

The Wheel of Life

The Wheel of Life, a detailed representation of the Tibetan belief in the transmigratory nature of existence, explains the theory of rebirth. The form in which beings are re-born into the universe depends upon their yearnings, prayers, and the amount of merit and demerit (Karma) they have stored up in their past lives. This suffering of rebirth affects the whole living universe.

The wheel is held in the embrace of Shenje, ruler of the dead, showing that all beings must eventually meet death. Shenje, who is again represented in the sphere of hell, is a ferocious god with fangs. He is said to symbolize the fearfulness of death and the hideousness of clinging to life.

Outside the wheel is a figure of the Lord Buddha (upper right), who is free from the moral and mental obstructions that can prevent living beings from achieving enlightenment. His presence outside the wheel implies his escape from the cycle of life.

The wheel is divided into three parts: axle, spokes, and rim.

The Axle: The first noble truth in Buddhist belief holds that suffering exists. The purpose of Mahayana Buddhist teachings is to relieve all living beings from suffering. To achieve this end, we must be aware of the three evils that cause our sufferings: ignorance, lust, and hatred. These three great vices, which rule the universe and keep it in continuous revolution, are symbolized by the pig (ignorance), the cock (lust), and the snake (hatred). By abstaining from these three vices, we may further our progress on the path to Nirvana (upper left).

The outer axle shows the manifestations of a bright white heaven and a dark black hell.

The Spokes: The spokes of the wheel divide our universe into six sensual realms: gods, demigods or titans, human beings, animals, yidags or ghosts, and hell. Meritorious Karma brings rebirth in the realms of gods, demigods, and humans. Demeritorious Karma causes rebirth in the lower realms of animals, yidags, and hell. But the beings of all six realms cannot escape the suffering of the universe; in each of the realms, suffering exists. Also, in each realm, the compassion of Lord

Buddha is all-pervading. This compassion, rising from every direction, helps all beings toward the path to enlightenment and release from the sufferings of the universe.

1. The Realm of the Gods: The gods dwell in heavenly bliss. Sweet strains of music are to be heard everywhere, and whenever they wish, they may eat of the Tree of Life, whose branches instantly yield any food they wish for. The gods enjoy bliss for an almost incalculable length of time, but their long life is the source of their sufferings. When the gods' merit is exhausted, they can no longer hear the strains of music, and the power of the wish-granting Tree is lost to them. Their bodies, no longer bathed by the nectar of the tree, sweat like mortals' bodies, and their loathsome persons are detested by their companions. They die miserably.

2. The Realm of the Demigods: The demigods' leading trait is pride, and their realm is reserved for those who, in an earlier life, boasted of being more pious than their neighbors. The duration of their life is greater than that of the human, and they have greater luxury and enjoyment. But their sufferings are extreme, for, in their pride, they envy the greater bliss of the gods. They die, fighting vainly

for the fruits of the Heavenly Tree.

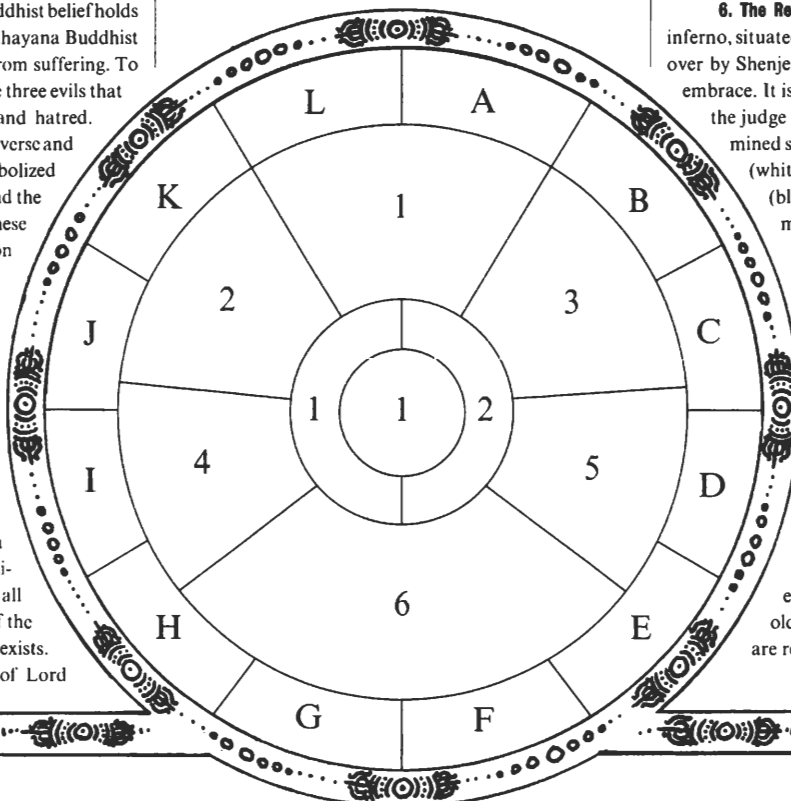
3. The Realm of Human Beings: Contrary to popular belief, the realm of human beings is the most desirable, for it is only from this life that one may attain enlightenment. Only in the realm of humans may one combine reason and faith and earn the privilege to leave the transient life and dwell forever in Nirvana, the end of all Buddhist hopes and prayers. Even so, human beings experience four great sufferings: birth, illness, old age, and death.

4. The Realm of Animals: The state of the beasts is one of greater misery than that of human beings. Some beings of this realm have to bear the suffering of bondage and slavery. Their greatest suffering lies in their inability to express themselves.

5. The Realm of Tantalized Ghosts (Yidags): These wretched beings are condemned to suffer the torment of hunger and thirst. Their mouths are no bigger than the eye of a needle, their gullets are no thicker than a hair, and they can never take in enough food to fill their huge bellies. Thirst is expressed by flames that issue from the poor yidags' parched mouths.

6. The Realm of Hell: The Buddhists' hell is a true inferno, situated in the bowels of the universe. It is presided over by Shenje, who also holds the entire universe in his embrace. It is the world of the Lord of Death. Shenje is the judge of the dead. The Great Judgment is determined solely by a being's own actions. Good deeds (white pebbles) are weighed against bad deeds (black pebbles), and the judge holds up a mirror, which reveals the being's soul in all its nakedness. Hell is divided into numerous compartments, each with a special torture devised to suit the sins to be expiated. Eight hot hells are depicted on the left, eight cold hells on the right, and in between are several additional hells. In the six realms of the universe depicted on the wheel, Lord Buddha tries to help the six beings eliminate their miseries.

The Rim: Termed the "Causal Nexus" or the "Causes of Life and of Misery," the rim symbolically depicts the causes and effects of human life. Life is an eternal cycle of birth, childhood, maturity, old age, death, and rebirth. These twelve stages are represented allegorically below.



The Causes of Life and Misery

The Twelve Interdependent Elements

CAUSAL CATEGORY	EVOLUTIONARY STAGE	DEPICTED ON RIM
A. Ignorance	Stage of passing from death to rebirth	A blind old woman being led by a boy
B. Conformation	Shaping of formless physical and mental materials	A potter modeling clay on a wheel
C. Consciousness	Rise of conscious experience	A monkey in a tree
D. Self-consciousness	Rise of individuality: distinction between self and not self	A man being ferried across the ocean (ocean of life)
E. Sense-surfaces and understanding (sense organs)	Realization of possession of sense-surfaces and understanding with reference to outside world	The empty house of the senses
F. Contact	Exercise of sense organs on outer world	A man and a woman holding hands
G. Feeling	Mental and physical sensation	An arrow enters a man's eye (perception)
H. Desire	Desire as experience of pain or delusive pleasure	A woman serves a man a drink
I. Indulgence	Grasping greed, inducing clinging to worldly wealth and desire of heir to it	A man grasps fruit and stores it in big baskets
J. Procreation	Life in fuller form, enfolded by satisfying desire of married life and as means of obtaining heir	Husband and wife
K. Birth (of heir)	Maturity by birth of heir (which affords rebirth to another spirit)	Birth
L. Decay and death	Maturity leads to decay and death	Death and burial