



Ministry of Culture



# Dharmacakra

(The Wheel of the Law)

THAI CULTURE SERIES No. 25







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# DHARMAKAKRA (THE WHEEL OF THE LAW)

BY  
DHANIT YUPHO



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## Message

from

**His Excellency General Prayut Chan-o-cha (Ret.)**  
**Prime Minister of the Kingdom of Thailand**

Thailand's unique cultural heritage has flourished from our rich national history that began almost 800 years ago as the Kingdom of Sukhothai. Thai people are proud to be able to say that what began eight centuries ago by courtiers, artists, scholars, and farmers, as the first Thai Kingdom has lasted until this very day, and that our performance drama, music, paintings, architecture and the Thai language attest to this noble ancestry. The preservation of Thailand's heritage has been a distinct quality of our people and part of the Thai way, and this can be credited to the benevolence of the Thai Monarchy through Royal Patronage of the arts and Thai culture. With this splendid lineage, the Thai people have thus enjoyed being gracious to our international friends by sharing our culture and traditions, and welcoming our guests to our country.

I wish to congratulate the Ministry of Culture on the publication of this book series called "Thai Culture Series". I hope that it will be enjoyed by all peoples as well as inspire future generations.

General  (Ret.)  
(Prayut Chan-o-cha)  
Prime Minister of the Kingdom of Thailand



## Introduction

Arts and culture are priceless assets that reflect civilisation and prosperity of a nation which were created and passed on to the people by their forefathers.

The Ministry of Culture has played an active role in promoting and disseminating Thainess both domestically and internationally. In this regard, we have meticulously selected a book series of Thai art and culture consisting of 25 books such as *Introducing Cultural Thailand in Outline*, *The Royal Palaces*, *Thai Music*, *The Khon*, *Contemporary Art in Thailand*, and so on, which were written by experts in those fields and were published by the Fine Arts Department many times in the past. In this republication, this series of books are still full of knowledgeable content which will allow their readers to access the in-depth information about Thai arts and culture.

On behalf of the Ministry of Culture, I really hope that this book series will be useful and great sources of knowledge for the readers.

*VIRA ROJPOJCHANARAT*

(Vira Rojpojchanarat)

Minister of Culture of the Kingdom of Thailand





### MR. DHANIT YUPHO

was Director General of the Fine Arts Department from 1956 to 1968. He was born in Nakhon Sawan Province, Thailand, in 1907, and learned Pali at Wat Mahathat, Bangkok, in 1918. He was also a graduate of the ecclesiastical doctorate of Thailand. He entered into the government service in 1934 and became Chief of the Research Section of the National Library in 1943. He was the Director of the Division of Music and Drama in the Fine Arts Department from 1946 to 1956. Mr. Yupho was also a lecturer in the history of Thai literature at Chulalongkorn University. He was the editor of Thai Culture, New Series and the author of the following publications:

The Economic Conditions of India in the Buddha's Time; The Khōn; The Classical Siamese Theatre; Artists of the Thai Dance-Dramas or Lakhon Vol. I; The Preliminary Course of Training in Thai Theatrical Art; Thai Musical Instruments; The Khōn and Lakhon Presented by the Department of Fine Arts, etc.







## DHARMAKAKRA OR THE WHEEL OF THE LAW



Before discussing the actual Wheel of the Law, I would like first to remind everyone of our Great Lord Buddha's life story. It is, I trust, still well remembered that before the Birth of Lord Buddha, there was a prophetic scripture about Him. Because of His possession of the 32 Characteristics of the Great Man, the Brahminical scripture prophesised that if he remained as a layman, he would be the Emperor of the World; but if he entered the priesthood, he would become the Great Teacher of Mankind.

First, let us consider what kind of treasures an Emperor must possess. According to the Buddhist scripture, the emperor must have an important treasure called "Ratana". This consists of the Jewel Wheel, the Heavenly Elephant, the Heavenly Steed, the Precious Stones, the Splendid Wife, the Good Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Brave Knight. Of all these, the Jewel Wheel or Chakkaratana is, by far, the most important. It seems that it is the Jewel Wheel which confers upon the possessor the status and powers of an Emperor.

Figure 1  
(left) Lion-crowned capital of the Asoka pillar.  
Archaeological Museum, Sāmāh. (right) Relief from gateway,  
Sāñchi, showing original form of Asoka pillar, left.





According to the Pāli Scripture, the Jewel Wheel is complete, with the spokes, the rim, and the hub in perfect condition. Any king who happens to possess the Jewel Wheel will undeniably become an Emperor. According to the legend, the Jewel Wheel usually would manifest itself on the 15<sup>th</sup> day of the lunar month, (the night of the full moon). When the king had finished washing his hair after having observed religious precepts, he would take the royal seat on the top floor of his royal palace, and then the Jewel Wheel would come floating in the air from Mount Vipulaparbata and appear in front of him. The king would then realize that he was accepted as an Emperor. He would then get up from the royal seat to clothe himself properly, and with his left hand holding a gold pitcher, he would sprinkle water from it on the Jewel Wheel with his right hand. Then he would say,

“Gracious Jewel Wheel, please turn yourself constantly, Gracious Jewel Wheel, please bring us victory, and victory again.” The Jewel Wheel would then travel to the East, the South, the West and the North.

Whichever direction it turned, the Emperor with the army would follow immediately. In whichever countries the Jewel Wheel stopped, the Emperor and his army would also stop. All his royal enemies in the direction to which the Jewel Wheel led the Emperor and his army would come to greet him and become his subjects. Then the Emperor would preach on the Five Precepts. After having led the Emperor and his army to conquer all the land surrounded by the ocean, the Jewel Wheel would lead the Emperor back to his capital.

There is a scripture describing this particular Jewel Wheel in full length, concluding that it is in the same shape as the ordinary wheel of a carriage except for details. The hub of the Jewel Wheel is made of amethyst and the center of it sparkles like the light of the full moon. The Wheel has a thousand spokes decorated in various patterns and made of seven different kinds of precious stones set in silver. The rim of the Jewel Wheel is made of bright topaz. There are one hundred topaz pipes at the outer side of the rim, each of which is placed at a distance of ten spoke lengths. When the Jewel Wheel is turning in the air, these topaz pipes will produce beautiful sounds like that of a five piece musical ensemble. On top of each topaz pipe, there is a white parasol decorated with flowers, jewels and pearls. When in action, it seems that there are three Jewel Wheels turning within one another. However, we usually see the Jewel Wheel portrayed as an ordinary carriage or ox-cart wheel.

This brief description of the Jewel Wheel, the Emperor’s Almighty Emblem is, I hope, enough to make us realize that it is the Emperor himself who can make the Jewel Wheel turn. Certain scriptures add that no creatures who oppose the Emperor can turn the Jewel Wheel; only the Emperor who is accepted as the Dharma Rājā (the King of the essential purity of Justice) can turn it. When Prince Siddhartha did not want to possess the imperial treasure but wished to become the Teacher of Mankind, He entered the monkhood and persevered until He was enlightened and became the Self-Enlightened Teacher of Mankind, generally known as “Lord Buddha”. Buddha gave His first Sermon to His Five Disciples at the Deer Park (Isipatana Migadāyavana) near Benares on Āsālha-punnami Day, that is to say, on the full moon day of the eighth lunar month (July). Buddha’s First Sermon is about the Story of Lord Buddha, Himself, turning the Wheel of the Law.

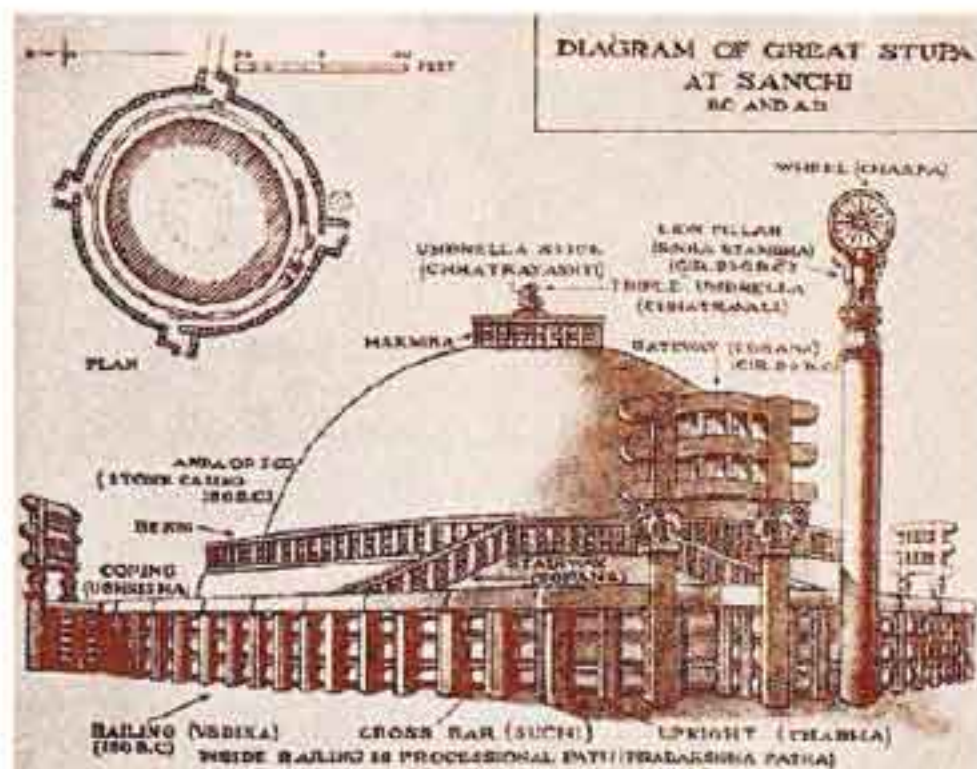


Figure 2 Great Stūpa, Sāñchi





The reason for a lengthy discussion of the Emperor and the Jewel Wheel is merely to show you that the Emperor uses the Jewel Wheel for his might and for the expansion of his empire, but Buddha at the First Preaching used the Dharmacakra or Wheel of the Law for making known the Noble Truth or the Good Law. It has been said before that no creatures in the world except the Emperor can turn the Jewel Wheel, but according to the Dhammacakkapavattanasutta it is Lord Buddha, alone, who can set the Wheel of the Law in motion.

The scripture says that celestial beings announced all over the earth and heavens that the Exquisite Wheel of the Law which nobody in the universe could turn, had then been turned by Lord Buddha at the Isipatana Migadāyavana near Benares. These stories should be enough to convince you of the strong belief of the Indians or at least the people of central India in the power of the Emperor to turn the Jewel Wheel. We know that Buddha, himself, used this belief to popularize His Infinite Wisdom or Supreme Knowledge. When He preached about the Wheel of the Law, the news, therefore, was widely and swiftly spread. But the wheel which Buddha was turning was called “the Wheel of the Law”, instead of the Jewel Wheel. If we raise the problem of how Buddha turned the Wheel of the Law, and what was said in the turned Wheel of the Law, it will have to be discussed at length in a separate issue. Here I shall consider the Wheel of the Law from the archaeological and artistic point of view.

The time when Buddha put the Wheel of the Law in motion is regarded by Buddhists as one of the most important periods or episodes of Buddha's Life. It is as important as the other three episodes of His Life; namely, the episode of His Birth, the episode of His Enlightenment and the episode of His Nirvāna (or extinction). After Buddha's Nirvāna, people wanted to create something to commemorate these different episodes, but at that time Buddha was highly respected in India and it was impossible to create an image of Him. The Indian artists turned instead to symbols to commemorate those episodes. Concerning the origin of symbols in Buddhism, Prince Damrong wrote that, “according to Professor Foucher, they seem to be found only in four places — these are the Birth Place, the Enlightenment Place, the First Preaching Place and the Nirvāna Place. The reference for this is the coins stamped with



Figure 3 Buddha in the attitude of the First Sermon, Gandhāra.



Figure 4 Buddha in the attitude of the First Sermon, Amaravati.



Figure 5 Buddha in the attitude of the First Sermon, Gupta.



the lotus design for the mark of His Birth Place, with the Bodhi tree (figus religiosa) for the mark of His Enlightenment Place, with the Wheel of the Law for the mark of the First Preaching Place, and with the Stūpa for the mark of His Nirvāṇa Place. These coins are evidently found to be very much older than the Stūpa built by King Asoka the Great.”

Later on, King Asoka made Buddhism the official religion of his country and built many big monuments; the architects often used the designs on the coins as decorations on the Stūpas. In that period it was still forbidden to make an image of Buddha; therefore the architects had to use the lotus as the symbol of the Birth, the throne and the religious fig tree as the symbol of the Enlightenment, the Wheel of the Law and the stag for the First Sermon, and the Stūpa for Buddha's Nirvāṇa.

The oldest model of the Wheel of the Law is considered to be the one on the stone pillar erected by King Asoka in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century of Buddhism, around 150 B.C. Hsüan-tsang, a Chinese pilgrim of the 7<sup>th</sup> century A.D., saw it still standing in the Deer Park at Sārnāth. He described, “a stone pillar about 70 feet high. The stone is altogether as bright as jade.... It was here that Siddhartha having arrived at enlightenment began to turn the wheel of the law”. \*

The large symbolic wheel, of which only fragments now remain, was supported on the heads of four adorned lions facing in four directions. The lions stand on a circular plinth supported by a bell shaped lotus base. This plinth or platform is engraved with four wheels facing the four directions of the world. Between the wheels are representations of four different animals: the elephant, bull, horse and lion. We should notice that the animals are not stationary; each is portrayed in a running or walking position to indicate that the wheels also are not stationary but are turning constantly (figure 1).

In the Gandhāra Period (B.C. 50-A.D. 500) an artist of Greco-Roman background created an image of Buddha giving the first sermon. It portrayed him with lowered face, both shoulders covered, sitting with crossed legs on the throne, turning towards the

right, the right hand holding the Wheel of the Law at knee level. He was handing the Wheel of the Law to the Five Disciples, two of them sitting near the throne on the right hand side and three on the left hand side also near the throne. In front of the throne there was a crouching stag with head turned (figure 3). After that, in the Amaravati Period (A.D. 150-300) the image of Buddha was again created but with only one shoulder covered, the right shoulder being bare, sitting with the legs folded over each other, lifting the right open hand pointing outside at the shoulder level, the left hand holding the end of the robe at the left breast level. Two of the Five Disciples sat on the right hand side of the throne and three of them on the other side. In front of the throne there were two deer (without the Wheel of the Law) facing each other (figure 4). The image of Buddha in the Gupta Period (A.D. 300-600) was shown sometimes seated in the European fashion with both legs hanging (figure 5), and sometimes in the crossed leg position, both hands lifted to breast level and making the gesture that we call “turning the Wheel of the Law”. Below the feet of the Buddha seated in European fashion, the Wheel of the Law was shown usually in flat section or sometimes with the rim outward, beneath the figure seated with crossed legs. On each side of the Wheel on the base of the throne are portrayed the figures of three men facing outwards, with hands joined together at the breast (figure 6). (The six men are understood to represent in this period the Five Disciples and the creator or donor of the Statue of Buddha). In front of the Wheel of the Law, there were two stags with turned heads. Apart from these features there would also be various illustrative or decorative designs. The reason for including the stag was to show that Buddha preached about the Wheel of the Law in the Migadāyavana (The Deer Park). But the most important symbol was the Wheel of the Law to show the episode of the First Sermon in accordance with traditional belief. The Wheel of the Law was deeply incised or carved in relief on Indian images of the Buddha representing the First Sermon. Except for the wheel on the heads of the four lions on Asoka's pillar and the other one on the “Singha Stambha”, it was never sculptured in the round such as we found it in Thailand.

\* S. Beal, Buddhist Records of the Western World, (London, 1906,) Vol. II, p. 46.







Figure 6 Buddha in the attitude of the First Sermon. Archaeological Museum, Sāmāth. Gupta.



Figure 8 Wheel of the Law, sandstone. Wat Māhathāt, Phetchaburi Province.



Figure 7 Wheel of the Law, bluish limestone. Wat Khlong Khwāng, Nakhon Ratchasima Province. Diameter 150 cm.



Figure 9 Their Imperial Majesties the Shah and Empress of Iran viewing Dharmacakra at the Bangkok National Museum on January 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1968





Figure 10 Wheel of the Law. National Museum, U-thong, Suphan Buri. Diameter 94 cm.



Figure 11 Wheel of the Law with inscription in Pāli, found in Nakhon Pathom Province. Collection of H.R.H. Prince Bhanubandhu Yugala, Bangkok. Diameter 96 cm. Height 110 cm.

The present Indian government has taken this lotus pillar with the four lions on the top to use now as the State-Emblem of India.

There was also another lion and Wheel of the Law pillar called “Singha Stambha” placed near the southern gateway of the Sāñchi Stūpa (figure 2). In the period of King Asoka the Great, there was also a model of the Wheel of the Law engraved on a pillar of the Sāñchi Stūpa dated in the second century B.C., that is, over 2000 years ago.

The first discovery of an ancient Wheel of the Law in Thailand is generally understood to have occurred in the reign of King Rama IV (A.D. 1851-1868), at the time when His Majesty gave the command to repair the Phra Pathom Chedi (Pathama cetiya) and many stone Wheels of the Law were found in the compound. Some were broken with parts missing, and some were still in good

condition. H.R.H. Prince Pawares, the Supreme Patriarch, wrote about these Wheels of the Law in his article about the Phra Pathom Chedi as follows, “Many old stone Wheels made for worshipping and buried under the ground were found. And this showed us that the place must, once upon a time, have been a big town, rich and prosperous and ruled by a king. May be the possessor of the wheels thought that his possession of worldly goods was not quite great enough without the Jewel Wheel. He therefore made the stone wheels to worship the Three Gems of Buddhism and to gain some advantages. But on the other hand, it might be to show that the town called Sudasana Devanagara (according to chronicles) and in the Buddhist period changed into Kusinarā was a good and prosperous town ruled by an Emperor. Therefore the Jewel Wheel was concealed and buried in the ground”.



Some of these stone Wheels of the Law were later on kept in the National Museum in Bangkok, and along the west corridor of the Phra Pathom Chedi or in the museum of that sanctuary. When L. Fournereau, the French archaeologist saw these stone wheels in A.D. 1895, he photographed them and later published them in *Le Siam ancien* with the explanation that these wheels were from the carriages of the Brahmin gods. However, L. De Lajonquière said in the book *Le domaine archéologique du Siam* that he did not believe that these stone wheels were the wheels of a carriage because there were no holes in the hubs. He thought that they could be the boundary stones of a temple.

Prince Damrong said “These stone wheels have never been found in Burma, or Cambodia, even in Thailand. They were found only in Nakhon Pathom Province. Somehow there was a rumour about them being found in Nakhon Ratchasima Province but never in any other provinces.”

The rumour about a stone wheel being found in Nakhon Ratchasima proved to be true. It is now in Wat Khlong Khwang (คลองขวาง), Meuang Sema district (ตำบลเมืองเสมา), Nakhon Ratchasima province (figure 7). Others were found at Wat Phipphri (วัดพิภพริ) and Wat Mahāthāt, Phetchaburi province (figure 8). Later on the Fine Arts Department excavated the ruins in U-Thong district, Suphan Buri province in 1963 and found three stone Wheels of the Law, one of them in perfect condition. A stone slab with a Wheel of the Law carved in relief was found in Kalasin province. Concerning these stone wheels, Prof. Georges Coedès has explained that “Owing to the figures of stags being found near these wheels, it is thought that these wheels may symbolize the Wheel of the Law which Buddha turned round when He gave His First Sermon in the Migadāyavana.”\*



Figure 12 Wheel of the Law, laterite. Phra Pathom Chedi, Nakhon Pathom Province. Diameter 42 cm. Height 50 cm.



Figure 13 Wheel of the Law, sandstone. National Museum, Bangkok. Diameter 20 cm. Height 21.5 cm.

\* Coedès, “Une Roue de la Loi avec inscription en Pāli provenant du Site de P'rā Pāthōn,” *Artibus Asiae*, XIX, 3/4, 1956, p. 221.



The Wheel of the Law, or the stone wheels, are found in various sizes, the largest, which is now kept in the National Museum in Bangkok, being 1.95 meters in diameter (figure 9). There are many smaller ones but all are damaged except one now in the U-thong museum in Suphanburi province (figure 10), its size being 45 centimeters in diameter. The decorative designs on the spokes, the rims, the hubs and the foundation stand are varied, and in some, the space between the spokes is cut through, as is the case with the one found in U-thong district, Suphan Buri and another one in the personal collection of Prince Bhanubandh (figure 11), but usually spaces between the spokes are not cut through. One point worth noticing is that the spokes of the wheel vary in number. This difference makes serious Buddhists think of Buddha's different Laws of Truth and consider that the eight-spoke Wheel might be meant for the Noble Eightfold Path, the twelve-spoke one meant to represent the Twelve activities known as *Dvādasākaram* in the Wheel of the Law in motion, the one with 16 spokes meant for sixteen actions of the Law (*solasadhamma*). But the Wheels of the Law we have discovered do not only have 8, 12, or 16 spokes; they may have 14, 15, 17, 18, 21, 22, 24, 26, 32, 35 and 36 spokes in one wheel. Moreover, a wheel does not have the same number of spokes on the reverse as on the face. If we think hard about the laws of Buddhism, we may succeed in matching them to the number of spokes but the result will be vague and impossible to regard as evidence. In my opinion the maker of the wheel did not intend to make the spokes of the wheel equal in number to certain laws in Buddhism although he made it to represent the Wheel of the Law which Buddha taught. We should also consider that when a wheel is turning it is impossible for the viewer to determine precisely the exact number of spokes. We know from the scriptures that Buddha turned the Wheel of the Law and kept it constantly moving. On the Asoka pillar mentioned earlier, this motion was shown symbolically by the running or walking animals. Since it is impossible in monolithic sculpture to realistically portray a turning wheel, the artisans of early Thailand tried to solve the problem by carving the wheels with a varied number of spokes and a different number on the face and the reverse, and also, I believe, by showing the leaves in the floral border around the rim in a reclining or flattened movement from the force of the wheel's movement.



Figure 14 Wheel of the Law, bluish limestone. Phra Pathom Chedi, Nakhon Pathom Province. Diameter 88 cm. Height 96 cm.



Figure 15 Wheel of the Law, bluish limestone. Phra Pathom Chedi, Nakhon Pathom Province. Diameter 104 cm. Height 114 cm.





Figure 16 Wheel of the Law, bluish limestone. Phra Pathom Chedi, Nakhon Pathom Province. Diameter 77 cm. Height 80 cm.

A few, very rare wheels are carved from laterite (figure 12) or from sandstone (figure 13). Most of the Wheels of the Law found in Nakhon Pathom province and Suphan Buri province are made of bluish limestone (figures 14-20). We discovered that this material comes from the vicinity of the mountain close to the river (เขาพญา) in Phetchaburi province, around Chinnasi brook (ห้วยจีนสิทธิ์) in Ratchaburi province, and around the chain of mountains in Chom Bueng district (อำเภอจอมบึง), Ratchaburi. The bluish limestone is not only found near the mountains but also on the plains, and the wheel found at Wat Khlong Khwang in Nakhon Ratchasima province may be made of the bluish limestone from the local district. I should mention here that the stone of this wheel is not as fine a grade of limestone as that of the Nakhon Pathom wheel, nor is it fashioned with a comparable degree of craftsmanship.

In general, this type of bluish limestone which turns a slightly more slaty blue color with age is a very hard and smooth stone, and an excellent material for sculpture. It was a particular favorite of

the earliest sculptors, and most of the large and beautiful images of the Dvāravatī period are made from it.

As far as I know there are only a few wheels which do not have some incised or relief ornament. A design is usually found on the ring around the hub, on the spokes, and on the rim. The engraving on the ring around the hub is in a spot design called "Lai Nueang" (ลายเนือง) which might represent the fertilized ovule of the lotus. In the second ring is a different type of lotus design, but the third ring repeats the "Lai Nueang" design. Next to the third ring are the feet of the round or angular spokes which taper slightly to the rim. The lower part of the wheel is engraved in a design of erect or bent lotus with the stem twisted in a triangular form. Here also are the figures of celestial beings, or crowned kings shown from the breasts upwards with their two hands resting on the rim of the lotus as if peeping through a window (figure 21). The end of each spoke touching the rim is engraved with a connecting lotus petal design, sometimes in a twisting stem design in one or two tiers, sometimes in the flower and stem design with a finely engraved line. The outside ring of the rim is engraved either in a long, thin leaf design, or with the seeds of the lotus, or in some other design. Some examples, such as the big bluish limestone wheel in the Bangkok National Museum have been finely engraved with many tiers and circles of design.

One thing should be noticed; that is that every wheel has a carved stand attached to it, and some seem to have an axis to fix the wheel in another stand. The wheel stand is sometimes engraved in the erect or bending lotus design, some in the erect lotus design with very long petals (figure 17), some in the twisting, twin stem design, and some in other designs. Occasionally the leaf design is so high as to conceal the spokes. In the lower part beneath the rim of the hub, there are two Wheels of the Law, and the stand is engraved with a celestial being sitting with flat crossed legs, each hand holding an unopened lotus above the shoulders (it is sometimes said that this image represents Surya, or the Angel of Dawn) (figure 22).

On one wheel of this design, the Angel is flanked by two caryatid dwarfs (gana) who support the smaller wheels on their backs (figure 23). There is also one broken wheel, but the section where the Angel of Dawn or Garuda holds the lotus is still in fair conditions;





Figure 17 Wheel of the Law, bluish limestone. Phra Pathom Chedi, Nakhon Pathom Province. Diameter 96 cm. Height 96 cm.



Figure 18 Wheel of the Law, bluish limestone. Phra Pathom Chedi, Nakhon Pathom Province. Diameter 104 cm. Height 112 cm.

it is now placed in the corridor of the Phra Pathom Chedi (figure 24). Another wheel has been discovered at the Noen Kok Chedi in the east of Kamphaeng Saen district, Nakhon Pathom province. There is still another one with a Pāli inscription on the stone vase (figures 21 & 25).

Archaeologists are of the opinion that the stone wheels were made in the Dvāravatī period (6<sup>th</sup> - 11<sup>th</sup> century A.D.). The Indian design shows that ancient Indian culture was known in this part of South East Asia at least in the Gupta Period (A.D. 300 - 600) or soon thereafter. One of the most interesting of these ancient wheels is a damaged one in the museum of Phra Pathom Chedi. The design on the stand is that of the large lotus with half opened petals, on which, seated cross-legged, is a female figure with her two hands touching her abdomen. Her regal costume identifies her as a royal lady or a queen. On either side of her, standing on petals of the same lotus, is an elephant pouring water over her from a pitcher held in its trunk (figure 26). Since the theme of this wheel is important in history and archaeology we will discuss it at some length.



Figure 19 Wheel of the Law, bluish limestone. Phra Pathom Chedi, Nakhon Pathom Province. Diameter 65 cm.





Figure 20 Wheel of the Law, bluish limestone. Phra Pathom Chedi, Nakhon Pathom Province. Diameter 67 cm. Height 72 cm.







Figure 21 Wheel of the Law, bluish limestone. Excavated at Kamphaeng Saen, Nakhon Pathom Province. National Museum, Bangkok. On the attached base is the half-figure of a divinity or royal personage holding an unopened lotus in each hand. There is a Pāli inscription on the supporting base. Diameter 67 cm. Height 98 cm.



Figure 22 Wheel of the Law, bluish limestone. Phra Pathom Chedi, Nakhon Pathom Province. The figure holding unopened lotuses may represent Surya. Diameter 68 cm. Height 72 cm.

The royal lady sitting on the large lotus with two elephants lifting their trunks to pour the water over her, raises the question of where the idea came from. And how can we find the place of origin? As we mentioned before, Indian culture was evidently brought to this part of the world. So let us make a journey of observation and perhaps we may get some ideas from it. For a complete investigation of this motif we should visit India and pay our respects to the sites important in the Lord Buddha's life. We might begin at Bodha Gaya, the site of His Enlightenment, then go to Sāmāth where He preached the First Sermon, perhaps then we should see Bharhut, and Nagara Ujjeni, and turning gradually to the southwest we will arrive at Sāñchi. Here is a great Stūpa surrounded by a stone fence and four stone gateways beautifully carved with scenes from the Birth Stories or the life of the Buddha. There are also several big and small shrines in the vicinity.

Archaeologists believe that the Great Stūpa of Sāñchi was first built in the Mauriya period around 323 - 187 B.C. This period produced three kings well known to historians, namely, King Chandragupta, the founder of the Mauriya dynasty, King Bindusāra, called Amittagharta, and King Asoka the Great, the first powerful supporter of Buddhism. Judging by the style of the sculpture, archaeologists and historians agree that Sāñchi was built and came into use during the reign of Asoka in 273 - 232 B.C. There is a story telling that Asoka, at the time when he was still heir to the throne, went to Nagara Ujjeni. During the journey he stopped at a merchant's house in Vidisā (now called Besnagar) and met the beautiful daughter of a merchant. He fell in love with her and married her as his first wife. Later on she became known as Vidisā Mahā Devi. She bore three children, two sons and one girl. The two sons were called Ujjeniya and Mahindra, and the girl was Sanghamittā.





Figure 23 Wheel of the Law, bluish limestone. National Museum, Bangkok. On the base is a figure of Surya; supporting the wheel are two ganesha or dwarves. Diameter 72 cm. Height 90 cm.

When King Asoka came to the throne after King Bindusāra, his father, he generously and devoutly supported Buddhism. He patronized the activity of the third council of Buddhism (Tatīyasangāyanā) which took place in Pāṭaliputra. Mahindra, his son (although some historians say he was King Asoka's younger brother) entered the monkhood and was appointed leader of the monks going to popularize Buddhism in Ceylon. According to the Singhalese chronicle the Mahāvamsa, before he left for Ceylon, he went to see his mother at Cetiyagīrī near Vedisā and stayed in the stately temple (called Cetiyagīrī) built by her at the Sāñchi hill. King Asoka the Great made the stone pillar to which we have referred and engraved his commands on it, and he also enshrined many relics at the same site. It is evident that before, or during King Asoka's reign there were already Buddhists and monks living in the compound of Sāñchi.

There is one story praising King Asoka's might. It said, "King Asoka the Great by the power of the Yakṣa (demons) could make Jambudvīpa (India) beautiful at one moment with Stūpas". The Buddhist chronicle reveals that King Asoka built 84,000 Stūpas in India and Afganistan. Even though the chronicle might seem to exaggerate, it might be gathered that King Asoka had actually built Stūpas in great number, and that he had built the Great Stūpa at Sāñchi in Bhopal.



Figure 24 Base from a Wheel of the Law, bluish limestone. Phra Pathom Chedi, Nakhon Pathom Province. A divinity holds an unopened lotus in each hand. Width 58 cm. Height 60 cm.



After King Asoka's death, the influence of the Maurya dynasty deteriorated and the empire was divided into various sections. The last descendant of the Maurya dynasty was King Brihadaratha who was assassinated by the minister of state named Pusyamitra, a descendant of a Brahmin family, in about 187 B.C. Then Pusyamitra came to the throne and established a new dynasty called Śunga.

King Pusyamitra of the Śunga dynasty came to the throne of Pāṭaliputra in about 187-151 B.C. The chronicle says that he was a deadly foe of Buddhism as is mentioned in the Mañjusrī-mūlakalpa scripture, "Once there was a foolish man who wanted to destroy the temple where Buddha's relics were kept and to kill the virtuous monks". It also said that King Pusyamitra offered a reward for the heads of Buddhist monks as is mentioned in the Divyāvadāna scripture : "He who brings a head of a Buddhist monk to me, will receive from me a hundred dinar". Some historians argue that the two scriptures seem to condemn King Pusyamitra too much. But it was evidently true that King Pusyamitra, a Brahmin descendant, had come to the throne and that he encouraged Brahminism,

which was just opposite to King Asoka the Great, who was the patron of Buddhism. It was quite understandable that the Buddhists would certainly be angry and displeased and let this displeasure show in the two mentioned scriptures. King Pusyamitra of Śunga dynasty was on the throne about 26 years, and after his death his son Agnimitra, the heir to the throne and the governor of the West with Vidisā as his capital came to the throne. The last king of this dynasty ended his life in the same manner as the last king of the Maurya dynasty. The last King of the Śunga dynasty was a weak man and was under the influence of the Brahmin minister of state who came from the "Kāṇva" family, but somehow the king remained on the throne until about 43 or 33 B.C. In the later reigns of the Śunga dynasty from King Agnimitra on, it again became a prosperous time for Buddhists.

This was because those kings did not show themselves to be the enemies of Buddhism. Therefore the Buddhists were encouraged to build additional important religious places in the compound of Sāñchi and Bharhut. The second and third Stūpas in the compound of Sāñchi were also built in this period of the Śunga dynasty. Archaeologists, after long research, are of the opinion that the Stūpa built by King Asoka was originally made of brick and was smaller by half than the present size. The Stūpa which now measures 121½ feet wide and 77½ feet high was later on covered with stone on top of the original brick. The stone railing, changed from the original wooden one, measures 11 feet high. The gates at the four directions of the Stūpa, which are also made of stone, are understood to have been built in this period. It is agreed that the reconstruction of the Stūpa at Sāñchi was made during the period of 143-43 B.C. But Sir John Marshall has said that the gates of the Great Stūpa and the single gate of the third Stūpa, making 5 altogether, were built one after the other, taking a few decades. At the west gate of the Great Stūpa, built before the other ones, the donor's name was carved on the stone support. His name was Ananda, and he was the leader of the capable artists of King Sri Sātākarni of Andhra, the region which occupied the land between the Krishnā and Goāvari Rivers in the southern India. It is he who got rid of the Śunga dynasty and the Kāṇva family from India in about 43 B.C. If that is so, the gates of the Sāñchi Stūpa were probably built in the second half of the first century B.C.



Figure 25 Detached base, showing Pāli inscription from the Wheel of the Law, Figure 21 Width 36 cm. Height 38 cm.





An artist's rendering of the Wheel of the Law shown in Figure 26



Figure 26 Wheel of the Law, bluish limestone. Phra Pathom Chedi, Nakhon Pathom Province. (For an explanation of the figures carved in relief, see pp. 23 and 24.) Diameter 65 cm. Height 80.5 cm

The four mentioned gates were covered with sculptured scenes taken from the Buddha's Birth Story and with the symbols relating to his life, such as the figure of the Wheel of the Law supposed to represent the First Sermon (figure 27), the Throne and the Bodhi Tree for the episode of Enlightenment (figure 28), and the Stūpa for the episode of Nirvāṇa. The eastern and the northern gates of the Sāñchi Stūpa were engraved in the design of the lotus leaf with the fully-opened and budding lotus rising from the water pot; upon the big middle flower is seated the figure of the royal lady with right leg folded, and the pendant left foot touching the lotus leaf; the left hand rests in the lap, and the right hand is holding the stem of the budding lotus at the level of the right shoulder. There are two elephants standing on each of the open lotuses, one at each side of the figure of the royal lady (figure 29). Each of the

elephants lifts its trunk to pour water from a pitcher over the head of the royal lady. This scene of a royal female figure seated on a lotus with two elephants pouring water from a pitcher over her is considered by the British and French archaeologists, Marshall and Foucher,\* to be the picture of Queen Siri Mahā Māyā giving birth to Buddha, that is to say, it is the symbol of the episode of the Birth. Forbidden at this time to make portraits of respected persons in India, the artist therefore thought of this kind of picture to represent the idea.

Apart from this scene one also finds a representation on the north gate of Queen Siri Mahā Māyā standing on a lotus. There is also a carving of the waterpot with fully open and budding lotuses peeping out of it, which even without the Queen or elephants may symbolize the Birth.

\* Sir John Marshall & A. Foucher.





An artist's rendering of the figures on the Wheel of the Law shown in Figure 26.



Figure 27 Relief from gateway, Sanchi. First century B.C. The Wheel of the Law revolving upon the pillar is a symbol of the First Sermon.



Figure 28 Relief from gateway, Stupa III, Sanchi. First Century B.C. Top : A representation of the First Sermon. Bottom : The Bodhi Tree representing Buddha's Enlightenment.



With this description in mind of the Queen Siri Mahā Māyā scenes let us turn back to the stone wheels of Thailand and consider whether the artists of ancient Nakhon Pathom may have found the inspiration for their version of the design from those in Sāñchi.

As we have mentioned earlier, a scene on the lower part of the Wheel of the Law in the Phra Pathom Chedi museum shows a royal female figure, both hands touching her abdomen, seated crosslegged on a large lotus. On either side of her, but standing on the same lotus are elephants who bathe her with water from pitchers held in their raised trunks (figure 26).

We wonder if there were not Buddhist or royal missions from the Dvāravātī kingdom which travelled to India and may have paid respect to the Great Sāñchi Stūpa. Or did merchants, landowners, sailors, monks, and so forth who had seen Sāñchi, travel from India to the land of ancient Nakhon Pathom? At any rate, it seems evident that a description of the carving on the Sāñchi gate and its symbolism reached Nakhon Pathom. However, either the description lost accuracy during the long journey or it was imperfectly understood by the artist, or perhaps he had to adjust the design to a limited space. Whatever the reason, we find the scene on the Nakhon Pathom Wheel, while obviously deriving from that of Sāñchi, is not identical; the pose of the female figure is different and the elephants stand upon the same large lotus instead of smaller separate ones.

Elements similar to the Queen Mahā Māyā design are found on an unusual object kept in the National Museum, Bangkok. The object is a molded clay rectangle, 21 cm. by 14.5 cm.; it too comes from Nakhon Pathom. There are cup-like depressions at the four corners and a circular depression ringed by a double lotus in the center. Above this, seated with bent legs is a nude female figure, hands raised above her thighs. On either side, with front and hind legs standing on separate lotus flowers are the familiar elephants with raised trunks and water pitchers. The rest of the area is filled with representations of royal insignia such as flywhisks, conch shells, garlands, vajra, etc. (figure 30). Mr. J.J. Boeles identifies the figure as Gaja-Laksamī and discusses this container or toilet tray in his article, "The King of Sri Dvāravati and his Regalia" (Journal of the Siam Society III, 1, April 1964).



Figure 29 Relief from east gateway of the Great Stūpa, Sāñchi representing Buddha 's Birth.



An artist's rendering of Figure 29. Compare with Figure 26.



In spite of the additional elements on the clay tray, the design gives the impression of having been derived from the same source as that on the Wheel of the Law in the Nakhon Pathom museum. We might also compare a terra cotta fragment from U-Thong, Suphan Buri, which shows a female figure who is holding a lotus bud in each hand and who is seated between two elephants (figure 31). On the subject of the female figure with two elephants, Mr. Havell has written "The symbols of Buddhism were not Buddhist inventions, but the common property of all Indo-Aryan religions. This interchange

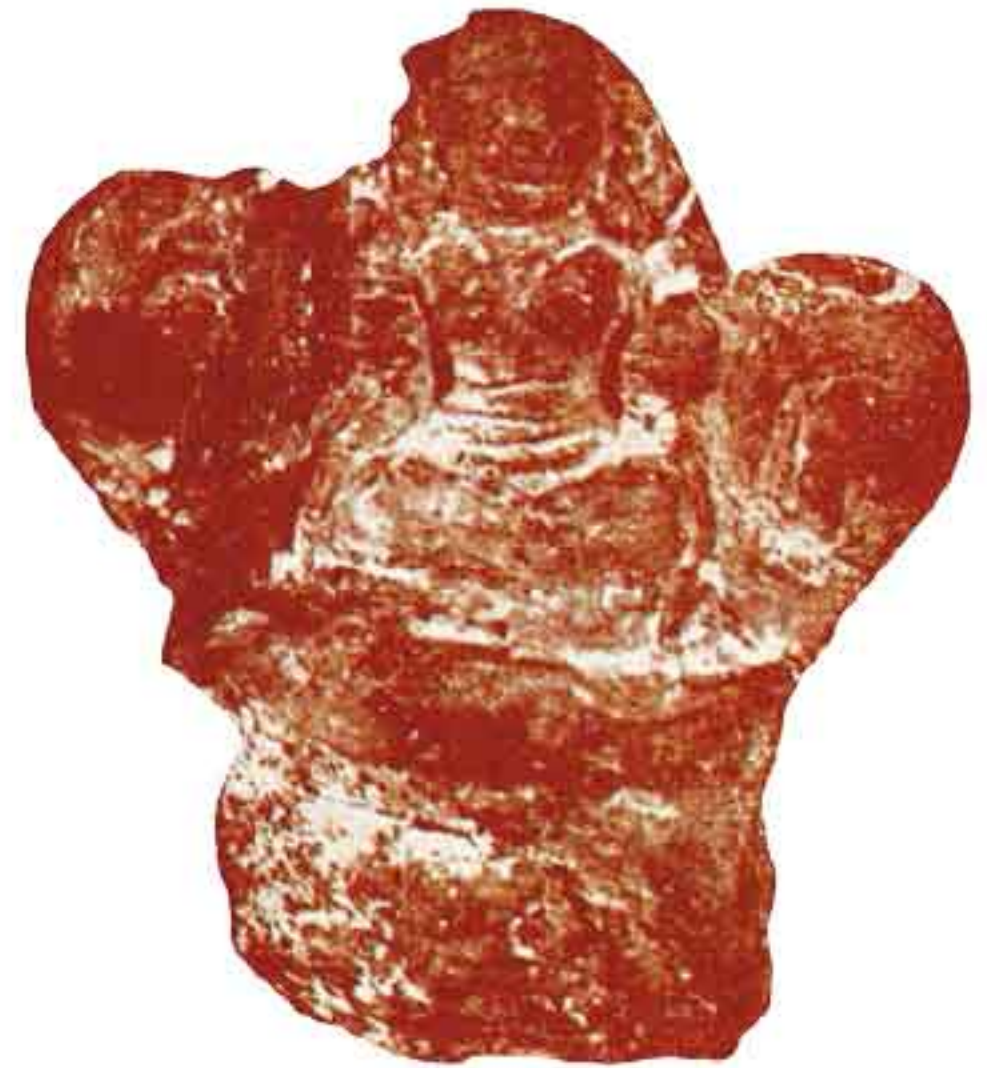


Figure 31 The Birth of Buddha or Gaja-Laksami. Terra-cotta fragment. Excavated at U-thong, Suphan Buri Province.

Figure 30 Clay tablet representing either Buddha's Birth or Gaja-Laksami National Museum, Bangkok From Phra Pathom Chedi, Nakhon Pathom Province.

From top :

1. The Queen is seated with folded legs; her hands are raised above her thighs and seem to hold two lotus stems. The closed lotus flowers appear above her shoulders.
2. Two caparisoned elephants carrying upturned water pitchers in their trunks; the water descends in four streams.
3. Two flywhisks.
4. Two elephant goads.
5. Two thunderbolts or vajra.
6. Two strings of prayer beads or garlands.
7. Two conch shells.
8. Two fish with heads facing down.
9. Two royal umbrellas (upside down).
10. Two royal fans (upside down).
11. At the bottom a jar supporting the lotus rosette.
12. In the center a circle made up of overlapping lotus petals in bloom; it acts as a support for the lotus cushion the Queen sits on.

In each corner there is a band of blooming lotus.





of symbolism is also seen in the various panels representing Māyā, the mother of the Buddha, seated or standing upon a lotus flower springing from a vase, while on either side above her an elephant bathes her from a vase held in its trunk. No doubt, as M. Foucher says, this was meant by the sculptor to symbolise the Nativity of the Blessed One. But to many generations of artists before the Buddha's time, it had meant the miraculous birth witnessed every morning when Ushas rose from the cosmic ocean, and the mystic Brahmā lotus, the Creator's throne, unfolded its rosy petals. Ushas was the celestial maiden who opened the doors of the sky and was bathed by Indra's elephants, the rain-clouds. In Buddhist times the meaning of the myth is changed. Brahmā is dethroned and Ushas becomes the mother of the Blessed One under the name of Mahā Māyā the Great Illusion, the cause of pain and sorrow, from which the Buddha showed the way of escape. In later Indian art she is Laksami, the bright goddess of the day, greeting her consort Vishnu, the Preserver, as he rises victorious from his conflict with the spirits of darkness, and bringing with her the nectar of immortality churned from the cosmic ocean".\*

If we consider equally all of the points we have tried to make in this paper it might be difficult to decide whether the wheel in the Nakhon Pathom museum is the Jewel Wheel of the Emperor decorated with a representation of Gaja-Laksami, the goddess of fortune and beauty, or the Wheel of the Law with a scene of Queen Siri Mahā Māyā, the mother of the Buddha. But since we know from the sculpture of the Dvāravātī period that this era was predominately Buddhist, and in view of the other stone wheels carved with Buddhist symbols we may conclude that this particular wheel symbolizes two great events of the Buddhist faith, two episodes; the birth or conception of the Buddha, represented by the Queen his mother, and the First Sermon beginning the dissemination of His knowledge and represented by the wheel, the ever turning Wheel of the Law.



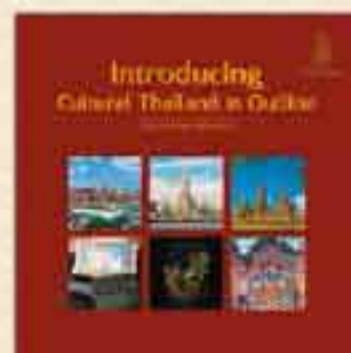
An artist's rendering and reconstruction of the fragment shown in Figure 31

\* E.B. Havell, A Handbook of Indian Art. (London, 1920) pp. 32-33.





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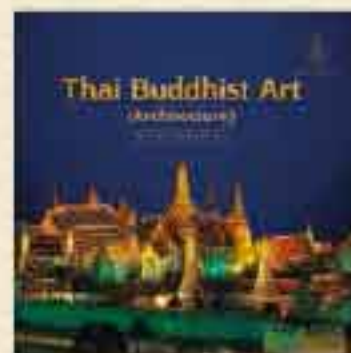
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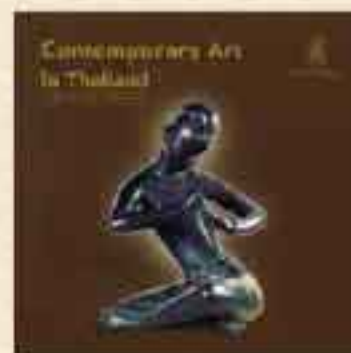
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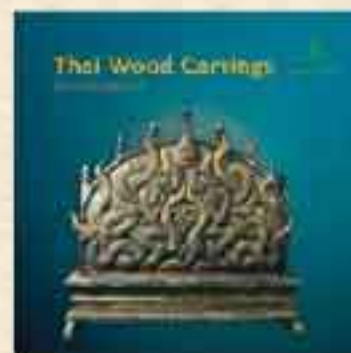
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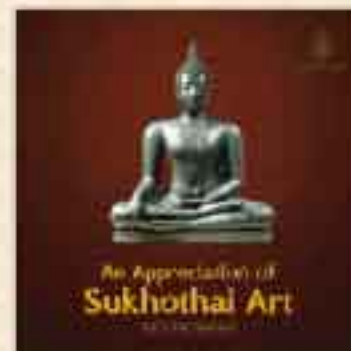
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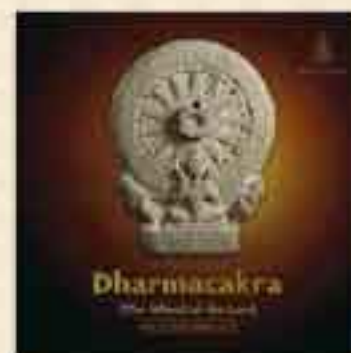
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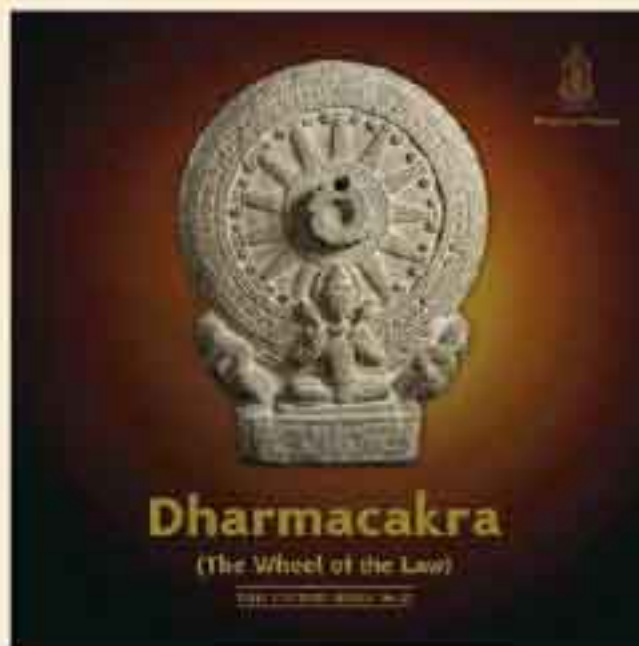


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