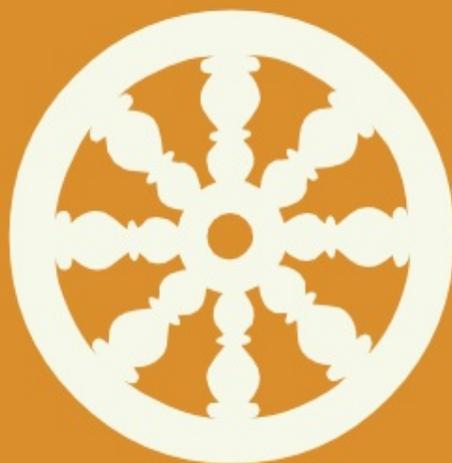


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The Wheel of Birth and Death

Bhikkhu Khantipālo



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by

Bhikkhu Khantipālo

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This indeed has been said by the Exalted One:

Two knowable dhammas should be thoroughly known—mind and body;

Two knowable dhammas should be relinquished—unknowing and craving for existence;

Two knowable dhammas should be realised—wisdom and freedom;

Two knowable dhammas should be developed—calm and insight.

Eight are the bases of unknowing:

Non-comprehension in dukkha,

Non-comprehension in dukkha's arising,

Non-comprehension in dukkha's cessation,

Non-comprehension in the practise-path leading to dukkha's cessation,

Non-comprehension in the past,

Non-comprehension in the future,

Non-comprehension in past and future,

Non-comprehension in Dependent Arising.

Eight are the bases of knowledge:

Comprehension in dukkha,

Comprehension in dukkha's arising,

Comprehension in dukkha's cessation,

Comprehension in the practise-path leading to dukkha's cessation, Comprehension in the past,

Comprehension in the future,

Comprehension in past and future,

Comprehension in Dependent Arising.

Peace it is and Excellence it is, that is to say—the stilling of all conditions, the rejection of all substrates (for rebirth), the destruction of craving, passionlessness, cessation, Nibbāna.

O bhikkhus, there is that sphere where is neither earth nor water nor fire nor air, nor the sphere of infinite space; nor the sphere of infinite consciousness, nor the sphere of nothingness, nor the sphere of neither-perception-nor-non-perception; not this world, nor another world, neither the moon nor the sun.

That I say, O bhikkhus, is indeed neither coming nor going nor staying, not passing-away and not arising. Unsupported, unmoving, devoid of object—that indeed is the end of dukkha.

And this dhamma is profound, hard to see, hard to awaken to, peaceful, excellent, beyond logic, subtle and to be experienced by the wise.

(Translated from the *Royal Chanting Book* [Suan Mon Chabub Luang], compiled by H.H., the 9th Sangharāja of Siam, Sā Phussadevo, and printed at Mahamakut Press, Bangkok.)

Introduction



Upon the Full Moon of the month of Visākha, now more than two thousand five hundred years ago, the religious wanderer known as Gotama, formerly Prince Siddhattha and heir to the throne of the Sakyān peoples, by his full insight into the Truth called Dhamma which is this mind and body, became the One Perfectly Enlightened by himself.

His Enlightenment or Awakening, called Sambodhi, abolished in himself unknowing and craving, destroyed greed, aversion and delusion in his heart, so that “vision arose, super-knowledge arose, wisdom arose, discovery arose, light arose—a total penetration into the mind and body, its origin, its cessation and the way to its cessation which was at the same time complete understanding of the “world,” its origin, its cessation and the way to its cessation. He penetrated to the Truth underlying all existence. In meditative concentration throughout one night, but after years of striving, from being a seeker, he became “the One-who-Knows, the One-who-Sees.”

When he came to explain his great discovery to others, he did so in various ways suited to the understanding of those who listened and suited to help relieve the problems with

which they were burdened.

He knew with his great wisdom exactly what these were even if his listeners were not aware of them, and out of his great compassion taught Dhamma for those who wished to lay down their burdens. The burdens which men, indeed all beings, carry round with them are no different now from the Buddha-time. For then as now men were burdened with unknowing and craving. They did not know of the Four Noble Truths nor of Dependent Arising and they craved for fire and poison and were then as now, consumed by fears. Lord Buddha, One-attained-to-the-Secure has said:

“Profound, Ānanda, is this Dependent Arising, and it appears profound. It is through not understanding, not penetrating this law that the world resembles a tangled skein of thread, a woven nest of birds, a thicket of bamboos and reeds, that man does not escape from (birth in) the lower realms of existence, from the states of woe and perdition, and suffers from the round of rebirth.”

The not-understanding of Dependent Arising is the root of all sorrows experienced by all beings. It is also the most important of the formulations of Lord Buddha's Enlightenment. For a Buddhist it is therefore most necessary to see into the heart of this for oneself. This is done not by reading about it nor by becoming expert in scriptures, nor by speculations upon one's own and others' concepts but by seeing Dependent Arising in one's own life and by coming

to grips with it through calm and insight in one's "own" mind and body.

"He who sees Dependent Arising, he sees Dhamma."

Let us now see how this Teaching is concerned with our own lives. The search of every living being is to find happiness, in whatever state, human or non-human, they find themselves. But what it is really important to know are the factors which give rise to unhappiness, so that they can be avoided; and the factors from which arise happiness, so that they can be cultivated. This is just another way of stating the Four Noble Truths. In the first half of this statement there is 'unhappiness' or what is never satisfactory, called in Pāli language *dukkha*. This *dukkha* is the First Noble Truth which we experience all the time, usually without noticing it, which does not make the *dukkha* any less! First, there is *occasional dukkha*: birth, old age, disease and death, for these events usually do not compose the whole of life. Then we have *frequent dukkha*: being united with what one dislikes, being separated from what one likes, not getting what one wants, and this is everyday experience. Finally, as a summary of all kinds of *dukkha* there is *continuous dukkha*: the five grasped-at groups, that is to say body, feeling, perceptions, volitions (and other mental activity) and consciousness, the components of a human being. Explanation of these in full would take too long here but all the readers are provided with these kinds of *dukkha* in themselves. They should look to see whether these facts of experience are delightful or not.

This Dhamma “should be thoroughly known” in one’s own person and life, that is where the First Noble Truth may be discovered.

Then the factors which give rise to unhappiness were mentioned. Here again one’s person and life should be investigated. Now when living creatures are killed intentionally by me, when I take what is not given, when I indulge in wrong conduct in sexual relations, when I speak false words and when I take intoxicating drinks and drugs producing carelessness—now are these things factors for happiness or unhappiness? When I covet the belongings of others, when I allow ill will to dwell in my heart, and when I have as the tenants of my heart ignorance, delusion, and views which lead astray—is this for my welfare or destruction? There are many ways of describing these factors which make for unhappiness but all of them derive from unknowing and craving which are just two sides of the same thing. This is the Second Noble Truth of the Arising of Dukkha. When craving is at work, when unknowing clouds one’s understanding, then one is sure to experience dukkha. Lord Buddha instructs us for our own benefit and for the happiness of others, that this craving “should be relinquished.”

Now, the ‘happiness’ in the second half of the statement above can be of many kinds. Two kinds dependent upon conditions can be seen illustrated by the world, while one kind, unsupported by conditions “should be realised” in one’s own heart. We are all looking for happiness so let us

see what is needed for it. First, there is materially-produced happiness. This is born of possessions and jugglery with conditions of life “out there.” Called *āmisa-sukha* in Pāli, this happiness is most uncertain; for all the factors supporting it are subject to instability and change. Moreover, they are out in the world and not in one’s own heart, so that they call for expert jugglery to save one from dukkha. And failure and disappointment cannot be avoided if one goes after this sort of happiness, so this sort of happiness is short-lived and precarious. A great improvement on this is the happiness which comes from practising Dhamma, called non-material happiness or *nirāmisa-sukha*. This kind of happiness is made sure whenever a person performs wholesome kamma, such as doing the following ten things: giving, moral conduct mind-development, reverence, helpfulness, dedicating meritorious acts to others, rejoicing in the meritorious acts of others, hearkening to Dhamma, teaching Dhamma and setting upright one’s views. People who practise this Dhamma, purifying their hearts in this way, are sure to reap happiness. But this happiness, though more lasting than the first, is not to be relied upon forever. As a fruit of it one may dwell among the gods for aeons, or be born as a very fortunate man but even the gods have to pass away, let alone man. And the fruits of kamma, good or evil, are impermanent, so it cannot be relied upon to produce a permanent happiness.

Permanent happiness can only be found by removing entirely the cause for dukkha. When craving is uprooted, no

growth of dukkha can take place. With purity, compassion and wisdom one can reach the supreme happiness of Nibbāna, which is stable, indestructible and never subject to changing conditions.

This is the Third Noble Truth of the Cessation of Dukkha by the removal of its cause. A good deal of hard work is needed to get to this “which should be realised,” and that work must be done along the right lines, hence the Fourth Noble Truth—the Truth of the Path “which should be cultivated.” It comprises elements of wisdom—Right View and Right Attitude; elements of moral conduct—Right Speech, Right Action, and Right Livelihood; and elements of meditation—Right Effort, Right Mindfulness and Right Collectedness. These will not be explained in detail here. ^[1] It is certain that any one who practises Moral Conduct, Collectedness and Wisdom in his life has the conditions which sustain happiness. From his practise he may have Dhamma-happiness or the Supreme Happiness, according to the degree he practises, for the latter requires well-developed meditation both in calm and in insight.

These Four Noble Truths—Dukkha, Cause, Cessation, and Path—are the heart of the Dhamma and they are in the heart of every man who cares to see them. From their seeing and understanding comes happiness, but by trying to escape them only more misery is born.

These Truths are illustrated by the formula of Dependent Arising which is found elaborated in various ways. The

simplest form is:

“Craving being, dukkha is; by the arising of craving, dukkha arises; craving not being, dukkha is not; by the cessation of craving, dukkha ceases.”

But Dependent Arising can be given in much more detailed ways than this. The important principle to understand is that whatever is experienced by us, all that arises is due to many conditions. An aspect which will be easy to understand concerns this body which grows in size from birth through youth, which develops certain characteristics in maturity, and as old age creeps on becomes infirm in various ways, and finally dies. The processes which govern this growth and decline are of great complexity and interdependence. The body, to keep going at all, needs clothes, food, shelter and medicines at least. But once the internal chemistry (also dependently originated) starts the process leading to old age and death, none of the exterior supporting conditions can do more than retard the process for a little while. The body, as a whole, does not arise from “no-cause” (the physical particles and kamma being its immediate causes); nor is it derived from *one* cause. If examined, nothing which we experience arises from only one, or no cause at all; on the contrary our experiences all arise dependently. Sight is actually dependent on the eye as base, the object to be seen, and the operation of eye-consciousness. (There are other factors that also contribute: light, air, ...) Similarly, there is ear, sound, ear-

consciousness; nose, smell, nose-consciousness; tongue, taste, tongue-consciousness; body, touch, body-consciousness; and mind, thoughts, mind-consciousness. All of our experience falls within these eighteen elements and there is nothing which we know outside them.

It is also important to understand that much of what one experiences arising dependently is the fruit of one's own actions. The happiness one feels and the dukkha one feels, although sometimes brought about by events in the physical world (landslides, earthquakes, a sunny or a rainy day), is very often brought about by one's own past intentional actions or kamma. And in the present time with each deliberate action, one performs more kammass which will come to fruit as experience in the future. So, if one wants to experience the fruits of happiness, the seeds of happiness must be planted now. They may fruit immediately, in this life, or in a future existence. We make ourselves, we are the creators of ourselves, no one else has a hand in this creation. And the Lord of Creation is no other than Ignorance or Unknowing. He is the Creator of this Wheel of Saṃsāra, of continued and infinitely varied forms of dukkha. And this Lord resides in the hearts of all men who are called "ordinary-men." We shall return to this in more detail later.

The History of the Wheel

Dependent Arising is explained many times and in many different connections in the Discourses of Lord Buddha, but he has not compared it to a wheel. This simile is found in the *Visuddhimagga* (“The Path of Purification”) and in the other commentarial literature. Although Theravāda tradition has many references to this simile, it does not seem to have been depicted at all. But in Northern India and especially in Kashmir, the Sarvāstivāda school [2] was strongly established and besides producing a vast literature upon Discipline and the Further Dhamma (Vinaya and Abhidhamma), they produced also a way of depicting a great many important Buddhist teachings by this picture of the Wheel which is the subject of the present essay.

In Pāli it is the *bhava-cakka* or *saṃsāra-cakka*, which is variously rendered in English as the Wheel of Life, the Wheel of Becoming or the Wheel of Rebirth.

In their collections of stories about Lord Buddha and his disciples (known as *Avadāna*), there is one which opens with the story of this wheel. Readers will observe that the story refers to Lord Buddha’s lifetime and says that he has authorised the painting of this picture, as well as laying

down its contents. It is certain that in the Buddha-time painting was well known (it is mentioned several times in the Discourses and the Discipline) while the other facts given in this short introductory story are quite in accord with the spirit of the Pāli Discourses. Even the collection of stories in which this account is contained was compiled, according to some scholars, before the Christian era. So if one does not believe that this painting was ordained by Lord Buddha, still it has an age of two thousand years, a venerable tradition indeed. Of all “teaching-aids” this expression of Buddhist skilful-means (*upaya-kosalla*), must surely be the oldest. Now let us turn to the story.

The Translation

“Lord Buddha was staying at Rājagaha, [3] in the Bamboo Grove, at the Squirrels’ Feeding-place. Now, it was the practise of Venerable Mahāmoggallāna to frequent the hells for a certain time, then the animal-kingdom, and also to visit the ghosts, the gods and men. Having seen all the sufferings to be found in the hells which beings there experience as they arise and pass away, such as maiming, dismembering and so forth; having witnessed how animals kill and devour others, how ghosts are tormented by hunger and thirst, how the gods lose (their heavenly state), fall (from it), are spoiled and come to their ruin, and how men crave and come to naught but thwarted desires, — having seen all this he returned to Jambudīpa (India) and reported this to the four assemblies. Whatever (venerable one) had a fellow-bhikkhu or a bhikkhu-pupil leading the holy life with dissatisfaction, he would take him to Venerable Mahāmoggallāna (thinking): ‘The Venerable Mahāmoggallāna will exhort and teach him well’. And (truly) the Venerable Mahāmoggallāna would exhort and teach him well. Such (dissatisfied bhikkhus) would again lead the holy life with keen interest, even distinguishing themselves with the higher attainments since they had been taught and exhorted so well by the

Venerable Mahāmoggallāna.

“At that time (when the Lord stayed at Rājagaha), the Venerable Mahāmoggallāna was surrounded by the four assemblies consisting of bhikkhus, bhikkhunīs, pious laymen and women.

“Now the illustrious Enlightened Ones who Know, (also) ask questions. Thus Lord Buddha asked the Venerable Ānanda (why the second of his foremost disciples was surrounded by the four assemblies). Venerable Ānanda then related Venerable Mahāmoggallāna’s experiences and said that he instructed discontented bhikkhus with success.

“(The Lord replied:) ‘The Elder Moggallāna or a bhikkhu like him cannot be at many places (at the same time for teaching people). Therefore, in the (monastery) gateways a wheel having five sections should be made.’

“Thus the Lord laid down that a wheel with five sections should be made (whereupon it was remarked:) ‘But the bhikkhus do not know what sort of wheel should be made’.

“The Lord explained: ‘The five bourns should be represented—the hellish bourn, that of the animal kingdom, of ghosts, of men, and the bourn of the gods. In the lower portion (of the wheel), the hells are to be shown, together, with the animal-kingdom and the realm of the ghosts, while in the upper portion gods and men should be represented. The four continents should also be depicted, namely, Pubbavideha, Aparagoyana, Uttarakuru and Jambudīpa. [4] In the middle, greed, aversion and delusion must be shown,

a dove symbolising greed, [5] a snake representing aversion, and a hog, delusion. Furthermore, the Buddhas are to be painted (surrounded by their) haloes pointing out (the way to) Nibbāna. Ordinary beings should be shown as by the contrivance of a water-wheel they sink (to lower states) and rise up again. The space around the rim should be filled with (scenes teaching) the twelve links of Dependent Arising in the forward and reversed order. (The picture of the Wheel) must show clearly that everything, all the time, is swallowed by impermanence and the following two verses should be added as an inscription:

Make a start, leave behind (the wandering-on)
firmly concentrate upon the Buddha's Teaching.
As He, Leader like an elephant, did Nālāgiri rout,
so should you rout and defeat the hosts of Death.
Whoever in this Dhamma-Vinaya will go his way
ever vigilant and always striving hard,
Can make an end of dukkha here
and leave behind Saṃsāra's wheel of birth and death.
(= S I 156)

“Thus, at the instance of the bhikkhus, it was laid down by the Lord that the Wheel of Wandering-on in birth and death with five sections should be made in the gateways (of monasteries).

“Now brahmins and householders would come and ask:
'Revered Sir, what is this painting about?'

“Bhikkhus would reply: ‘We also do not know!’

“Thereupon the Lord advised: ‘A bhikkhu should be appointed (to receive) visitors in the gateway and to show them (the mural).’

“Bhikkhus were appointed without due consideration (to be guest-receiver), foolish, erring, confused persons without merit. (At this, it was objected:) ‘They themselves do not know, so how will they explain (the Wheel-picture) to visiting brahmins and householders?’

“The Lord said: ‘A competent bhikkhu should be appointed.’” **[6]**

The Later History of the Tradition

Tibetan legend says that Lord Buddha outlined the Wheel with grains of rice while walking with bhikkhus in a rice field. However this may be, in India, at least in all the Sarvāstivāda monasteries, this painting will have adorned the interior of the gateway, arousing deep emotions in the hearts of those who knew its meaning, and curiosity in others. It is a measure of how great was the destruction of the Buddhist religion in India that not a single example survives anywhere, since no gateways to temples are known to have survived. A solitary painting in Ajanta cave number seventeen may perhaps be some form of this wheel.

In the translation above, the pictures for representing the twelve links of Dependent Arising were not given and it is said that these were supplied from the scriptures by Nāgārjuna, a great Buddhist Teacher (some of whose verses are quoted below). From India the pattern of this wheel was taken to Samye, the first Tibetan monastery, by Bande Yeshe and there it was the Sarvāstivāda lineage of ordination which was established. The tradition of painting this wheel thus passed to Tibet, where, due to climatic conditions, it was painted in the vestibule of the temple, there to strike the eyes of all who entered.

Tibetan tradition speaks of two kinds of Wheel: the old-style and the new-style. The old-style is based upon the text translated above, while the new-style introduces two new features. The great reformer, Je Tsongkhapa (b. 1357 C.E.), founder of the Gelugpa (the Virtuous Ones, the school of which H.H. the Dalai Lama is the head), gave authority for the division of the Wheel into six instead of five, and for drawing the Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara in the guise of a Buddha in each of the five non-human realms. Both these features may be seen upon the drawing of the Tibetan-style Wheel. The sixth realm is that of the titans (asura) who war against the gods of the sensual-sphere heavens. These troublesome and demonic characters are included in a separate part of the world of the gods in my drawing. The introduction of a Buddha-figure figure into each realm illustrates the universal quality of a Buddha's great compassion, for Avalokiteśvara is the embodiment of enlightened compassion. The writer has preferred to retain the old-style representation according to the text as it agrees perfectly with Theravāda teachings.

The terrors and violence of saṃsāra, which are with us all the time, may be seen plainly in the ravishment of Tibet by the Chinese invaders. Tibetan artists have kept this tradition alive to the present day and still paint under difficulties as refugees in India. But this ancient way of presenting Dhamma deserves to be more widely known and appreciated. Buddhist shrines could well be equipped with representations of it in the present day, to remind devotees

of the nature of this whirling wheel of birth and death.

The Symbolism and its Practical Meaning

We now turn to the pictures of the Bhavacakka accompanying this book. One is from a Tibetan original after Waddell. The second is a modern version executed by the author, in which the scenes and figures have been given a contemporary colouring.

The Hub

The hub of this painting is the central point for us who live in the realm of saṃsāra, so it is the best point to start a description of the symbolism. In this centre circle, a cock, a snake and a hog wheel around, each having in its mouth the tail of the animal in front. These three, representing Greed, Aversion and Delusion which are the three roots of all evil, are depicted in the centre because they are the root causes for experience in the wandering on. When they are present in our hearts then we live afflicted in the transitory world of birth and death but when they are not there, having been destroyed by wisdom or pañña, developed in Dhamma-

practise, then we find rest, the unshakable peace of Nibbāna. It is notable that Tibetan paintings show these creatures against a blue ground, showing that even these afflictions of mind, although powerful, have no real substance and are void, as are all the other elements of our experience.

The cock of fiery yellow-red represents greed (*lobha*). This greed includes every desire for all kinds of “I wish, I want, I must have, I will have” and extends from the violent passion for gross physical form, through attachments to views and ideas, all the way to the subtle clinging to spiritual pleasures experienced by meditators. The colour of the cock, a fiery red, is symbolic of the fact that the passions burn those who indulge in them. Passions and desires are hot and restless, just like tongues of flame, and never allow the heart to experience the cool peace of non-attachment. The cock is chosen as a symbol of greed because as an animal it is observed to be full of lust and vanity.

In the cock’s beak there is the tail of a green snake indicating that people who are not able to “satisfy” their ocean-like greeds and lusts tend to become angry. Aversion (*dosa*) of any form springs up when we do not get what we want, or when we get what we do not want. This also can be very subtle, from aversion to mental states ranging through hostile thoughts against other beings, to expressions of inward resentment finding their way out in untruthful, malicious or angry words, or as physical violence. The greenness of the snake indicates the coldness, the lack of

sympathy with others, while the snake itself is an animal killing other beings by poison or strangulation, which is exactly what aversion does to those who let it grow in their hearts. Our lives can be corrupted by this venomous beast unless we take very good care to remove it.

At the bottom of the picture there is a heavy hog, the tail of which is chewed by aversion's snake, while in turn it champs upon the tail feathers of greed's cock. This heavy hog is black in colour and represents delusion (*moha*). This black hog, like its brethren everywhere, likes to sleep for long, to root for food in filth and generally to take no care at all over cleanliness. It is a good symbol for delusion which prevents one from understanding what is advantageous and what is deleterious to oneself. Its heaviness is that sluggishness of mind and body which it induces in people, called variously stupidity, dullness, boredom; but worry and distraction with sceptical doubt also arise from this delusion-root. One who is overwhelmed by delusion does not know why he should restrain himself from evil, for he can see neither his own benefit with wisdom, nor the benefit of others by compassion—all is blanketed by delusion. He does not know, or does not believe that kamma (intentional actions) have results according to kind. Or he has wrong views which lead him astray from the highway of Dhamma. When people do not get what they want either using greed or aversion, then they turn dull and the pain of their desire is dulled by delusion. From this black hog are born the fiery cock and the cold green snake.

These three beasts, none more dangerous anywhere, are shown each biting the tail of the other, meaning that really they are inseparable, so that one cannot have, say, greed, without the other monsters lurking in its train. Even characters which are rooted predominantly in one of these three, have the other two present, while most people called “normal” have a sort of unhealthy balance of these three in their hearts, ever ready to influence their actions when a suitable situation occurs. These three beasts revolve endlessly in the heart of the ordinary-man (*puthujjana*) and ensure that he experiences plenty of dukkha. One should know for one-self whether these beasts control one’s own heart, or not.

The First Ring

Out from the innermost circle, the first ring is divided into two (not shown at all upon the Tibetan version illustrated here), one half with a white background and the other having a black background. In the former, four people are seen ascending: the bhikkhu holding a Dhamma-light goes on in front, being followed by a white-robed nun (*upāsikā*), after which come a man and a woman in present day dress. The four of them represent the Buddhist Community made up of monks, nuns, laymen and laywomen. They are representative of anyone practising the path of good conduct in mind, speech and body. They represent as well

two classes of persons: “going from dark to light” and “going from light to light.” In the first case, they are born in poor circumstances and have few opportunities due to past evil kamma but in spite of this, they make every effort to practise Dhamma for their own good and others’ happiness. Thus they go towards the light, for the fruit of their present kamma will be pleasant and enjoyable. The latter class, “going from light to light,” are those people who have attained many benefits with plentiful opportunities in their present life, due to having done much good kamma in the past. In the present they continue with their upward course devoting themselves to further practise of Dhamma in their lives.

What is this Dhamma-practise? There are two lists both of ten factors which could be explained here but the space required would be too great for more than a summary. The first list is called the ten Skilled Kamma-paths, [7] three of which pertain to bodily action, four to speech and three to mental action. “Paths” here means “ways of action” and “skilful” means “neither for the deterioration of one’s own mind nor for the harm of others.” The bodily actions which one refrains from are: destroying living creatures, taking what is not given, and wrong conduct in sexual desires. In speech, the four actions which should be avoided are: false speech, slanderous speech, harsh speech and foolish chatter. The three actions of mind which should be avoided are: covetousness, ill will, and wrong views. Anyone who restrains himself from these ten, practises a skilful path, a

white path which accords with the first steps of training in Dhamma.

The other ten factors are called the Ten Ways of making Puñña [8] (meaning actions purifying the heart). They have a different range from the first list of ten, being divided into three basic ways and seven secondary ones. The basic factors are giving (*dāna*), moral conduct (*sīla*), and mind development (*bhāvanā*), while the remaining seven are counted as aspects of these three: reverence, helpfulness, dedicating one's puñña to others, rejoicing in other's puñña, listening to Dhamma, teaching Dhamma, and straightening out one's views. These actions lead to uprightness, skilful conduct and to the growth in Dhamma of oneself, as well as the benefit of others.

Those who tread upon this white path going toward the light are able to be born in two bourns: either as men, or as "shining-ones"—the gods in the three sorts of heavens, of sensuality, subtle form, and formlessness. A life of good practise is thus usually followed by a life in one of these two bourns, called *sugati* or the good bourns. But Lord Buddha does not declare that everyone who has led such a life is necessarily born there. This depends not only upon the intensity of their Dhamma-practise but also upon the vision which arises at the time of death. Through negligence at the last moment, one can slip into the three evil bourns difficult to get out of. The round of saṃsāra is very dangerous, even for those who lead almost blameless lives. More of this below. To be born in the two good bourns is the fruiting of

puñña or skilful kamma and the more purified one's heart, the higher and more pleasant will be one's environment.

In the dark half of the ring, naked beings are tumbling downwards in disorder. Their nakedness symbolises lack of shame in doing evil and their disorder shows the characteristic of evil to cause disintegration and confusion. "Downwards" means that they are falling, by the commission of sub-human actions, to sub-human states of existence. In some Tibetan versions they are chained together and pulled downwards by a female demon who squats at the bottom. This demoness is craving or *tanhā* (a noun of female gender). This craving is, of course, not outside those who follow the path of evil but in their own hearts. On this path there are two sorts of persons, those "going, from light to dark" and those "going from dark to dark." The former have good opportunities in this life but do not make use of them, or else use them for evil ends and thus waste the fruits of their previous good kamma without laying up any further store. Instead, they prefer from delusion to store up evil now for fear and distress in future. Those who go from dark to dark do not have even the advantages of the former group for they are born in conditions of deprivation due to past evil kamma and then, driven on by the fruits of suffering received by them, they commit more evil.

The ten unskilful kamma-paths are the ways along which they walk: destroying living creatures, taking what is not given, wrong conduct in sexual desires; false speech,

slandorous speech, harsh speech, foolish chatter; covetousness, ill will and wrong-views. They do not delight in making puñña but are by nature, mean, immoral, undeveloped in mind, proud, selfish, grasp at possessions, envious, never listen to Dhamma and certainly never teach it, while their hearts are ridden with confused and contradictory views and ideas.

For their pains, having pursued evil, these beings upon their death, already having destroyed “humanness” in themselves, fall down to the three lower states which are called the Evil Bourns (*duggati*). These are, in order of deterioration and increase of suffering: the hungry ghosts, the animals, and the hell-wraiths. Truly a case of “do good, good fruit; do bad, bad fruit”—as the Thai proverb says.

These two half-circles are also an illustration of the refrain which closes every one of the *Avadāna* stories: “Thus bhikkhus, completely black kamma bears completely evil effects; completely white kamma bears completely good effects; and composite kamma bears composite effects. Therefore, bhikkhus, abstain from doing completely black kamma and composite kamma; strive to do kamma completely white. Thus, O bhikkhus, must you train yourselves.”

The Five Divisions

The two good bourns and the three evil bourns contain the whole range of possibilities for rebirth. In most Tibetan illustrations, including the one shown here, a sixth bourn is given, by dividing the devas and asuras (the gods and anti-gods or titans). In this section the five, or six bourns will be described, together with the ways to get to them. Birth in any bourn is a fruit or effect and here we shall see the causes.

A person who has done evil persistently, or even one heavy crime, is likely to see at the time of death a vision, either relating to his past evil actions, or else to the bourn which his past evil actions or kamma have prepared for him. When his physical body is no longer a suitable basis to support life, his mind creates a body ghostly and subtle in substance, which then and there begins to experience one of the evil bourns. But in case his kamma drives him to be born as animal, there is the vision of animals copulating and he is dragged into the womb or egg of those animals.

Kamma which leads to birth as an animal is a strong interest in the things which mankind shares with the animals, that is, eating, drinking and sex. If a man strengthens the animal in himself, to become an “animal-man,” he can expect only to be born as an animal. Human beings interested in only these things, strengthening the evil root of delusion in their minds, have already the minds of animals. There is no essential “man-ness” which can prevent such a catastrophe, for no unchanging human soul exists. If a man wishes to guard himself against this, he must protect the conditions

for humanity (*manussa-dhamma*) which are the Five Precepts. Sinking below the level of conduct of these precepts, is to sink into the sub-human levels. Once rebirth as an animal has taken place it is by no means easy to gain human birth again, as Ācārya Nāgārjuna has written:

More difficult is it to rise
from birth as animal to man,
Than for the turtle blind to see
the yoke upon the ocean drift;
Therefore, do you being a man
practise Dhamma and gain its fruits.

— L.K. 59 [9]

Kamma dragging one to the hells, which are the most fearful and miserable states, are actions involving hatred, killing, torture and violence generally. People lead themselves to experience hell because they have made the evil root of aversion very strong within themselves.

On the other hand, those who have strengthened the evil root of greed while they were men, having been mean, possessive and selfish, are liable to arise as spirits with strong cravings forever unsatisfied, for which reason they are known as “hungry” ghosts.

However, it does sometimes happen that one who has led an evil life turns sincerely to religion upon his deathbed. When this occurs, with his mind centred upon Dhamma

and purified by faith, a person like this may be reborn among men, even arise among the devas. That evil kamma which has been done, though it may have no chance to fructify in those good bourns, remains a potential for creating very unpleasant results whenever conditions are favourable to its fruition. The reverse of this may happen, as when good and noble men become distracted at death and so remember some small evil done, or see a vision of evil done in some past life, the result of which is the arising of unwholesome consciousness leading to the evil bourns.

It is more usual for one who has followed the path of white deeds to be born as a man or among the gods. The basis for the former is the practise of the Five Precepts which constitute the level of humanness. They are in brief: refraining from destroying living creatures; refraining from taking what is not given; refraining from wrong conduct in sexual desires; refraining from false speech; and refraining from distilled and fermented intoxicants which cause carelessness. Those who refrain from such things, having really lived as men, having strengthened the base of humanness in their own hearts, are born again as men well-endowed with the riches of fine qualities, of varied opportunities, as well as with a wealth of worldly goods.

The path to the heavens is cultivated by those who make special efforts to live with purity and self-restraint, exercising loving kindness towards all beings and so purifying their minds to some extent through meditation. At the time of death, having fulfilled the ten skilful kamma

paths and the ten ways of making puñña, the heart will be joyful and peaceful to varying degrees, which will result in the experience of arising in one of the many heavenly levels according to the degree of purity and concentration which has been attained.

All these possibilities are within the scope of the mind, the quality of which can be changed in this way or that by kamma, good or bad. From the type of mind which performs the duty of relinking-consciousness at birth, is determined the kind of sense-organs possessed by a being, and hence the kind of world experienced by him. Perception varies—as the famous Buddhist verse puts it:

As a water-vessel is variously perceived by beings:
Nectar to celestials, is for a man plain drinking-water,
While to the hungry ghost it seems a putrid ooze of pus
and blood,
Is for the water serpent-spirits and the fish a place to
live in,
While it is space to gods who dwell in the sphere of
infinite space.
So any object, live or dead, within the person or
without—
Differently is seen by beings according to their fruits of
kamma.

From such verses we catch a glimpse of the mysterious depths of the mind, and of the truth of the Exalted Buddha's words which open the Dhammapada:

Before all dhammas goes the mind;
Mind is the chief, mind-made are they.

To come now to a description of the picture. In the world of *the gods* or “shining-ones” (deva, upper right, but topmost in the Tibetan version), the gilded palaces and glittering jewel trees of the gods of sensuality are shown in the lower part of the drawing. The Tibetan picture shows more details of these superlatively beautiful worlds in which there is also a kind of subtle sexual relationship. Being based upon sensuality, as this world of men is, these devas must also pay the price for this—which is conflict. This conflict is an ever-recurring battle with the asuras, the anti-gods or titans who have in past times fallen through their quarrelsome nature from the heavens and who now enviously try to invade the celestial realms. In my picture, they share a segment of the world of gods and they are equipped with ancient and modern weapons and are in the dress of soldiers. But they do not only battle with the gods but also among themselves and so a bit of insubordination is depicted as well. The Tibetan picture gives them a world to themselves along the frontiers of which they are fleeing from the victorious heavenly hosts led upon a very large elephant by Sakka, the lord of the sensual-realm gods. These titans only understand force, so the Buddha shown in their world bears a sword with which to duly impress them, after which they may be able to hear a little Dhamma. By contrast, the Buddha appearing among the gods bears a

lute, in order to lure them into listening to Dhamma sung in exquisite strains, for it was believed that they would not be interested in mere spoken words!

Above the battling of the sensual-realm gods dwell the Brahmas of subtle form and of formlessness, experiencing meditative happiness, serene joy, or sublime equanimity. The Tibetan picture also shows a magnificent Brahma world palace in the upper left-hand corner. About all this heavenly splendour, Ācārya Nāgārjuna warns us:

“Great King, although celestial worlds
have pleasures great to be enjoyed,
Greater the pain of dying there.
From often contemplating this
a noble person does not wish
For transient heavenly joys.”

— L.K. 98

He goes on to speak of the devas as those

“Who, dying from celestial realms
with no remaining merit fruits
Must take up their abode
according to the karma past,—
With birth as beast or hungry ghost,
or else arise in hell.”

— L.K. 101

The Brahmas of formlessness dwelling for unthinkable ages in the realms of infinite space, infinite consciousness, nothingness, and neither-perception-nor-non-perception being quite without any form, naturally cannot be shown, but even their states are not eternal, but come to an end.

Among men (upper left in both pictures), the progress of the human-being is shown: birth (a perambulator); old-age, sickness (hospital sign) and death (a bloated corpse in a graveyard), but with this basis of dukkha, men can also understand Dhamma. Lord Buddha, foremost among men, sits highest in the human world teaching Dhamma in a forest grove to his first five disciples. In the original version which my picture follows, he is shown only in the human world, thus emphasising the value of human birth, during which it is possible to gain insight into Dhamma. The religious aspirations of man are represented by a Hindu temple, a Christian church and Muslim mosque, while a war and a bar show his tendencies towards aversion and greed. The Tibetan picture shows several mundane activities such as ploughing the fields, while people climb towards the top of the picture where there is a temple in which they can listen to Dhamma. In the centre stands a Buddha carrying the alms-bowl and staff, showing to men the way of peacefulness leading to sublime peace of Nibbāna. This is shown in my picture by the sure Dhamma-path which issues from the mouth of the Exalted Buddha. Upon this way a bhikkhu lends a hand to help householders out of the realms of saṃsāra, leading them forward upon

the Eightfold Path. Ācārya Nāgārjuna has this to say:

“Who though he has been born a man
yet gives himself to evil ways,
More foolish is he than the fool
who fills with vomit, urine, dung
Golden vessels jewel-adorned—
harder man’s birth to gain than these.”

— L.K. 60

Hungry ghosts or *peta* (lower right in my picture, lower left in the Tibetan) crave for food and drink but find that it turns to fire or foul things when they are able to get it. I have shown a huge moon and a tiny sun, as the verse says:

“From want of merit, hungry ghosts
in summer find the moon is hot,
in winter sun is cold;
Barren are the trees they see
and mighty rivers running on
dry up whene’er they look at them.”

— L.K. 95

Then there is a sky-going *peta* being torn to shreds by birds, as seen by Venerable Moggallāna; one “resting” upon rocks under a leafless tree which is the simile used by the Exalted Buddha in the suttas to symbolise the sole comforts of this realm, and two ghosts sunk in the water up to their lower lips, their gaping mouths just a little too high to get any of it.

The state of Tantalus was obviously birth among the hungry ghosts! The ghosts all have bloated bellies, extremely slender necks and “needle-mouths.” Their sufferings are illustrated further in the Tibetan. They have to bear the intense cravings for food and drink and then more sufferings when they manage to get a little of it, for it turns to swords and knives in their bellies. The Buddha in this “abundantly painful” realm carries celestial food to allay the ghosts’ cravings. In the words of Ācārya Nāgārjuna:

“Lord Buddha has declared the cause
why beings come to birth as ghosts,
torments to endure
For when as men they gave no gifts,
or giving gave with avarice—
They ghostly kamma made.”

— L.K. 97

The animals, in the Tibetan illustration, are being encouraged in the Dhamma by a Buddha holding a book, illustrating the point that animals have little ability to understand and are in need of wisdom. My picture illustrates the sufferings of animal-life as described by Ācārya Nāgārjuna:

“Then should you come to birth as beast
many are the pains—
Killing, disease and gory strife
binding, striking too.
Void of peaceful, skilful acts

beasts slay and kill without remorse.

Some among beasts are slain because they produce pearls, or wool, or bones, or valued are for meat or hide.

Others are pressed to do men's work by blows or sticks or iron hook, by whipping them to work."

— L.K. 89–90

In the animal-world where feelings experienced are "painful, sharp and severe," one can see the dukkha, the hunter and the hunted, in my illustration. The birds of the air are being shot while a vulture is feeding on its prey. A wasp struggling in the net of a spider represents the horrors of life among the insects, while among the larger animals, a buffalo is being forced to work, a deer is being shot and a lion feeds upon its prey. The fish fare no better and are shown being devoured by larger fish, or else hooked and netted by men. Slithering down the division of this world from the hells, there is a gecko. The Tibetan picture illustrates the diversity of animal life and shows, under the waters, the palace of the serpent-spirits or naga, half snake and half man.

The *hells*, which are not permanent states of course, have some new horrors of our day: for railway lines run into a concentration camp from the chimneys of which belches sinister black smoke, while a uniformed member of some

secret police force compels a suppliant hell-wraith to swallow molten metal. Towards the viewer flows the river of caustic soda called Vaitarani which burns the flesh off the bones of those swirling along in it, mingled with a stream of blood from the clashing mountains. Whatever torments hell-wraiths experience, though their bodies are mangled, crushed and ripped apart, yet they survive still for vast ages of time experiencing feelings which are “exclusively painful, sharp and severe,” unrelenting and uninterrupted:

“As highest is the bliss that comes
from all desires’ cessation —
No higher bliss than this!
So worst the woe that’s known in hell
Avīci with no interval —
No woe is worse than this!”

— L.K. 85

In the foreground is the hell of filth where hell-wraiths, who as men had corrupted the innocent, are devoured by gigantic maggots while floundering in a stinking ooze. To the left are the trees of the sword-blade forest which have to be climbed so that hell wraiths are pierced through and through. This particular aspect of hell is said to be the punishment which adulterers bring on themselves. Various murderers and torturers are impaled upon stakes while a steel-beaked bird rips out the entrails of former cock-fighters. Ācārya Nāgārjuna has some more verses upon these lowest and most-miserable states:

“The criminal who has to bear
throughout a single day
The piercing of three hundred spears
as punishment for crime,
His pain can nowise be compared
to the least pain found in hell.

The pains of hell may still persist
a hundred crores of years—
Without respite, unbearable
So long the fruits of evil acts
do not exhaust the force—
So long continues life in hell.”

— L.K. 86–87

Jetsun Milarepa, the great sage and poet of Tibet, who had seen the heavens and hells and other states, once sung this verse:

“Fiends filled with cravings for pleasures
Murder even their parents and teachers,
Rob the Three Gems of their treasures,
Revile and falsely accuse the Precious Ones,
And condemn the Dhamma as untrue:
In the hell of unceasing torment
These evil-doers will be burned...” [10]

Those who now violate the peoples of Tibet and their Dhamma might well take note! This brief survey of the five

ourns (*pañcagati*) may be concluded with a verse of exhortation from “The Letter of Kindheartedness”:

“If your head or dress caught fire
in haste you would extinguish it,
Do likewise with desire—
which whirls the wheel of wandering-on
And is the root of suffering,
No better thing to do!”

L.K. 104

The Rim of the Wheel (Dependent Arising)

The Twelve-linked Chain

Our description has now come to the Rim, or felly of the Wheel, which depicts the Twelve Links of Dependent Arising. It is these links which chain the entire universe of beings to re-becoming and to suffering. It is a well-established tradition to explain this chain as referring to three lives (past, present and future). While the present is the only time which is real, it has been moulded in the past. It is in the present that we produce kamma of mind, speech and body, to bear fruit in the future. In the twelve *nidānas* or “links” around this wheel are set out the whole pattern of life and in it all questions relating to existence are answered.

The teaching of Dependent Arising, central in our Dhamma-vinaya, is not, however, for speculation but should be investigated and seen in one’s own and others’ lives, and finally it may be perceived in one’s own heart where all the truths of Dhamma become clear after practise. But people who do not practise Dhamma are called “upholders of the world”; they let this wheel whirl them round from

unknowing to old-age and death. The Exalted Buddha urged us not to be “world upholders” but through Dhamma-practise to relinquish greed, aversion and delusion so that by the cessation of unknowing there comes to be a cessation of birth, old-age and death.

Now let us have a look at these twelve links in brief.

First Link: Unknowing (*avijjā*)

This Pāli word *avijjā* is a negative term meaning “not knowing completely” but it does not mean “knowing nothing at all.” This kind of unknowing is very special and not concerned with ordinary ways or subjects of knowledge; for here what one does not know are the Four Noble Truths, one does not see them clearly in one’s own heart and one’s own life. In past lives, we did not care to see *dukkha* (1), so we could not destroy *the cause of dukkha* (2) or craving which has impelled us to seek more and more lives, more and more pleasures. *The cessation of dukkha* (3) which perhaps could have been seen by us in past lives, was not realised, so we come to the present existence inevitably burdened with *dukkha*. And in the past we can hardly assume that we set our feet upon the *practise-path leading to the cessation of dukkha* (4) and we did not even discover stream-entry. We are now paying for our own negligence in the past.

And this unknowing is not some kind of first cause in the past, for it dwells in our hearts now. But due to this unknowing, as we shall see, we have set in motion this wheel bringing round old age and death and all other sorts

of dukkha. Those past “selves” in previous lives who are in the stream of my individual continuity did not check their craving and so could not cut at the root of unknowing. On the contrary they made kamma, some of the fruits of which in this present life I, as their causal resultant, am receiving.

The picture helps us to understand this: a blind old woman (*avijjā* is of feminine gender) with a stick picks her way through a petrified forest strewn with bones. It is said that the original picture here should be an old blind she-camel led by a driver, the beast being one accustomed to long and weary journeys across inhospitable country, while its driver could be craving. Whichever simile is used, the beginninglessness and the darkness of unknowing are well suggested. We are the blind ones who have staggered from the past into the present—to what sort of future?

Depending on the existence of unknowing in the heart, there was volitional action, kamma or *abhisankhāra*, made in those past lives.

Second Link: Volitions (*saṅkhārā*)

Intentional actions have the latent power within them to bear fruit in the future—either in a later part of the life in which they were performed, in the following life, or in some more distant life, but their potency is not lost with even the passing of aeons; and whenever the necessary conditions obtain that past kamma may bear fruit. Now, in past lives we have made kamma, and due to our ignorance of the Four Noble Truths we have been “world-upholders” and so

making good and evil kamma we have ensured the continued experience of this world.

Beings like this, obstructed by unknowing in their hearts, have been compared to a potter making pots: he makes successful and beautiful pottery (skilful kamma) and he is sometimes careless and his pots crack and break up from various flaws (unskilful kamma). And he gets his clay fairly well smeared over himself just as purity of heart is obscured by the mud of kamma. The simile of the potter is particularly apt because the word *saṅkhāra* means “forming,” “shaping,” and “compounding,” and therefore it has often been rendered in English as “formations.”

Depending on the existence of these volitions produced in past lives, there arises the consciousness called “relinking” which becomes the basis of this present life.

Third Link: Consciousness (viññāṇa)

This relinking consciousness may be of different qualities, according to the kamma upon which it depends. In the case of all those who read this, the consciousness “leaping” into a new birth at the time of conception, was a human relinking consciousness arising as a result of having practised at least the Five Precepts, the basis of “humanness” in past lives. One should note that this relinking consciousness is a resultant, not something which can be controlled by will. If one has not made kamma suitable for becoming a human being, one cannot will, when the time of death comes round, “Now I shall become a man

again!” The time for intentional action was when one had the opportunity to practise Dhamma. Although our relinking-consciousness in this birth is now behind us, it is now that we can practise Dhamma and make more sure of a favourable relinking consciousness in future—that is, if we wish to go on living in saṃsāra.

This relinking-consciousness is the third constituent necessary for conception, for even though it is the mother’s fertile period and sperm is deposited in the womb, if there is no “being” desiring to take rebirth at that place and time there will be no fertilisation of the ovum.

Appropriately, the picture shows a monkey, the consciousness leaping from one tree, the old life, to another tree. The old tree has died, while the one towards which it jumps is laden with fruits—they may be the fruits of good or evil. The Tibetan picture shows a monkey devouring fruit, experiencing the fruits of deeds done in the past.

Dependent upon relinking-consciousness, there is the arising of mind-body.

Fourth Link: Mind-body (*nāma-rūpa*)

This is not a very accurate translation but gives the general meaning. There is more included in *rūpa* that is usually thought of as body, while mind is a compound of feeling, perception, volition and consciousness. This mind and body is two interacting continuities in which there is nothing stable. Although in conventional speech we talk of “my

mind” and “my body,” implying that there is some sort of owner lurking in the background, the wise understand that laws govern the workings of both mental states and physical changes and mind cannot be ordered to be free of defilements, nor body told that it must not grow old, become sick and die.

But it is in the mind that a change can be wrought instead of drifting through life at the mercy of the inherent instability of mind and body. So in the illustration, mind is doing the work of punting the boat of psycho-physical states on the river of cravings. The Tibetan picture shows a coracle, the body, being rowed over swirling waters with three other passengers, who represent the other groups or aggregates (*khandha*) included in *nāma*.

With the coming into existence of mind-body, there is the arising of the six sense-spheres.

Fifth Link: Six sense-spheres (saḷāyatana)

A house with six windows is the usual symbol for this link (but the Tibetan shows a house with one window. These six senses are eye, ear, nose, tongue, touch and mind, and these are the bases for the reception of the various sorts of information which each can gather in the presence of the correct conditions. This information falls under six headings corresponding to the six spheres: sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tangibles and thoughts. Beyond these six spheres of sense and their corresponding six objective spheres, we know nothing. All our experience is limited by the senses

and their objects with the mind counted as the sixth. The five outer senses collect data only in the present but mind, the sixth, where this information is collected and processed, ranges through the three times adding memories from the past and hopes and fears for the future, as well as thoughts of various kinds relating to the present. It may also add information about the spheres of existence, which are beyond the range of the five outer senses, such as the various heavens, the ghosts and the hell-states. A mind developed through collectedness (*samādhi*) is able to perceive these worlds and their inhabitants.

The six sense-spheres existing, there is contact.

Sixth Link: Contact (*phassa*)

This means the contact between the six senses and their respective objects. For instance, when the necessary conditions are all fulfilled, there being an eye, a sight-object, light and the eye being functional and the person awake and turned towards the object, there is likely to be eye-contact, the striking of the object upon the sensitive eye-base. The same is true for each of the senses and their types of contact. The traditional symbol for this link shows a man and woman embracing.

Where contact arises, feeling exists.

Seventh Link: Feeling (*vedanā*)

When there have been various sorts of contact through the six senses, feelings arise which are the emotional response

to those contacts. Feelings are of three sorts: pleasant, painful and neither pleasant nor painful. The first are welcome and are the basis for happiness, the second are unwelcome and the basis for dukkha while the third are the neutral sort of feelings which we experience so often but hardly notice.

But all feelings are unstable and liable to change, for no mental state can continue in equilibrium. Even moments of the highest happiness, whatever we consider this is, pass away and give place to different ones. So even happiness which is impermanent based on pleasant feelings is really dukkha, for how can the true unchanging happiness be found in the unstable? Thus the picture shows a man with his eyes pierced by arrows, a strong enough illustration of this.

When feelings arise, cravings are (usually) produced.

Eighth Link: Craving (*taṇhā*)

Up to this point, the succession of events has been determined by past kamma. Craving, however, leads to the making of new kamma in the present and it is possible now, and only now, to practise Dhamma. What is needed here is mindfulness (*sati*), for without it no Dhamma at all can be practised while one will be swept away by the force of past habits, and let craving and unknowing increase themselves within one's heart. When one does have mindfulness, one may and can know "this is pleasant feeling," "this is unpleasant feeling," "this is neither pleasant nor unpleasant

feeling”—and such contemplation of feelings leads one to understand and beware of greed, aversion and delusion, which are respectively associated with the three feelings. With this knowledge one can break out of the Wheel of Birth and Death. But without this Dhamma-practise it is certain that feelings will lead on to more cravings and whirl one around this wheel full of dukkha. As Ācārya Nāgārjuna has said:

“Desires have only surface sweetness,
hardness within and bitterness—
deceptive as the *kimpa*-fruit.
Thus says the King of Conquerors.
Such links renounce—they bind the world
Within saṃsāra’s prison grid.
If your head or dress caught fire
in haste you would extinguish it,
Do likewise with desire—
Which whirls the wheel of wandering-on
and is the root of suffering.
No better thing to do!”

— L.K. 23, 104

In Sanskrit, the word *tr̥ṣṇā* (*tan̥hā*) means thirst, and by extension implies “thirst for experience.” For this reason, craving is shown as a toper guzzling intoxicants and in my picture I have added three bottles—craving for sensual sphere existence and the craving for the higher heavens of

the Brahma-worlds which are either of subtle form, or formless.

Where the kamma of further craving is produced, there arises Grasping.

Ninth Link: Grasping (upādāna)

This is an intensification and diversification of craving which is directed to four ends: sensual pleasures, views which lead astray from Dhamma, external religious rites and vows, and attachment to the view of soul or self as being permanent. When these become strong in people they cannot even become interested in Dhamma, for their efforts are directed away from Dhamma and towards dukkha. The common reaction is to redouble efforts to find peace and happiness among the objects which are grasped at. Hence both pictures show a man reaching up to pick more fruit although his basket is full already.

Where this grasping is found, there Becoming is to be seen.

Tenth Link: Becoming (bhava)

With hearts boiling with craving and grasping, people ensure for themselves more and more of various sorts of life, and pile up the fuel upon the fire of dukkha. The ordinary person, not knowing about dukkha, wants to stoke up the blaze, but the Buddhist way of doing things is to let the fires go out for want of fuel by stopping the process of craving and grasping and thus cutting off Unknowing at its root. If we want to stay in saṃsāra we must be diligent and

see that our *becoming*, which is happening all the time shaped by our kamma, is *becoming* in the right direction. This means *becoming* in the direction of purity and following the white path of Dhamma-practise. This will contribute to whatever we become, or do not become, at the end of this life when the pathways to the various realms stand open and we *become* according to our practise and to our death-consciousness.

Appropriately, *Becoming* is illustrated by a pregnant woman. In the presence of *Becoming* there is arising in a new birth.

Eleventh Link: Birth (jāti)

Birth, as one might expect, is shown as a mother in the process of childbirth, a painful business and a reminder of how dukkha cannot be avoided in any life. Whatever the future life is to be, if we are not able to bring the wheel to a stop in this life, certainly that future will arise conditioned by the kamma made in this life. But it is no use thinking that since there are going to be future births, one may as well put off Dhamma practise until then—for it is not sure what those future births will be like. And when they come around, they are just the present moment as well. So no use waiting! Ācārya Nāgārjuna shows that it is better to extricate oneself:

“Where birth takes place, quite naturally
are fear, old age and misery,
disease, desire and death,

As well a mass of other ills.
When birth's no longer brought about
All the links are ever stopped."

— L.K. 111

Naturally where there is Birth, is also Old-age and Death.

Twelfth Link: Old-age and death (jarā-maraṇa)

In future one is assured, given enough of Unknowing and Craving, of lives without end but also of deaths without end. The one appeals to greed but the other arouses aversion. One without the other is impossible. But this is the path of heedlessness. The Dhamma-path leads directly to Deathlessness, the going beyond birth and death, beyond all dukkha.

The Tibetan picture shows an old man carrying off a bundled-up corpse upon his back, taking it away to some charnel-field. My picture has an old man gazing at a coffin enclosing a corpse. We are well exhorted by the words of Ācārya Nāgārjuna:

"Do you therefore exert yourself:
At all times try to penetrate
into the heart of these Four Truths;
For even those who dwell at home,
they will, by understanding them
ford the river of [mental] floods."

— L.K. 115

This is a very brief outline of the workings of this wheel which we cling to for our own harm and the hurt of others. We are the makers of this wheel and the turners of this wheel, but if we wish it and work for it, we are the ones who can stop this wheel.

The Monster

Both pictures show the wheel as being in the grip of a fearful monster. In my drawing the monster's name is engraved upon his crown so that people should not think of him as a common demon. He is no such thing, for his name is Impermanence and his crown shows his authority over all worlds whatever. He devours them and they are all, heavens and hells together, securely held in the grasp of his taloned hands. The crown upon his head is adorned with five skulls, representing the impermanence of the five groups or aggregates comprising the person. His eyes, ears, nose, and mouth have flames about them, an illustration of the Exalted One's Third Discourse in which He says: "The eye is afire..." and so on. Above the monster's two eyes, there is a third one meaning that while for the fool impermanence is his enemy, for the wise man it helps him to Enlightenment. Although the monster has adorned himself with earrings and the like he fails to look attractive—in the same way, this world puts on an outer show of beauty but its beauty fades when examined more carefully.

Below the painting of the wheel, some Tibetan examples show parts of a tiger skin adorning the monster, a symbol of

fearfulness. In my drawing I show the monster's tail which has no beginning, looping back and forth. In the same way, we have been born, lived and then died countless times in the whirl of saṃsāra. Sometimes our deeds were mostly good and sometimes mostly bad, and we have reaped the fruit of it all.

Some other features

The whole wheel glows with heat and is surrounded by flames burning with the fires of greed, aversion and delusion as the Exalted One has repeated many times in his discourses.

In the upper right corner of both pictures stands the Exalted Buddha shown crossed over to the Further Shore, meaning Nibbāna. The Tibetan picture shows him pointing out the moon upon which is drawn a hare, the symbol of renunciation, the way to practise Dhamma, and the way out of this wheel. **[11]** In my picture, he indicates with his hand the nature of saṃsāra and warns us to beware. He is adorned with a radiance about him symbolising the spiritual freedom and majestic wisdom won by him which can be described in many ways but is finally beyond the limitations of everything known to us.

The Tibetan picture shows in the upper left, a drawing of Avalokiteśvara, **[12]** the embodiment of compassion, as the way and the goal for those who follow the bodhisattva-path. My picture has the Path of Dhamma of eight lotuses leading to the wheel of Dhamma. The eight lotuses are the eight

factors of the Noble Path, the first two—Right View, Right Attitude—being the wisdom-section; the next three—Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood—being the morality section; and the last three—Right Effort, Right Mindfulness and Right Collectedness—being the section of collectedness or meditation. The Wheel of Dhamma has at its centre *suññata*, the Void, another name for the experience of Nibbāna in later Buddhist traditions. Around its hub are the ten petals of a lotus, representing the ten perfecting qualities (*pāramī*) which are necessary for complete attainment: generosity, moral conduct, renunciation, wisdom, determination, energy, patience, truthfulness, loving kindness and equanimity. Eight spokes radiate from the hub, which stand for the practise by the Arahant, the one perfected, of the Eightfold Path when each factor, instead of being just right, becomes perfect. On the inside of the wheel's nave there are 37 jewels symbolising the thirty-seven factors of Enlightenment, while the outer edge of the nave is adorned with four groups of three jewels showing the Four Noble Truths in each of the three ways wherein they were viewed by the Exalted Buddha when he discovered Enlightenment. [13]

Conclusion

This picture teaches us and reminds us of many important features of the Dhamma as it was intended to be by the teachers of old. Contemplating all its features frequently helps to give us true insight into the nature of saṃsāra. With its help and our own practise we come to see Dependent Arising in ourselves. When this has been done thoroughly all the riches of Dhamma will be available to us, not from books or discussions, nor from listening to others' explanations...

The Exalted Buddha has said:

“Whoever sees Dependent Arising, he sees Dhamma;
Whoever sees Dhamma, he sees Dependent Arising.”

* * *

*Aniccā vata saṅkhārā
uppāda-vayadhammino
Uppajjitvā nirujjhanti
tesaṃ vūpasamo sukho.*

Conditions truly they are transient
With the nature to arise and cease

Having arisen, then they pass away
Their calming, cessation is happiness.

Notes

1. See **Wheel No. 34/35**: “The Four Noble Truths.”
2. One of the eighteen branches of extinct Hinayana.
3. The familiar Pāli forms of names are used throughout.
4. These have not been shown in the accompanying drawing and neither does modern Tibetan tradition represent them. They are, respectively the eastern western, northern and southern continents of the old Indian geography.
5. In modern representations a cock is always shown.
6. Translation by Ven. Pāsādiko from the opening paragraphs of the *Sahasodgata Avadāna*, *Divyāvadāna* 21, Mithila Edition, page 185 ff.
7. *Dasa-kusala-kamma-patha*.
8. *Dasa-puñña-kiriya-vatthu*.
9. “The Letter of Kindheartedness” by Ācārya Nāgārjuna, in *Wisdom Gone Beyond*, Social Service Association Press of Thailand, Phya Thai Road, Bangkok, Siam.)
10. See *Sixty Songs of Milarepa*, **Wheel No. 95/97**.
11. Not included in the reproduction given here.

12. Not included in the reproduction given here.
13. See **Wheel No. 17**: “Three Cardinal Discourses” p. 7f.

Plates

Plate I

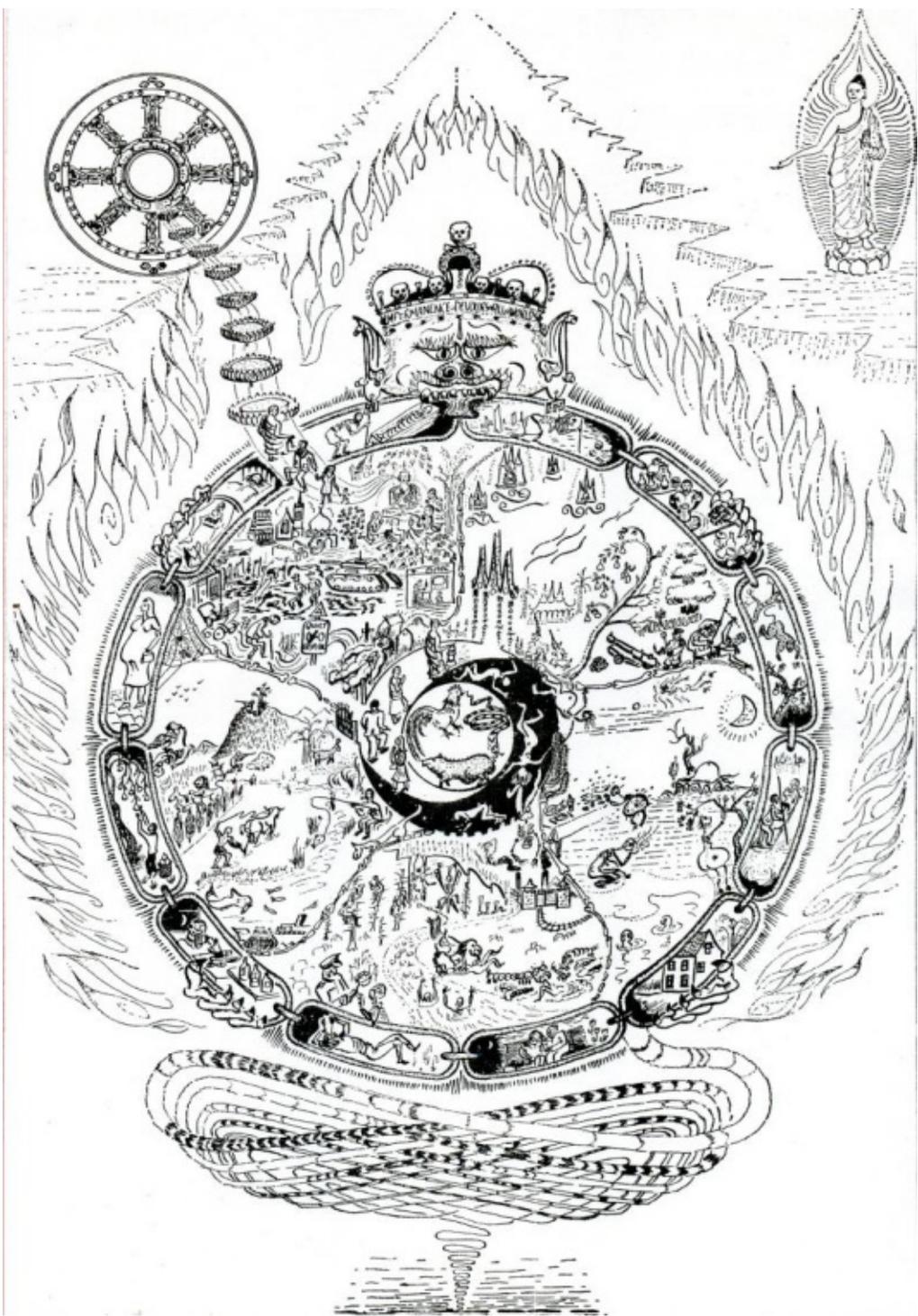
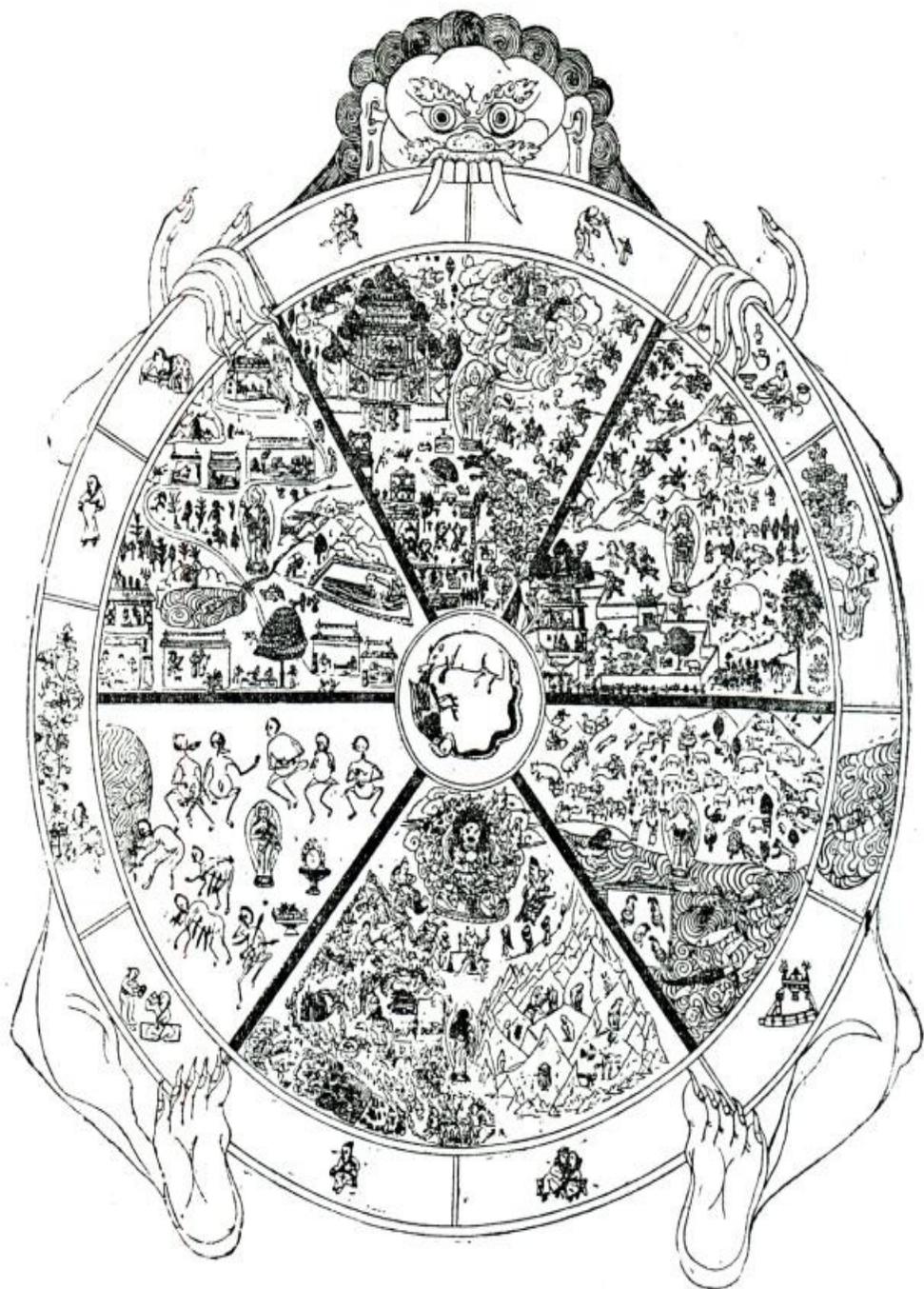


Plate II



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