

The Wheel of Life

The Tibetan Wheel of Life symbolizes the Buddhist perspective on life and contains within it numerous symbols of Buddhist themes and teachings.

The creature who turns the wheel of life and holds it in his clutches is Yama, a wrathful deity and the Lord of Death. Yama symbolizes the inevitability of death, samsara and the impermanence of all things. This does not lead to hopelessness, though, because outside of the wheel stands the Buddha, who points the way to liberation (symbolized by the moon).

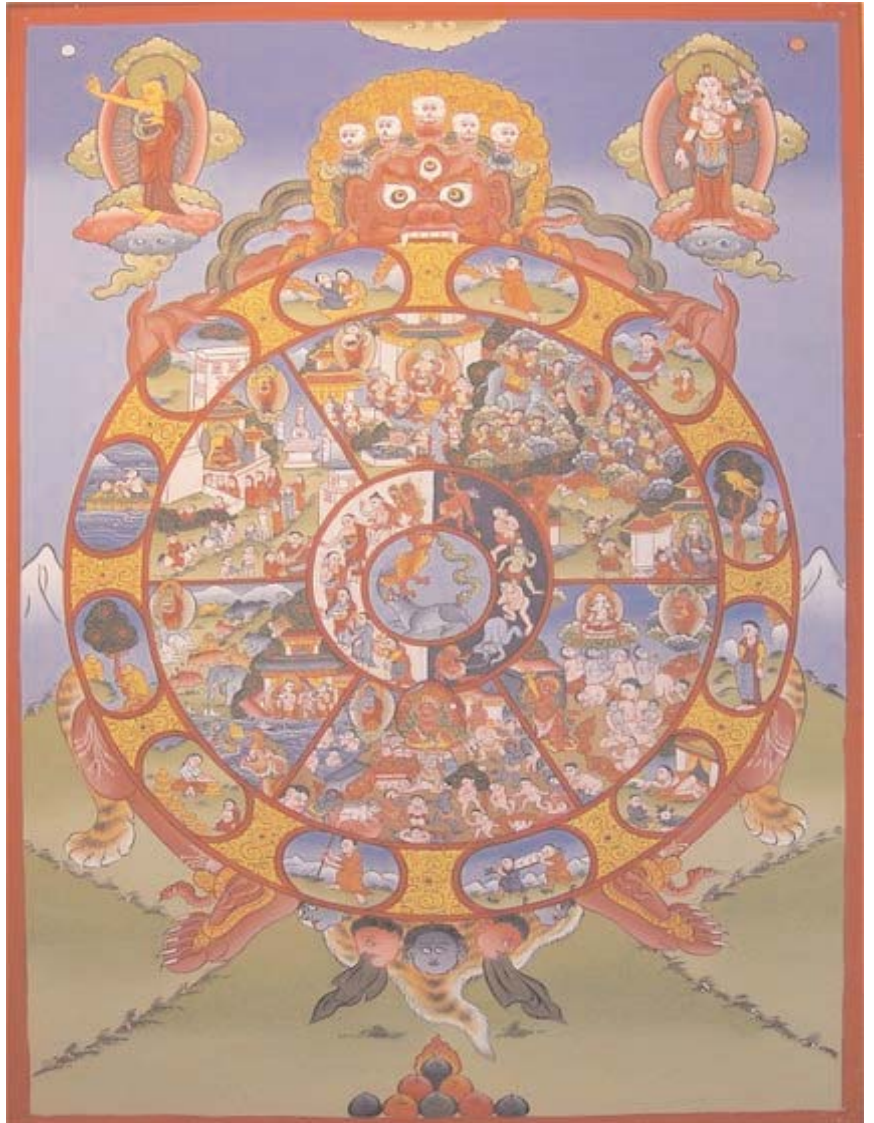
The inner circle of the wheel contains symbols of the three root delusions: hatred (snake), ignorance (rooster), and greed (pig).

The ring around the center represents karma, with the figures on the left ascending to higher realms of existence because of virtuous actions, and the figures on the right descending to lower realms of existence because of evil or ignorant actions.

The middle ring of the wheel (the areas between the spokes) symbolizes the six realms of existence. The top half, from left to right, portrays the three higher realms of existence: humans, gods, and demi-gods. The lower half shows the three lower realms: animals, hell-beings, and hungry ghosts.

The outer ring represents the 12 links of dependent origination:

1. Just to the left of the bottom is a blind man with a cane, representing ignorance of the true nature of the world.



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2. Moving clockwise, a potter molding a pot symbolizes that we shape our own destiny with our actions through the workings of karma.
3. The monkey climbing a tree represents consciousness or the mind, which wanders aimlessly and out of control.
4. Consciousness gives rise to name and form, which is symbolized by people traveling in a boat on the river of life.
5. The next link is an empty house, the doors and windows of which symbolize the developing sense organs. Buddha noted six senses: sight, smell, taste, hearing, touch and thought.
6. The six senses allow us to have contact with the world, which is symbolized by lovers embracing.
7. From contact arises feelings, which we categorize as pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. Feelings are represented on the wheel as an arrow piercing the eye.
8. From feelings arises desire or attachment to pleasant feelings and experiences, symbolized by a couple falling in love or a man drinking alcohol.
9. Desire or attachment leads to grasping for an object of desire, symbolized by a monkey picking fruit.
10. From grasping arises existence, represented by a man and a woman making love.
11. Existence culminates in birth (entry into the human realm), which is symbolized by a woman in childbirth.
12. Birth naturally leads to aging and death, which is symbolized by an old man carrying a burden.