

The Wheel of Life

Friends of the Western Buddhist Order

Holding the Wheel: Yama, the God of Death

The Wheel of Life is held by Yama, the god of death the Daemon of impermanence. He looks fearsome for those who are ignorant to believe that physical death is frightening. He represents the suffering that comes to all, especially those who feel trapped within the wheel and don't listen for the Buddha's message that there is a way out.

The Buddha and the Moon

Standing outside the Wheel of Life is the answer of liberation: the Buddha points to a moon (symbolizes the dharma – teaching – of Buddhism that liberates us from desire). It is this desire for the truth that liberates one from the causes of ignorance and the six realms.

The 12 Fetters: The Law of Dependent Co-arising

Circling the outside of the Wheel of Life, are 12 separate scenes that depict the law of karma in terms of the way that, beginning with the ignorance of being a 'grasping self or ego', one is led to a series of delusions that cause pain, suffering, and the negative affects of rebirth. Here are the fetters starting at the top (1 o'clock position and going clockwise, each fetter directly causes the next one).

1. Ignorance - one blind person leading another

A blind man – Ignorance is the inability to see the truth. Characterized by: Ignorance, domination of instinctual drives - 'I want food, sex, territory, and sleep.' The art representing this fetter depicts one blind person leading another. Because of ignorance, we choose to act in foolish ways (conditioning activities) - hence ignorance produces the effect of unenlightened action, that leads to....

2. Conditioning activities - a potter shaping a pot

A potter - Action. With the raw materials of clay and water, the potter creates a new pot on his particular kind of wheel. Represented by the potter shaping a pot, this depicts the unenlightened activities become a latent force which exert a formative influence on the emerging consciousness. This produces, or reinforces, a false sense of duality and separation between the universe and ourselves. Basically, it leads us to act on instinct, without thinking about the effects of our actions, only that it fulfills a drive that "I have". Which leads to....

3. Conditioned Consciousness – a monkey

A monkey - Conditioned consciousness. A monkey is virtually impossible to control. It blindly grasps one branch after another as it swings through the trees. So is a consciousness restless with karmic urges. The picture depicts this fetter as a monkey swinging from branch to branch. This false sense of duality (or the idea that I am an individual separate from others) produces the notion of a permanent, separate self, which in turn seeks the reassuring solidity of mind and body. Which leads to...

4. Mind and Body - Three men in a boat

The boat is the vehicle that carries the men across the stream; similarly, the body is the vehicle that carries us - or more precisely, our karmic inheritance - through the world. This condition is depicted by a man (mind) rowing a boat (body). The separate self produces the six senses (mind is considered to be a sense organ). Which leads to....

5. Six Senses - Houses with doors and windows

The openings are the 'sense-doors' through which sense-data passes. This fetter is depicted by a house (usually with six windows) - the usual five physical senses plus, as above, 'thought', which is considered to be a 'sense' in Buddhism. The six senses inevitably produce sensory contact (awareness of touch, sight, smell, hearing, etc.) Which leads to....

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6. Contact – Man and Woman Embracing

Contact stimulates awareness which results in feeling. This fetter involves two people who fall in love based on awareness of the other through sense perceptions. The two people who signify the contact of senses and sense~ data which leads to.....

7. Feeling/Sensation - a man shot through the eye with an arrow.

Because of feeling/sensation, we become familiar with pleasure and pain. This produces desire/craving for pleasure, and desire to avoid of pain. The man shot in the eye with an arrow represents the feelings that arise from sense impressions being so strong that they partially blind us. We thus cannot see the true way but stumble into that which leads to....

8. Craving - a man being served tea by a woman

This is the step that is most important in religious training. We have the choice - to act upon the desire that arises in the mind or, by recognizing where the desire is taking us (towards dissatisfaction and suffering), we can choose to be 'still' (i.e. meditate). Remaining 'still' means that we *neither indulge nor repress the desire*, thereby breaking the cycle of Dependent Origination. If indulged, craving produces clinging/grasping. In the representation, a man drinking represents desire as an insatiable thirst. If the thirst is for alcoholic drink, then it leads to intoxication: i.e. it seems to promise all kinds of delights and fulfillments, though in actual fact, it must move us on one more notch around the Wheel, which leads to....

9. Clinging/Grasping ~ a person plucking fruit from a tree

Clinging is the intensification of desire. It is the movement from "I want" to "I *must have*". Grasping is an activity, and if the impulse to act is rooted in ignorance, grasping will produce becoming, the will to continue trying to cling to false refuges. The monkey clinging to a fruit tree is symbol of the wayward, desire-ridden mind that has here found a suitable object of desire and has latched on to it. Actually it doesn't look too happy; nor is it apparently enjoying the fruit; it is just clinging on. Which leads to....

10. Becoming - a woman becoming pregnant

Our attachments, the things we grasp after, create the momentum that produces the need for (re)birth. The pregnant woman stands for the clinging that has clearly created an embryo, a new life is on the way. Which leads to.....

11. Birth - a woman giving birth

Because there is birth, there will be suffering (dukkha). This is an unavoidable consequence of being alive. The woman giving birth symbolizes that new life has arrived, but in the due course of time, it will inexorably

12. Old Age and Death - an old man walking towards a funeral pyre near a lake

The old man carries a burden: the weight of all the ills that beset human life; and, he seems to be walking towards that lake - signifying death, dissolution - from which the blind man in the next panel (Step #1 in the sequence) just seems to have emerged. The scene here depicts the struggle against the inevitable: death. The confusion, which is the result of the struggle, creates yet more ignorance, thus, we go back to step #1.