

A VISUAL EXPLANATION OF BUDDHIST COSMOLOGY

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Fig. 1 Wheel of Existence, detail showing image area; Tibet; early 20th century; pigments on cloth; image area 31-7/8 × 23-1/8 in. (81 × 58.7 cm), with brocade frame 65-5/8 × 40³/₄ × 1¹/₂ in. (166.7 × 103.5 × 3.8 cm); Rubin Museum of Art; C2004.21.1 (HAR65356)

WHEEL OF EXISTENCE

Central Tibet
ca. early 20th century

SUMMARY

Buddhist Studies scholar Eric Huntington explores one of the most recognizable and longstanding visual explanations of Buddhist conceptions of the world: the Wheel of Existence. A fierce demonic figure grasps the wheel to signify that all forms of life are subject to death—that everything is impermanent. Painted on portable cloth or displayed on the outer walls of monasteries, such images are meant to educate the public about key ideas in Buddhism, such as interdependence, and the laws of cause and effect.

The wheel of existence is one of the most recognizable and long-standing visual explanations of Buddhist conceptions of the world. It carefully diagrams the causes and conditions of life, the problems of life, and hints for how to resolve the problems. The main impact of the image is to educate viewers about the key ideas of Buddhism, and early texts even state that the wheel of existence should be displayed on exterior monastery walls with a monk posted nearby to explain it to visitors.¹ This kind of instructional art may thus be understood as distinct from other major genres, such as devotional images that relate to ritual, mandalas that suggest meditations, or portraits and narrative works that emphasize the stories of individual people.

UNDERSTANDING THE CYCLIC NATURE OF EXISTENCE

The wheel of existence is depicted as a large circle that contains numerous separate vignettes, each of which characterizes something about the nature of life (fig. 1). The overarching lesson is provided by the demonic figure who stands outside the wheel and grasps it firmly, signifying that all forms and aspects of life are subject to death—in other words, that everything is impermanent. This demonic figure is sometimes identified with Yama, the god of death, and in this painting (although not necessarily in others), he is indeed depicted much like Yama, who also appears with similar dark-red complexion and tiger-skin clothing, dancing in flames in the realm of hells, about one-third of the way up from the bottom of the painting (fig. 2). The wheel itself is divided

into four concentric circles of images representing, from the outside to the inside: a) the twelvefold chain of dependent origination that conditions all states of being; b) the five realms and six paths of life in the world; c) the two motions upward and downward that trap sentient beings in cyclical existence through these paths of life; and last, at the axial center, d) the three psychological poisons that drive this entrapment, an interminable cycle of suffering known as samsara.



Fig. 2 Detail of Wheel of Existence, showing Yama in the hell realms; Rubin Museum of Art

The largest area inside the wheel is taken up by the five realms and six paths of life in the world, represented separately in complex scenes of many characters. The wedge toward the top right shows the realm and path of humans (fig. 3), with a formal gathering in the foreground; images of the aged, sick, and dead toward the right (recalling the four visions of the historical Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama)² (fig. 4); and an assembly around yellow-skinned Buddha Shakyamuni at the top.



Fig. 3 Detail of Wheel of Existence, showing the realm of humans; Rubin Museum of Art



Fig. 4 Shakyamuni Sees a Dead Person, detail of the Twelve Deeds of Shakyamuni; Mongolia; 19th century; pigments on cloth; Erdene Zuu Museum; photograph by Eric Huntington

Clockwise from the human realm, the next wedge shows the realm and path of the hungry ghosts (*pretas*) (fig. 5), whose small throats and distended bellies reveal their constant starvation. Here too, as in all the other realms, a buddha offers relief. In the sky above appears the bodhisattva of compassion, Avalokiteshvara, expressing the Buddhist goal to aid all sentient beings.³ In fact, the six buddhas depicted inside the wheel of existence are sometimes said to be emanations of Avalokiteshvara intended to help beings on the six paths according to their needs (fig. 6).

The bottom wedge of the wheel depicts scenes from hell realms (fig. 7), with Yama overseeing various tortures of cutting, boiling, freezing, and so on that are partially alleviated by a dark blue buddha.



Fig. 5 Detail of Wheel of Existence, showing the realm of pretas; Rubin Museum of Art



Fig. 6 Avalokiteshvara, Manjushri, Vajrapani, and the Six Buddhas of the Wheel of Existence; Darjeeling, India; 20th–21st century; mural; height approx. 72 in. (183 cm); Mak Dhog Monastery, Aloorari, Darjeeling; photograph by Eric Huntington



Fig. 7 Detail of Wheel of Existence, showing the hell realms; Rubin Museum of Art

Continuing clockwise, the realm of animals holds creatures of the land, sea, and sky, including a human-serpent naga in a small palace, and a dark green buddha (fig. 8). At the top left, the final wedge depicts the paths of gods (devas, top) and anti-gods (Asuras, left) battling for dominion over the world, along with the two buddhas dedicated to their aid (fig. 9).



Fig. 8 Detail of Wheel of Existence, showing the realm of animals; Rubin Museum of Art



Fig. 9 Detail of Wheel of Existence, showing the realm of devas and asuras; Rubin Museum of Art

The next interior ring is divided in two (fig. 10), with pious figures climbing to better existences in the white half (on the left) and miserable figures crawling downward to worse ones in the black half (on the right). The key message here is again one of impermanence, that all states of existence end. One's good or bad actions (karmas) have consequences, creating new states of existence that are better or worse, respectively. One may experience starvation as a hungry ghost due to previous gluttony, violence as an anti-god due to previous jealousy, or pleasure as a god due to previous generosity. Crucially, these new states are also impermanent, so that even someone experiencing hellish sufferings or heavenly pleasures will move on to new experiences resulting from their continued actions. All beings are thus subject both to the worst torments and to the

loss of the best pleasures, meaning that all states of existence, good or bad, ultimately cause misery. The only true release from suffering is thus not a state of pleasure but rather an escape from the cycle of action-and-consequence altogether. Luckily, the very fact of impermanence allows the possibility of escape, since, unlike in some other religious traditions, even heaven and hell are not eternal destinations.



Fig. 10 Detail of Wheel of Existence, showing the central registers; Rubin Museum of Art

ESCAPE FROM SUFFERING

In order to understand the means of escape, one must first grasp the mechanism of imprisonment, as depicted in the two remaining rings of the wheel. At the center, a rooster, a snake, and a pig represent the three psychological factors that drive the cyclical motion: attraction, aversion, and delusion or ignorance (fig. 10). It is because of

desire for more pleasure, repulsion from displeasure, and ignorance of the consequences of their actions that sentient beings become trapped in this wheel. Overcoming these negative factors means that one can avoid the sufferings they cause.

The outermost circle reveals in more detail how ignorance (represented by a blind person with a cane, top right) is the ultimate cause of desire (which includes repulsion) and therefore also the cause of all suffering⁴ (fig. 11). The cure for suffering is thus the overcoming of ignorance by correctly understanding the very lessons conveyed in the diagram. With proper insight into one's motivations, one can become liberated from the traps of desire and thus the cycle of causation altogether.



Fig. 11 Detail of Wheel of Existence, showing a blind person representing ignorance; Rubin Museum of Art

This possibility of escape is visually embodied by a buddha standing entirely outside the wheel, at the top right of the painting (fig. 13). He points to an inscription (in a dark-

blue cartouche) and set of symbols at the top left (fig. 12), indicating that the teachings of Buddhism are the means of escape.



Fig. 12 Detail of Wheel of Existence, top left; Rubin Museum of Art



Fig. 13 Detail of Wheel of Existence, top right; Rubin Museum of Art

THE INSCRIPTION

The inscription in this painting includes four passages that convey slightly different meanings. It begins with the first of two verses that commentaries say should be inscribed on the wheel of existence to motivate adoption of the Buddhist path.⁵ A second short verse summarizes the idea of dependent origination as the crux of the Buddha's teachings. This verse also appears commonly elsewhere in Buddhist art and ritual to consecrate images and objects, making them efficacious.⁶ The third passage exhorts sentient beings to do good deeds and is sometimes also recited to pacify the deceased.⁷ The last phrase is a mantra used to ritualize the completion of the image after artists have finished painting it. The combination of these different passages reveals that the wheel of existence, though ostensibly educational in its diagrammatic form, also has connections to ethical directives, ritual interactions, and perceptions of art as sacred. Above the inscription appears an eight-spoked wheel (*dharmachakra*) on a lotus,

designating the teachings of the Buddha, and a small white circle, representing the liberation of nirvana.⁸

FORMAT, HISTORY, AND TRANSFORMATION

Even this single painting reveals something of the adaptability of the wheel of existence to various circumstances. For example, it unusually depicts a figure in Western clothing and a pith helmet in the foreground of the human realm (fig. 14), exemplifying the cross-cultural interactions of its time. It is also painted on cloth and framed by multicolored brocade (fig. 15), in the format of a portable hanging scroll known as a *thangka*, even though the wheel of existence would more paradigmatically appear in murals on the entrance walls of monasteries or temples. Indeed, the earliest extant wheel of existence dates from the fifth century and remains, albeit fragmented, on the walls of the exterior entranceway of Cave 17 at Ajanta, India (fig. 16).



Fig. 14 Detail of Wheel of Existence, showing man in pith helmet in the realm of humans; Rubin Museum of Art



Fig. 15 Overview of Wheel of Existence, showing cloth frame; Rubin Museum of Art



Fig. 16 Wheel of Existence; Cave 17, Ajanta, India; 5th century; mural; photograph by Eric Huntington

While many characteristics of this image differ from more recent versions, the overall message seems similar.⁹ Such large, public images may help spread the ideas of Buddhism, just as the earliest textual sources describe the wheel of existence as a lasting

record of the stories of the Buddha's disciple Maudgalyayana, who had visited all the realms of existence to witness for himself the consequences of good and bad actions.¹⁰ In East Asia and Mongolia, Maudgalyayana's travels became a popular subject of narrative art,¹¹ although versions of the wheel of existence also appear in various forms, including a relief sculpture at Baodingshan in China¹² and a frontispiece illustration for the *Avatamsaka Sutra* (*Flower Garland Sutra*) in Korea. More recently, imagery of the wheel of existence has also been disseminated through the traditional medium of woodblock printing (fig. 17). Perhaps in part because of the didactic elegance of the imagery, the wheel of existence has also been reinterpreted by a variety of contemporary artists and authors to express views about the modern world, including themes of capitalism, social dysfunction, the relevance of Buddhism, and more.



Fig. 17 Wheel of Existence; Tashicholing Temple, Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia; 20th or 21st century; block print; height approx. 24 in. (61 cm); photograph by Eric Huntington

FOOTNOTES

¹ Stephen F. Teiser, *Reinventing the Wheel: Paintings of Rebirth in Medieval Buddhist Temples* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2006), 56.

² See, for example, Donald S. Lopez Jr., *Buddhist Scriptures* (London: Penguin Books, 2004).

³ See, for example, Peter Alan Roberts and Tulku Yeshe, trans., “Za Ma Tog Bkod Pa/The Basket’s Display/Kāraṇḍavyūha” (84000: Translating the Words of the Buddha, 2019), <http://read.84000.co/translation/toh116.html>, 1.18.

⁴ For more on this subject, see Lobsang Tharchin, *King Udrayana and the Wheel of Life: The History and Meaning of the Buddhist Teaching of Dependent Origination* (Howell, NJ: Mahayana Sutra and Tantra Press, 1984), 83–143.

⁵ Lhundup Sopa, “The Tibetan ‘Wheel of Life’: Iconography and Doxography,” *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 7, no. 1 (1984): 128–32, 143n12.

⁶ Daniel Berounsky and Lubomir Sklenka, “Tibetan Tsha-Tsha,” *Annals of the Náprstek Muzeum* 26 (2005): 69n25, 70.

⁷ Khenpo Kunpal Śāntideva and Khenpo Chöga, “Shantideva’s Bodhisattva-Charyavatara, According to the Tradition of Paltrül Rinpoche, Commentary by Khenpo Kunpal, with Oral Explanations by Khenpo Chöga,” trans. Andreas Kretschmar, Buddhism.org, 2003, <http://www.buddhism.org/Sutras/2/Shantideva.htm>, 522.

⁸ See for example Marek Mejor, “Painting the ‘Wheel of Transmigration’ (Saṃsāra-Cakra): A Note on the Textual Transmission,” in *From Turfan to Ajanta: Festschrift for*

Dieter Schlingloff on the Occasion of His Eightieth Birthday, ed. Eli Franco and Monika Zin, vol. 2 (Lumbini: Lumbini International Research Institute, 2010), 678.

⁹ Stephen F. Teiser, *Reinventing the Wheel: Paintings of Rebirth in Medieval Buddhist Temples* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2006), 79–100.

¹⁰ Stephen F. Teiser, *Reinventing the Wheel: Paintings of Rebirth in Medieval Buddhist Temples* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2006), 53–56.

¹¹ Karénina Kollmar-Paulenz, “Teaching the Dharma in Pictures: Illustrated Mongolian Books in the Ernst Collection in Switzerland,” in *The Arts of Tibetan Painting: Recent Research on Manuscripts, Murals and Thangkas of Tibet, the Himalayas and Mongolia (11th–19th Century) Proceedings of the Twelfth Seminar of the International Association for Tibetan Studies, Vancouver, 2010*, ed. Amy Heller (Asianart.com, 2010), <http://asianart.com/articles/paulenz/index.html>.

¹² See, for example, Karil J. Kucera, *Ritual and Representation in Chinese Buddhism: Visualizing Enlightenment at Baodingshan from the 12th to 21st Centuries* (Amherst, NY: Cambria, 2016), fig. 18; Stephen F. Teiser, *Reinventing the Wheel: Paintings of Rebirth in Medieval Buddhist Temples* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2006), chap. 9.

FURTHER READING

O rgyan 'jigs med chos kyi dbang po (Patrul). 1988. *Kunzang Lama'i Shelung / The Words of My Perfect Teacher*. Translated by the Padmakara Translation Group. Boston: Shambhala.

Teiser, Stephen F. 2006. *Reinventing the Wheel: Paintings of Rebirth in Medieval Buddhist Temples*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.

Tharchin, Lobsang. 1984. *King Udrayana and the Wheel of Life: The History and Meaning of the Buddhist Teaching of Dependent Origination*. Howell, NJ: Mahayana Sutra and Tantra Press

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