

The Wheel of Life Overview

Friends of the Western Buddhist Order

The Wheel of Life is a detailed pictorial description of the conditioned nature of existence. It illuminates the theory of rebirth by depicting how forms of being are dependent on the amount of merit and demerit stored in past and present lives.

The Hub: In the center of the picture a cock, a snake, and a pig chase each other around and around, each having in its mouth the tail of the other. These three represent Greed, Hatred, and Delusion, and are the representation of all roots of evil, or the Three Poisons as they're often called.

The Rings of the Wheel: On the next ring human and animal forms show the process of going from light to dark or from dark to light. By practicing the Dharma and purifying the heart, lives follow the path to light. Likewise if we practice greed, lust and delusion we draw the path to darkness.

Beings can be reborn into six realms: The realm of the gods (top right), The realm of the angry gods (upper right), the realm of the hungry ghosts (bottom right), the realm of hell (bottom), the realm of animals (bottom left) and the realm of humans (top left).

The Links: Surrounding all this are twelve links depicting what is called dependent arising of the chain of existence, one after the other. It is only through breaking one of the links that humans find release from suffering.

1. **Blind Old Woman:** Avijja (unknowing). Not knowing the four noble truths, Dukkha (suffering) exists, the cause of suffering, the cessation of suffering, and the practice of the path leading to cessation of suffering. Not knowing we cause forming.
2. **Pottery maker:** Sankara (volition). The forming of future lives by past Karma. As we are formed we have consciousness.
3. **Monkey leaping from tree to tree:** Vinnana (consciousness). Appropriately shown leaping from life to life, by again past Karmic actions, both good and bad. To have consciousness we must have a vessel.
4. **A man in a boat:** Nama-rupa (mind-body). As depicted, the body and mind are the transport for consciousness. With the existence of mind body we have the six sense-spheres.
5. **A house with six windows:** Salyanta (six sense spheres). The six sense spheres are the eye, ear, nose, tongue, touch and mind. All experience is linked by our perception beyond which we know nothing. The six sense-spheres existing we have contact.
6. **A man and woman embracing:** Phassa (contact). This means the contact between the six senses and the respective objects. When contact arises feelings exist.
7. **A man with arrows through his eyes:** Vedana (feeling). The emotional responses to contact, falling into three categories, pleasant, painful and neutral. When feelings arise cravings are produced.

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8. **Man drinking alcohol:** Tanha (cravings). Up until now the events have been caused by past Karma, craving is the making of new Karma. This is where mindfulness comes into play. Only through being mindful can we understand our emotions. Where there is craving so arises grasping.
9. **Man reaching for fruit though his basket is full:** Upadana (grasping). The intensification of craving in four directions, sensual pleasures, views which lead astray from the Dharma, external religious rites and vows, and the attachment to self. Where there is grasping there is becoming.
10. **A pregnant woman:** Bhava (becoming). With grasping and craving we are ensured more and more rebirths. Becoming is the direction right or wrong, we choose through our Karma. Becoming ensures a new birth.
11. **Mother in Labor:** Jati (birth) self-explanatory. Where there is birth, there is old age and death.
12. **Old man with Corpse:** Jara-marana (suffering). As we live, we age and soon we will die. All things are impermanent. All things are suffering.

Surrounding the wheel is the demon of Impermanence, starting at no discernable point, ending at no discernable point. On his head he wears a crown adorned with five skulls, representing the five aggregates, which are form, feelings, perceptions, volitions, and consciousness.

In the upper right hand corner the Buddha leads to the path away from suffering, starting in the human realm. Monks teach lay people the path of liberation symbolized by eight lotuses. They imply The Noble Eightfold Path: right understanding, right thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. The ten lotus petals represent the ten perfect qualities (Parami): generosity, moral conduct, renunciation, wisdom, determination, energy, patience, truthfulness, loving-kindness and equanimity. And even further placed within the lotus are thirty-seven jewels symbolizing the thirty-seven factors of enlightenment.