

The Wheel Of Life

The Wheel Of Life, or bhavacakra, is a symbolic representation of samsara, the cyclic existence of birth and death, found on walls of Tibetan Buddhist temples and monasteries in the Indo-Tibetan region.

In Mahayana Buddhism, it is believed that the drawing was designed by Buddha himself in order to help ordinary people understand Buddhist teachings.

The Wheel of Life is also referred to as «Wheel Of Cyclic Existence» or «Wheel Of Becoming».



The above Wheel of Life has been photographed at Thiksey Monastery, Ladakh, in September 2016

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Explanation of the diagram

The meanings of the main parts of the diagram are (starting from the middle outwards):

The middle of the wheel contains three animals, a pig, a bird, and a snake that are holding each others tails. The animals represent the three poisons ignorance, symbolized by the pig. (This comparison is based on the Indian concept of a pig being the most foolish of animals, since it sleeps in the dirtiest places and eats whatever comes to its mouth.) The snake represents aversion or anger; this is because it will be aroused and strike at the slightest touch. The bird represents attachment which can be translated also as desire or clinging. These three animals represent the three poisons, which are the core of the Wheel of Life. From these three poisons, the whole cycle of existence evolves.

The second circle with a white and a black half circle represents karma, the law of cause and effect. Under the influence of the three poisons, human beings create karma. The white half-circle shows happy people doing positive actions, and therefore who are moving upwards to higher states or realms. The dark/black half-circle shows people in miserable situations doing negative actions who in turn are led to lower states or realms.

The third circle represents the six realms of samsara, as karma in turn gives rise to the six realms, which represent the different types of suffering within samsara. These six realms are divided into three higher realms and three lower realms. The wheel can sometimes be represented as having five realms, too. In this case the God realm and the Demi-god realm are combined into a single realm.

The three higher realms are shown in the top half of the circle:

- God realm: The gods lead long and enjoyable lives full of pleasure and abundance, but spending them pursuing meaningless distractions. They never think to practice the dharma. When death comes to them, they are completely unprepared, and without realizing it, they have completely exhausted their good karma, which was the cause for being reborn in the god realm, and they suffer through being reborn in the lower realms.
- Demi-god realm: The demi-gods have pleasure and abundance almost as much as the gods, but they spend their time fighting among themselves or making war on the gods. When they make war on the gods, they always lose, since the gods are much more powerful. The demi-gods suffer from constant fighting and jealousy, and from being killed and wounded in their wars with each other and with the gods.
- Human realm: Humans suffer from hunger, thirst, heat, cold, separation from friends, being attacked by enemies, not getting what they want, and getting what they don't want. They also suffer from the general sufferings of birth, old age, sickness and death. Yet the human realm is considered to be the most suitable realm for practicing the dharma, because humans are not completely distracted by pleasure like the gods/demi-gods, or by pain and suffering like the beings in the lower realms.

The three lower realms are shown in the bottom half of the circle:

- Animal realm : The wild animals suffer from being attacked and eaten by other animals. They generally lead lives of constant fear. Domestic animals suffer from being exploited by humans (for ex. they are slaughtered for food, overworked, etc.).
- Hungry ghost realm: The hungry ghosts suffer from extreme hunger and thirst. They wander constantly in search of food and drink, only to be miserably frustrated any time they come close to actually getting what they want. The hungry ghosts are drawn with huge bellies and long, thin necks. On the rare occasions that they do manage to find something to eat or drink, the food or water burns their neck as it goes down to their belly, causing them intense agony.
- Hell realm: In hell, beings endure unimaginable suffering for eons of time. There are

actually eighteen different types of hells, each inflicting a different kind of torment. In the hot hells, beings suffer from unbearable heat and continual torments of various kinds. In the cold hells, beings suffer from unbearable cold and other torments.

Among all six realms, the human realm is considered to offer the best opportunity to practice the dharma. In some representations of the wheel, there is a buddha or bodhisattva depicted within each realm, trying to help sentient beings find their way to nirvana.

The fourth circle represents the twelve links of dependent origination. As previously stated, the three inner layers of the wheel show that the three poisons lead to karma, which leads to the suffering of the six realms. The twelve links of the outer rim show how this happens – by presenting the process of cause and effect in detail.

These twelve links can be understood to operate on an outer or inner level.

- On the outer level, the twelve links can be seen to operate over several lifetimes. In our example, these links show how our past lives influence our current lifetime, and how our actions in this lifetime influence our future lifetimes.
- On the inner level, the twelve links can be understood to operate in every moment of existence in an interdependent manner. On this level, the twelve links can be applied to show the effects of one particular action.

By contemplating on the twelve links, one gains greater insight into the workings of karma. This insight enables us to begin to unravel our habitual way of thinking and reacting.

The twelve causal links, paired with their corresponding symbols, are:

1. Lack of knowledge: a blind person, often walking, or a person peering out
2. Constructive volitional activity: a potter shaping a vessel or vessels
3. Consciousness: a man or a monkey grasping a fruit
4. Name and form (constituent elements of mental and physical existence): two men afloat in a boat
5. Six senses (eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind): a dwelling with six windows
6. (Close) contact: lovers consorting, kissing, or entwined
7. Pain: an arrow to the eye
8. Thirst: a drinker receiving drink
9. Grasping: a man or a monkey picking fruit
10. Coming to be: a couple engaged in intercourse, a standing, leaping, or reflective person
11. Being born: a woman giving birth
12. Old age and death: a corpse being carried

The fierce figure holding the wheel, Yama, the lord of death, represents impermanence. This symbolizes that the entire process of samsara or cyclic existence is impermanent, transient, constantly changing. Yama has the following attributes:

- He wears a crown of five skulls that symbolize the impermanence of the five aggregates. (The skulls are also said to symbolize the five poisons.)
- He has a third eye that symbolizes the wisdom of understanding impermanence.
- He is sometimes shown adorned with a tiger skin, which symbolizes fearfulness. (The tiger skin is typically seen hanging beneath the wheel.)
- His four limbs that are clutching the wheel symbolize the sufferings of birth, old age, sickness, and death.

The moon above the wheel, which is not always drawn, or, like in the painting used in our example, the white circle around the Wheel of Life, represents the liberation from samsara or cyclic existence.

The Buddha pointing to the white circle (or to the moon) indicates that liberation is possible.