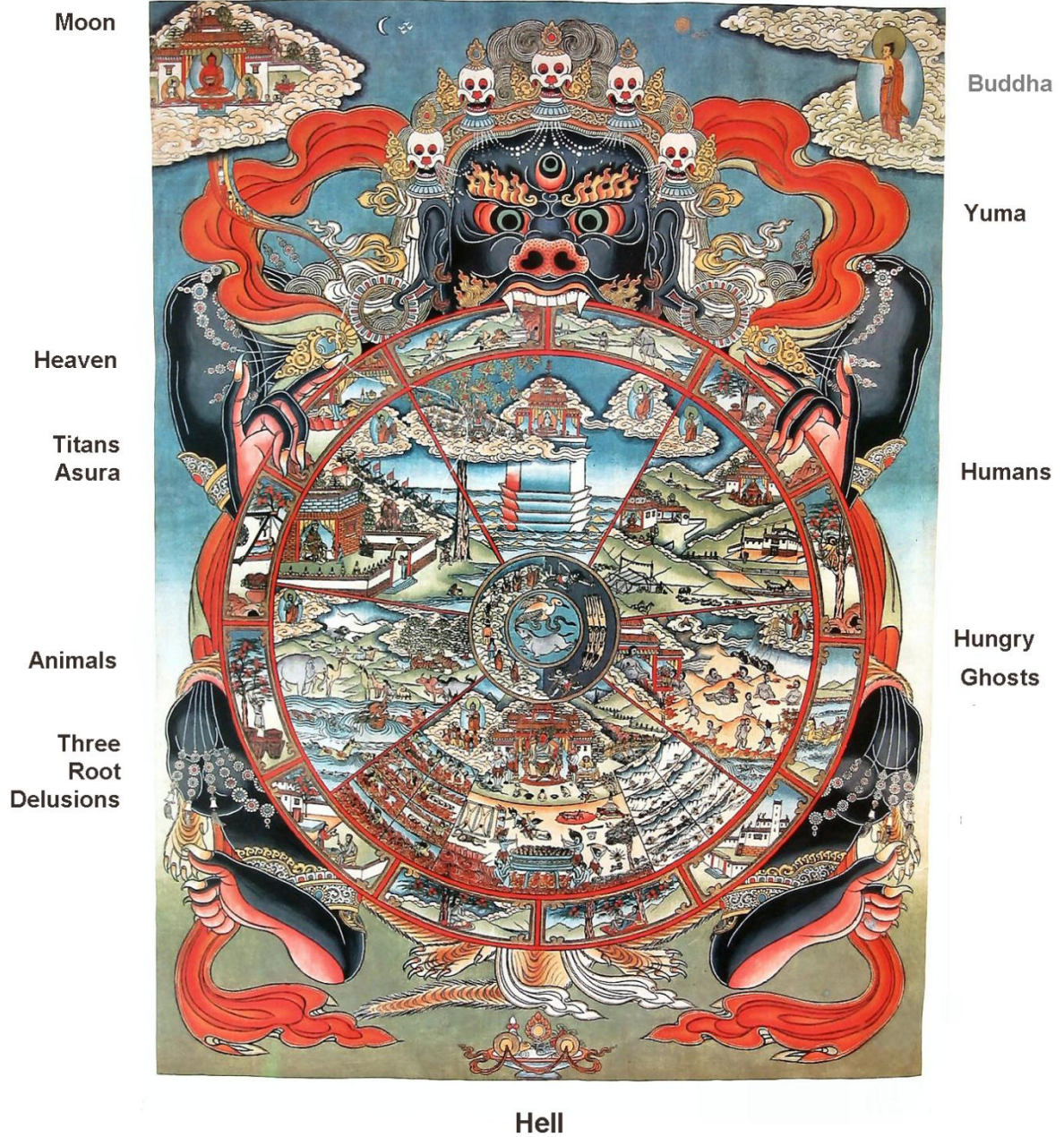
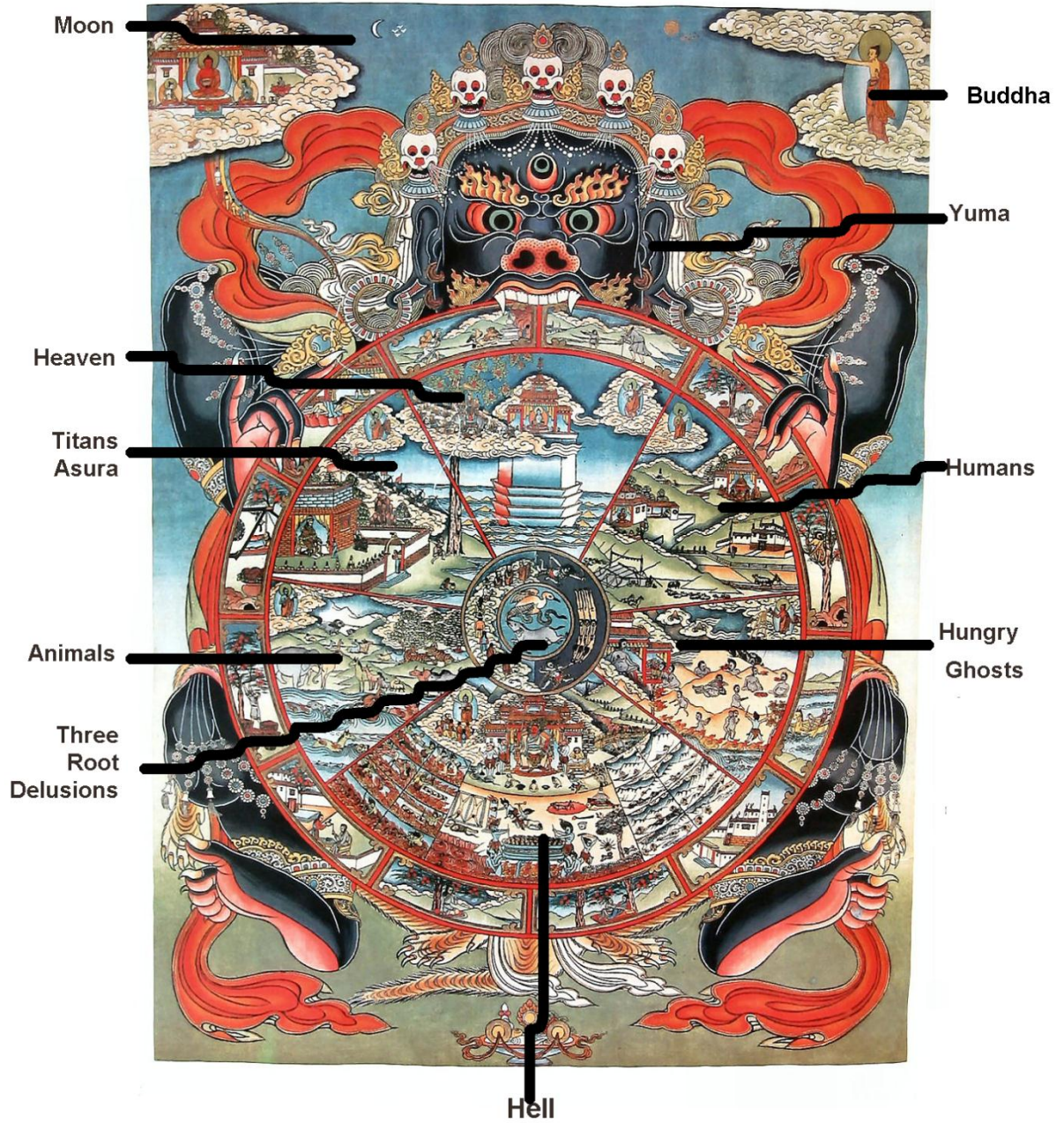


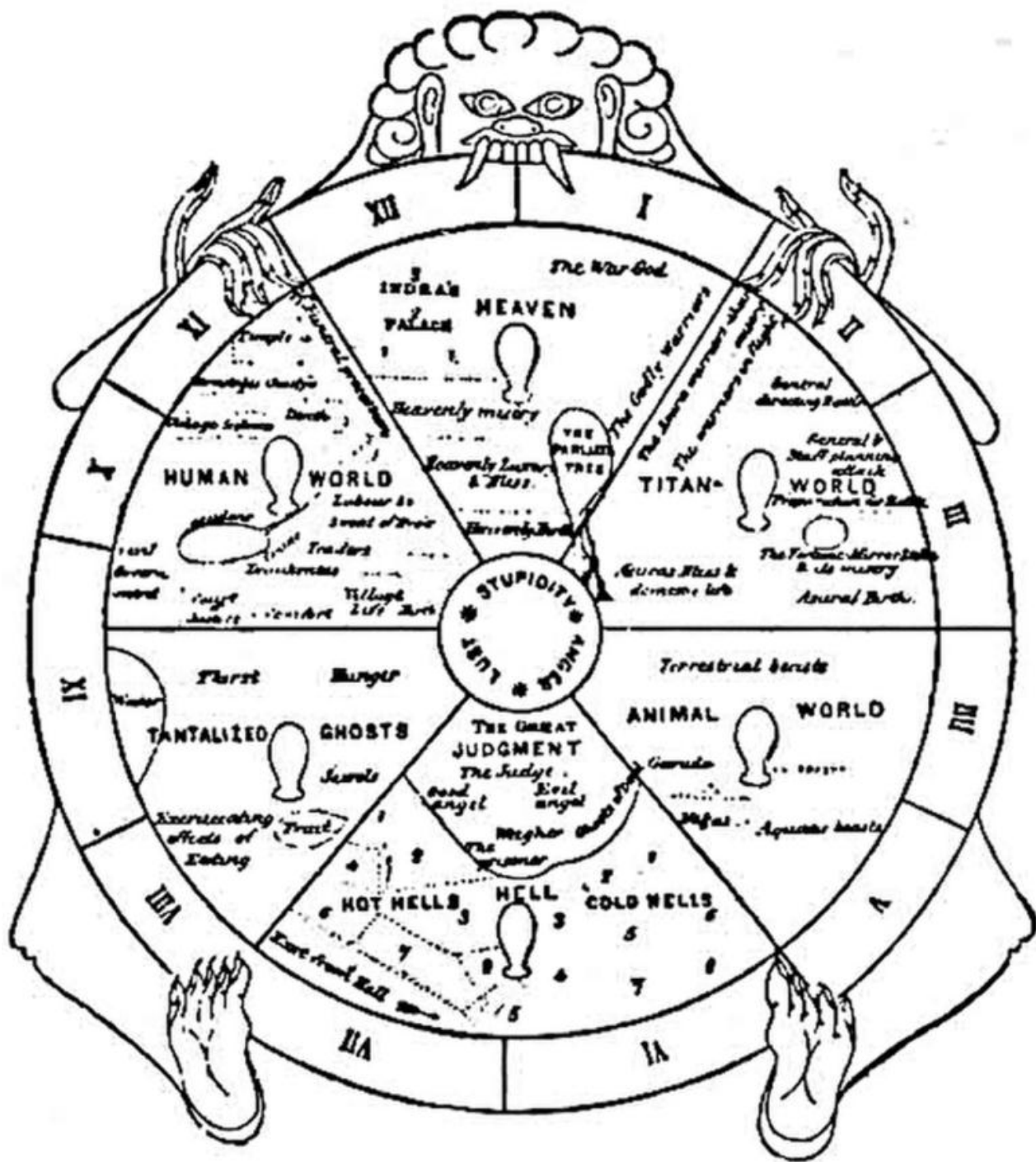
The Wheel of Life - Aesthetics of Suffering and Salvation

Wheel of Life
Six States or Realms



Wheel of Life
Six States or Realms





One of Buddha's foremost disciples was Maudgalyayana. He was said to be extremely adept at spiritual practices and had such mastery over psychic powers that he could penetrate into the soul of any individual and visualize all that was happening there and why.



With this ability to enter deeply into the lives of another it is not surprising that the insights expressed in his teachings gained a wide audience and universal acceptance. Buddha, noticing this, proposed that a picture should be made representing Maudgalyayana's teachings, so that his message could be made available to even those who did not have direct access to him. Thus was born the esoteric image known as 'The Wheel of Life.' This diagram serves as a powerful inspiration to spiritual aspirants and is painted to the left of all Tibetan monasteries, offering an opportunity to both monks and pilgrims alike, to look deeply into their own inner beings.

An amazing collection of contrasting imagery, each aspect of this composition is packed with rich symbolism and direct, hard-hitting metaphors. Essentially a construction made up of four concentric circles, it is an attempt to convey spiritual insights behind our 'physical existence' in purely visual terms.

The Buddhist view is that we humans exist in an unenlightened state. The goal of our earthly sojourn is to attain enlightenment and gain deliverance from the constant cycle of birth and re-birth which characterizes all sentient beings.

There are various reasons for the suffering our mortal forms have to entail. The Wheel of Life presents these very causes for our suffering through both gruesome and sublime imagery. But under no condition is it a pessimistic presentation, rather it is an optimistic affirmation that redemption is possible by recognizing the delusions that plague our ephemeral existence. The first step towards their elimination and replacement by positive virtues is the recognition of these ills. It is this very identification that the Buddhist Wheel helps us in attaining. By making visuals the primary mode of expression, it makes these realizations available to all, even the spiritually uninitiated.

On first viewing this metaphysical diagram, the attention of the viewer is immediately captured by the starkness of the center where are shown a pig, a snake, and a cock, running on endlessly (as life itself), and each emerging from another, in a kind of awful dance.



Each of these animals represents a particular human failing or weakness, which stands as an obstacle to spiritual accomplishment. They are known as the '**Three Poisons**' [or '**Three Root Delusions**'] because from them grow all of life's evils, and because they corrupt us from within. It is appropriate that these forces are depicted by animals, since they represent primitive urges beneath our supposedly civilized exterior.

The cock from which emerges the snake represents greed. No doubt, the proverbial vanity and lust of this poor bird make it an appropriate symbol for this human failing. The word greed does not really do full justice to the emotion symbolized by the cock which includes the whole spectrum of unwholesome desire from vague hankerings to intense longings. A more appropriate term would be 'craving.' Craving of this sort can be observed for example when we lose something and experience not only regret or irritation at no longer being able to enjoy it but a deeper sense of loss, even a kind of panic. It further signifies the most natural of all human emotions, namely our craving for admiration and approval of those around us. In such a scenario we are constantly looking at ourselves through the eyes of the world, and lose track of our inner life force, which, rather than the approval and opinion of others, should be the ultimate benchmark. Thus said the Buddha Shakyamuni "Just as a rock is not moved by the wind, so the wise man is not moved by blame or praise."

Craving should be distinguished from healthy desire. A hungry person may want food, which is a straightforward desire, and as soon as one eats this hunger is satisfied. This is an important distinction between a natural, healthy desire and an unnatural craving. The satisfaction of the former leads to its termination, while in the case of the latter any attempt at gratification leads to further temptation, as in the case of lust for money for its own sake.

Next is the snake that signifies aggression. It is a symbol of our instinctive self. Our inherent instinctive nature is aggressive. When things do not work out as we would

have wanted them to, our first reaction is to blame others and we then try to force the situation, which leads to resistance. Any time we meet resistance, if we force the situation, the resistance will only increase. Thus we have to distrust our first instinctive reaction to an unfavorable situation, and proceed only after the first wave of anger and frustration has subsided. It is not that we are not aware that we must restrain our impromptu, on the spot reactions, but we are lulled into complacency and such reactions slither past our better judgement (like a serpent).

From the mouth of the snake issues a pig, a symbol of ignorance. The ears of a pig are large enough such that they fall over his eyes. Thus blinkered by its ears, the pig is conscious only what its snout is sticking into, and unaware of all other that is happening near him. In a similar manner our perspective on life is narrowed by our cultural conditioning, and we lose sight of our own essential, natural being, which is but an extension of the all pervading pure consciousness

Our attempts to satisfy the misplaced desires, symbolized by the cock, lead to unhealthy aggression, making us insensitive and ignorant (as the pig), to the feelings of those in our immediate environment. This ignorance makes us selfish and thus is reborn the cock of desire from the pig, continuing the cycle which binds us to the constant wheel of samsara.



Next to the **central circle** is a concentric band divided along two halves. One is colored softly and radiantly, while the other is black. The darker portion shows individuals who have chosen the path of darkness and thus descend into gloomy depths. The glowing path, however, is the one taken by those following the righteous way, attaining spiritual ascension. Hence it shows mortals rising towards greater spiritual heights.

Our lives are dominated essentially by two contradictory forces: the evolutionary urge within us which drives us to achieve new levels of consciousness and the dead

weight of our ignorance which pulls us back to more limited horizons. Our task, in taking up the spiritual path, is to consciously allow the forces of evolution to carry us upward and to prevent ignorance from binding us down. The evolutionary urge is nothing but the pull towards Buddhahood, and is there within each of us, but it is heavily outweighed by our ignorance regarding the same. Thus for any progress to take place we must make a constant effort to overcome the pull of ignorance which binds us to the lower stages of being, exemplified by the dark part showing erring beings tumbling downwards.

Beyond this band is a wider area divided into six units, each depicting a different level of conditioned existence.

These states of existence are termed conditioned because they are brought about as a result of our own actions or karma. They can be both positive or negative:

1). The Realm of Hell

The first such realm is the world of hell. Pictures of hell in the Buddhist tradition are typically shown as places of intense pain and torment, where its victims are subjected to the most excruciating tortures, inflicted on them by presiding demons. Flames engulf the entire realm which is unbearably hot, though there are regions of ice also, which yield the painful



experience of cold.

The depiction of this hell is an objectification of hatred, rather a visual depiction of what may await us if we fill our hearts with hatred instead of compassionate understanding.

The basic features of hell are constant suffering and relentless pain inflicted by furious and vengeful beings. But this hell as all parts of our existence is a making of our own. A result of our own karma. It is upon us whether we wish to make our life a hell on earth and make every situation a torment for ourselves. The hell of the Wheel of Life is but that same mental state made manifest in all its painful detail. None can rest in peace who has in his heart a hatred for any other.



The hell is not everlasting. Every process is impermanent and a particular state continues so long as the conditions which have brought it into being are still present. One will remain in hell as long there are undisciplined karmic energies keeping one there. Tradition has it that a life in hell may extend over many aeons - perhaps this corresponds to the well-known experience of time dragging when we are suffering.

2). The Realm of the Hungry Ghosts

Next to the realm of hell are groups of ungainly creatures huddled together. Their distended bodies are the color of smoke, and they appear insubstantial as if made of mist. Their arms and legs are spindly and frail and their heads are carried on long, thin necks, while their bellies are bloated, sagging masses which their legs can barely support. Tiny mouths, no thicker than a needle, are topped by wide, staring eyes, filled with pain and longing signified by their red color.



These pathetic creatures are obsessed with perpetual hunger and an unquenchable thirst. They stagger on their feeble limbs in search of sustenance. Driven by their overwhelming hunger and thirst, the hungry ghosts live out their lives for no other purpose than food and drink. Their weak limbs and pinhole mouths make it almost impossible for them to gain any sustenance. No matter what they acquire it is not sufficient for them, and leaves them unsatisfied, panting for more. Even if they get what they want it gives them little pleasure. No matter what they possess, they always feel that there is something missing. Thus this realm is the personification of the mind in which craving predominates. The human hungry ghost is the miser who lives for his money, the collector who is never content with what he has but must have more.



3). The World of the Animals

In the realm of the animals, life is the life of the body. All endeavor is directed to the satisfaction of physical desires and the business of self-preservation. This depiction is a visual representation of the ignorant refusal to see beyond the needs of the body.

Such a horizon is willfully narrow and refuses to look beyond the surface of life, at its meaning and purpose.

4). The Realm of the Titans

The titans know only warfare. Not content with what they possess these giants rush upon the gods of the sensuous realm and try to grab from them their happiness and delight. They try to capture the heavenly tree which fulfills all wishes.

Their longing to possess does not come from desire or greed. They want things because they begrudge the possessions and achievements of others. The success of others leaves them

with a feeling of inadequacy and belittled. Indeed it is said that man is not content with he does have but discontent with what others have. This is the underlying message behind this realm.



5). The Human World

The human realm is the world of everyday experience.

A human birth is considered the most favorable at the outset of one's spiritual life because it contains a balance of pleasure and pain. Constant pain is demoralizing and numbs initiative. Similarly persistent pleasure and success tends to breed complacency. Human life, containing both pleasure and pain, makes us aware of both these aspects of life, striking a harmonious balance. Thus since



human life gives us such rare opportunities for spiritual realization, Buddhism teaches that it is very precious indeed.

6). The Heavens of the Gods

The Pali and Sanskrit words which are usually translated as 'god' come from a root which means 'to shine.' The gods are the shining or radiant ones who live in unalloyed happiness and pleasure. It is traditionally recognized that such beings are both heavenly and also found on the earth. The one who has gained spiritual attainment is the one who has created his heaven on earth. The one who has evolved himself into a higher being in a purely spiritual sense.



It is significant to note here that the gods are shown partaking of similar sensuous experiences as the humans, albeit at a more rarified level. The important being that the gods are not so far removed from the human dimension and mortal humans too can attain godhood following the path of virtuous karma.

These six realms constitute all possible states of existence in the universe and all beings cycle between these states, dependent on their karma, none of these states being permanent or everlasting. Thus, virtuous persons are said to be born in heaven; virtuous beings dominated by negative emotions of jealousy are born in the realm of the titans; persons dominated by attachment are born in the ghostly realms; those afflicted with hatred and anger are born in hell; and those dominated by dullness are born in the world of animals.

The **outermost concentric ring** of the Wheel of Life is divided into **twelve units**, each depicting a phase of the peculiar cycle of cause and effect which keeps one trapped in the six realms of cyclic existence mentioned above.



1). The Blind Man (Ignorance)

In the first section we discern a tottering shape, unsteadily groping towards its way. It is an old man bent with his years but not with their

wisdom.

His eyes gaze before him vacantly. He thinks he has been this way before, he seems to picture to himself the landscape around him, and he moves forward eagerly. But, alas, never has he been here and the scene he imagines is quite different from reality. Over and over again, he staggers and falls. But each time he drags himself to his feet with renewed hope.

Ignorance is blindness, unable to see yet believing that we know it all. It is lack of insight into the reality of things, lack of enlightenment even. Ignorance however is not just that we cannot see but also that we think we can see. We may be ignorant of the real nature of things but we think we know. If we start to examine what is in our minds, trying to see how we came by what we take to be knowledge, we realize that what we pass off as knowledge is derived from other sources. The views of those around us we absorb by a kind of osmosis - in order to satisfy our desire to belong, and our natural disinclination to utilize our own powers of analysis and observation.

2). The Potter at his Wheel (Volitional Activities)

Next we see a potter turning lumps of clay on his wheel and, with deft hands, shaping vases and bowls, pots and dishes.



How each pot turns out depends upon the potter. His skill and experience, aesthetic sense, and even his mood at the time of creation. When rage inflames him, his pot is hard and awkward in shape and, when he is gripped by craving, his desires determine what shape he will form from the lump of clay before him.

The volitional activities are like the potter, formative forces which shape our own future. They are the sum total of all our willing, whether the intentions manifest themselves in overt action, or remain as desires in our hearts. Indeed it is the accumulated momentum of all our wishes which determines the flow of our lives. A rope is plaited from many tiny hairs. But none of these hairs reaches even a fraction of the full length of the rope. Similarly the direction and tendency of our being is shaped by the countless acts of volition which we make in the course of our daily existence. Indeed every thought has a direction, an inherent momentum which discharges itself upon the world. With every mental image, every longing, every coherent idea, we are radiating a very subtle, but extremely powerful, field of energy which influences our environment.

3). The Monkey in the Tree (Sentience)



A young monkey frisks in a tree, leaping from branch to branch, never still for a moment. It sees, at the top of the tree, a glint of ripe fruit and up it leaps, hands and feet clasping the tree-trunk, his tail curved and waving.

It seizes the fruit, plucks it and takes an enormous bite. Its mouthful still unchewed, another fruit catches its eyes. It dashes off towards the new enticement, disregarding the fruit he has just plucked and swallowing down in a hurry whatever is there in his mouth. Soon, there is a heap of half-chewed fruit.

Our restlessness is an inherent part of our nature. An object loses its charm as soon as we are able to acquire it. Our attention then is diverted towards another. In the process we are unable to enjoy either of them. This is true for activities we perform too. Not having finished the job at hand we flit to another diversion, thus remaining unfulfilled and devoid of any sense of achievement.

4). Men in Boat (Name and Form)

Two men ride in a boat, while a third, more imposing than the other two, rows and steers the boat.

Each individual is made up of a mind and the body. These are represented by each of these two persons. The one steering the boat is the mind body composite which makes up the complete individual that of each of us is, better known as the Psychophysical organism. Without the other, each one is incomplete and insufficient.





exercise for the mind.

5). The House with Empty Windows (The Sense Organs)

A man sits within a house which has five windows and a door. Through these apertures, he watches the world. The windows and the door denote the six senses (eye, ear, nose, tongue and body together with the mind). The senses are the 'portals' whereby we gain our impressions of the world.

The worlds to which the physical sense gives us access are the lowest. It is only through the door of the mind that we can have access to higher worlds which are no less real than the physical. The faculty for perceiving them is cultivated through meditation, which is defined as

6) A Couple Embracing (Sensuous Impressions)

A man and woman gaze at each other passionately. Their hands entwine and pull each toward the other. Claspng each other close, they strain to press their two bodies into one.



A couple embracing depicts the contact of the sense organs with their objects, wherein lies their ultimate fulfillment.

7). Man with an Arrow in his Eye (Feeling)



A howl of pain shatters the silence and a man falls to his knees, groaning, his hands pressed to his face. At the center of his right eye, embedded deeply in it, is an arrow.

The arrow represents sense data impinging upon the sense organs, in this case, the eye. In a very vivid way, the image suggests the strong feelings which our sensory experience invokes.

Feelings are either painful or pleasant. Pleasure and pain are experienced on a number of different levels ranging from direct physical sensations to the loftiest bliss of liberation. According to Buddhist psychology, the experience of direct pain is confined to a relatively small area of the total possibilities of conscious experience. These unfortunately, more often than not, are the areas in which we habitually dwell.

8). Woman Offering Drink to a Man (Craving)

The next link is illustrated by a seated man being offered a drink by the woman who stands before him. The fact that it is a woman offering a drink to a man may be intended also to bring to the mind the intensity of sexual desire. The man partaking alcohol emphasizes the addictive nature of pleasure.





9). Woman on a Tree Plucking Fruit (Grasping)

This image is a logical development of the previous link, namely that of craving. Craving leads to action to fulfill the desire. The woman who climbs the tree to pluck a fruit represents craving having taken the form of concrete action. Attached to a particular object by our obsessive craving we attempt to grasp it in a futile manner. The fruit is an ancient symbol for earthly desires. A woman going up to the length of climbing a tree to grasp what she perceives as the fulfillment of her desires is metaphor enough for the almost disproportionate efforts we expend in the pursuit of similar temptations.

10). Couple Making Love (Bringing into Existence)

Lost to all but their own urgent desire, a couple melts together in the act of love. Tumbling rapturously to their release, they do not know that a new life has started in the woman's womb. Thus the image for bringing into existence (becoming) is a man and woman performing the sexual act, initiating a new life.





11). Woman in Labor (Birth)

After the process of procreation is the actual episode of giving birth. This is often represented by an explicit image of a woman delivering a child.

This new life is the condition in dependence upon which arises death and decay.

12). A Coffin (Death and Decay)

The final link is frequently portrayed by a coffin being carried towards its ultimate rest.

Whatever is born is bound to experience the attacks of sickness, the waning of physical powers in old age, the pain of separation and loss, and finally death. Once birth has taken place a process has been set in motion which must end in death, for birth and death are but integral parts of the cycle of samsara.





The complete Wheel of Life is gripped tightly in the talons of the Lord of Death, whose horrific face, projecting fangs and the forehead wreathed in the macabre five-skull crown is visible above the diagram.

We are all clutched in the fear of death. But death is not the end. According to Buddhist thought death is the beginning of a new existence. The process of death is evidenced everywhere in the natural rhythms of the earth, sea, and sky. A death occurs each night as the sun sets, each month as the moon wanes, each year as the earth shuts down for the winter, and each time the ocean waters recede with the tide. Thus the concept of death in nature is a promise of hope. With each death there is a resurrection. Nature has the capacity for renewal. The new, renewed state is of course dependent upon our previous karma.

Conclusion

The Buddhist Wheel of Life symbolically represents how all sentient beings, who have not practiced the Dharma and liberated themselves, are bound in a cycle of existences whose very nature is suffering. The symbolism is depicted through a series of pictograms that are meant to act as a powerful mnemonic device for both the serious practitioner and the layman. The Old Masters prescribe that one should think about this diagram and focus on it day and night so as to never forget its meaning. According to Shri Dharmakirti "One should intently and seriously contemplate the meaning of this wheel. If possible, one should put up a pictorial representation of it, if necessary in solitary retreat, until its significance sinks in. Once this happens, the wish to be free of this mindless suffering is spontaneous and constant. An apt comparison would be with a sick man, who while suffering from a chronic painful ailment, discovers after a thorough medical examination that the reason for his illness is some regular component of his diet. Such a person would immediately try to remedy the defect."

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