



The Wheel of Life

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Samsara is depicted as a large wheel called the Wheel of Life. This diagram appears to have originated with the Buddha but is transmitted today only within the Tibetan tradition. It is entirely symbolic and brings together all the different factors that define and characterise the cycle of conditioned existence, which are also taught by all Nikaya and Mahayana schools. The explanation below begins at the centre of the wheel and moves outwards.

The hub of the wheel At the centre of the wheel are three animals representing the Three Poisons that perpetuate existence in samsara. The pig symbolises ignorance; the cock symbolises craving and desire; and the snake symbolises aggression. They lie at the heart of the mechanism that makes the cycle of rebirth go round and round.

The first circle The first circle shows various ghost-like beings feeling their way towards their next rebirth. The idea is that, depending on past karma, beings accordingly find their way to an appropriate rebirth. The beings in this

circle are in the *bardo* state between one life and the next in accordance with the views of Tibetan Buddhism.

The second and widest circle: the six realms of samsara This circle depicts the six realms into which beings in samsara may be reborn. There are three higher realms (gods, humans, demi-gods) in which suffering is less intense, and three lower realms (hells, animals, hungry ghosts) where suffering is very intense and a major hindrance to spiritual progress.



REALM	CHARACTERISTICS	DOMINANT KARMIC CAUSE
Gods	Beautiful palaces and gardens, music, silks, perfumes and beautiful goddesses; the gods are absorbed in bliss, have very long lives but suffer tremendously when their life comes to an end.	Pride
Demi-gods or titans (<i>asuras</i>)	Constantly wage war on the gods. The tree of immortality has its roots in this realm but its branches and fruit are in the god realm; the demi-gods constantly fight to obtain the fruit they think should be theirs. It's a losing battle.	Jealousy, envy
Humans	Eight forms of misery: birth, illness, old age, death, separation from loved ones, meeting those we don't like, not having what we covet, fear of losing our possessions. Despite this, the human realm is the most fortunate of all realms because wisdom and compassion can be developed and enlightenment is possible.	Desire
Animals	Four categories: with many legs (insects), four legs (mammals), two legs (apes and birds) and no legs (snakes). Most animals live in the ocean. They suffer from hunger and thirst, heat and cold, human abuse and hunting, destruction of their habitat and being eaten by carnivores.	Ignorance, confusion
Hungry ghosts or <i>pretas</i>	Some pretas have long thin necks and swollen bellies and are unable to swallow their food; some breathe, excrete and urinate streams of fire. Food and water turn to pus and vomit. They live in a barren landscape and suffer constantly from hunger, thirst, heat, cold and seeing mirages.	Greed, insatiable craving, miserliness; stealing from charities
Hells	There are 8 hot hells, 8 cold hells, and 2 auxiliary hells. They are said to be located deep inside the Earth. Beings are tortured by extreme heat or cold, by fire, molten iron or by having their bodies sawn, crushed, impaled or devoured, and so on.	Aggression, anger, hatred



The outer rim of the wheel: Around the rim of the wheel we find the twelve *nidanas*, known as the Twelve Links or the Twelve Links of Dependent Origination. These are a pictorial way of presenting the chain of causes and effects through which samsara is created. They can be interpreted in three ways:

- a. as the chain of causes which link one life to the next. In this case the first two links relate to the past life; links 3 to 9 relate to the present life; and links 10-12 relate to the future life
- b. as the chain of causes that function throughout life, from birth to death
- c. as the chain of causes which operates in every moment of our life, linking our intentions, our actions and their results.

The Twelve Links can either be shown as a circle or as a list, but the important point is that they operate as an endless cycle, with the twelfth link leading to the first one so the cycle starts all over again. There is no First Cause in this cycle: the first link (ignorance) is not a metaphysical first cause which sets the wheel in motion because ignorance itself is produced from causes. It is therefore clearer to depict the links in a circle.

The Twelve Links illustrate the vicious cycle of samsara, where nothing happens by random chance but everything comes about from one or several causes. In practice this means that when our existence is entirely determined by these causes we have little or no freedom. Our choices will be determined by karmic tendencies, cravings and so on, and will not be made freely. How can we ever break out of the circle? There are two weak links in the chain, namely craving and ignorance. By tackling one or both of them we will weaken these links still further and break the chain. Meditation is a primary method for eliminating craving, while cultivating wisdom through study is effective against ignorance. The effect of longterm spiritual practice is to break this chain completely.

Yama, the lord of death: the whole Wheel of Life sits in the arms of a monster called Yama, who symbolises the lord of death. This represents the fact that all the beings who exist within the wheel are subject to death.

How does the Wheel of Life work in practice? It means that any being can be reborn in any one of the six realms, depending on karma. This means that we will not necessarily be reborn as human beings again next time. Maybe we will take birth as a horse or a mosquito – or as a hungry ghost or demi-god. Of all these six realms the human realm is considered the most fortunate because it is the one in which one can attain enlightenment. It is even more fortunate than the god realm because humans have just the right amount of suffering not to be overwhelmed by it, and just enough to be motivated to want to find a way out. The gods, on the other hand, have little or no suffering and can easily be trapped within their experience of bliss, feeling completely content and impervious to the sufferings of others. This is why Buddhism strongly encourages people not to waste their lives in meaningless activity but to make every effort to progress spiritually while they have the opportunity to do so.



Link (nidana)	Symbol in Wheel of Life
1. IGNORANCE (of the nature of life as analysed in the Four Noble Truths)	Blind man
2. KARMA-FORMATIONS i.e. impulses or tendencies resulting from actions or thoughts	Potter
3. CONSCIOUSNESS (which continues from one life to the next)	Monkey in a tree
4. NAME AND FORM (the five skandhas including the consciousness of the present life)	Boat and four passengers
5. THE SIX SENSES (sight, hearing, touch, smell, taste and mind)	House with six openings
6. CONTACT (with the objects of the senses)	Man and woman embracing
7. FEELING (pleasant, unpleasant or neutral)	Man with arrow in his eye
8. CRAVING (for experience, for life, or for oblivion)	Man takes drink from woman
9. GRASPING (at life, sense pleasures, etc.)	Man picking fruit
10. BECOMING (process of creating situations and then living them)	Pregnant woman
11. REBIRTH	Childbirth
12. SUFFERING, DECAY AND DEATH	Corpse



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