Therefore, we can consider Kalpa Sūtra as reflecting the situation of Post-Kautilya Age, and at the same time, as reflecting that of the Buddha Age. In that point Nakamura also has some weak points.

### III. Provisional Conclusion

This article has examined two kinds of conflicting theories relating to the origin of Cakravartin: the theory of the Pre-Buddha Age and the theory of the Post-Aśoka Age. Above all I would like to give more credit to the former, but in the former not all problems are solved because there remain problems of detail as it is again divided into three views; 1) the very time of the Buddha, 2) one millennium B.C. and 3) 4th and 3rd millenniums B.C.

With regard to these views, I think that the first is most persuasive. There are four reasons for this. First, the Age of the Buddha is the Age of many social confusions and the authority of religions was breaking down due to political and economical transition from a tribal nation to a centralized kingdom. So many people were waiting for the great political and religious leader to appear. Second, I would like to note that there is a possibility of coexistence between the idea of Jina and that of Cakravartin because a tacit presupposition is needed to account for the flourishing of *samaṇa* cultures in that time. The third reason is that 32 kinds of characteristics of the great figure are found in the earlier scriptures such as *Suttanipata*. The last argument is that Cakravartin is mentioned in some non-Buddhist literatures such as *Maitrī Upaniṣad*.

Nevertheless, I feel the need to modify it with the theory of the Post-Aśoka Age. Having mentioned the relationship between the doctrine of *Āgamas* and the Aśoka Dharma, Nikki Kimura says the following:

In these scriptures, there are not only the earlier layers which influenced the doctrine of Aśoka Dharma but also the later layers which appeared on the basis of Aśoka's religious movement (Nikki Kimura, 1985: 63).

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Probably, this view might be applied to the problem of Cakravartin. In other words, the archetype of Cakravartin was formed in the Buddha's Age and it had greatly influenced the king Aśoka; and conversely, after Aśoka's Age it was inspired and developed by the Aśoka's political and religious activities as a model. We can, in fact, find that the later scriptures, to which the idea of Cakravartin belongs, were developed gradually. My provisional conclusion, therefore, is that the factors in the Buddha's Age and those in the Aśoka's Age have developed from interaction.

## Glossary of Chinese Terms

Ch'ang-ê-han-ching 長阿含經

Chung-ê-han-ching 中阿含經

Tsa-ê-han-ching 雜阿含經

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