

WHEEL OF LIFE (BHAVACHAKRA)



The Wheel of Life painting graphically illustrates the Buddha's teachings on impermanence, suffering, karma, death, and rebirth into one of the six realms of cyclic existence, and the twelve links of dependent origination.

At the central hub of the painting are a pig, a cockerel, and a snake, which bite each other's tails and symbolize the three primary poisons of ignorance, desire and aversion.

The next circle of the painting depicts beings ascending to the three upper realms on its white segment, and beings falling to the three lower realms on its left dark segment.

The third circle is divided by spokes into either five or six sections, with the three lower realms of animals, hungry ghosts (preta), and the various hell (narak) realms in the three lower segments, and the three upper realms of humans, demi-gods (asura), and gods (deva) in the two or three upper segments. Birth into one of these six realms is characterized by a particular mental state or poison:

- 1) the god or deva realm (pride),
- 2) the demi-god or asura realm (jealousy),
- 3) the human realm (desire or all five poisons),
- 4) the animal realm (ignorance or confusion),
- 5) the hungry ghost or pretta realm (greed and miserliness), and
- 6) the hell or narak realm (anger and hatred).

The first three 'upper realms' are considered favourable, and the last three 'lower realms' miserable. Sometimes only five realms are listed, with the devas and asuras forming a single realm.

The outer circle of the wheel depicts in a clockwise sequence twelve metaphorical images of the twelve links of dependent origination. The twelve links in the chain of dependent arising is one of the most important doctrines on the Buddhist view of causation and interdependence, showing how suffering arises from ignorance and its motivational actions.

- 1) **Ignorance** (avidya), represented by a blind man.
- 2) **Conditioned or formative actions** (samskarakarma), as a potter making pots.
- 3) **Consciousness** (vijnana), as a playful monkey attracted by objects.
- 4) **Name and form** (namarupa), as two men in a boat.
- 5) **The six sense spheres** (ayatana), as a house with five windows and a door.
- 6) **Contact** (sparsha) and its desire for an object, as a couple kissing or making love.
- 7) **Feeling** (vedana) or desire giving rise to feelings of pleasure and pain, as a man blinded by an arrow in one eye.
- 8) **Craving** (trishna) or thirst, as a man drinking alcohol.
- 9) **Grasping** (adana), as a monkey plucking all the fruit from a tree.
- 10) **Becoming** (bhava) or maturing towards rebirth, as a pregnant woman.
- 11) **Birth** (jati) leading to endless rebirth, as a woman giving birth.
- 12) **Aging and death** (jaramarana) leading to endless cycles of life and death, as a corpse being carried to a cemetery.

The wheel itself is held in the claws of Yama, the 'lord of Death' – symbolizing impermanence – who bites and consumes the wheel with his deadly fangs.

Above and outside of this wheel stands the form of Shakyamuni Buddha, who raises his right arm to point towards the moon as a symbol of the Buddhist teachings that lead to liberation from the endless wheel of cyclic existence.