

TWELVE LINKS OF INTERDEPENDENT ORIGINATION

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Bhikshus, whoever sees dependent arising sees phenomena. Whoever sees phenomena sees the Buddha.

Due to the existence of this, that arises.

Due to the production of this, that is produced.

It is thus:

Due to ignorance there are compositional actions;

Due to compositional actions there is consciousness;

Due to consciousness there are name and form;

Due to name and form there are six sense sources;

Due to six sense sources there is contact;

Due to contact there is feeling;

Due to feeling there is attachment;

Due to attachment there is grasping;

Due to grasping there is existence;

Due to existence there is birth;

Due to birth there are aging and death;

Due to aging and death there are sorrow,

And grief, suffering, unhappiness and conflict will all arise.

Thus the great suffering of the aggregates is produced.

HISTORY OF THE WHEEL OF LIFE DRAWING

The Wheel of Life drawing originated as a pictorial teaching aid. Buddha Shakyamuni had the Wheel of Life drawn near the door on the wall of the Buddhist temples. He instructed that a monk should always be close by the door to explain the drawings to pilgrims. Often the Wheel of Life is depicted on both sides of Buddhist temple doors; so that many people can see it and learn its meaning. Buddha instructed that the message "**People should exert effort to free themselves from this cycle.**" should be written below the drawing.

The Wheel of Life in "tanka" (painting that can be rolled up) form also originated during Buddha's life. There were two kings that often exchanged presents. One lived in the central part of India and one in a distant place. The latter gave the former a very precious suit of armor as a gift. The former was very pleased and could think of no gift which was more precious to give in return. His main minister suggested that he send an image of Shakyamuni Buddha. The king asked permission from Shakyamuni Buddha and the Buddha agreed saying that the painting should also include a depiction of the Wheel of Life. The king from the central land had the painting done and sent to the distant king, who was very pleased to receive it. He instantly became delighted by the picture of the Buddha and asked many questions about the Wheel of Life. It is said that he attained enlightenment through the help of the painting.

SYMBOLISM OF THE WHEEL OF LIFE

CENTER

The three poisonous attitudes, or root afflictions, are symbolized by; a pig which stands for ignorance, a snake which stands for hatred, and a type of pigeon that stands for attachment. This shows that all our karmic actions are based on these three attitudes. Some modern paintings show a rooster instead of this particular type of pigeon from India, but it should be this particular kind of bird. Also many modern paintings show the tails of each animal in the mouth of the animal behind it, thus making a perfect circle, but in fact the tails of the snake and the bird should both be in the mouth of the pig, symbolizing that ignorance is the root of attachment and hatred.

SECOND CIRCLE

This ring around the inner circle is normally depicted as half white and half black. The beings in the black half are depicted in a suffering state being forced downwards to rebirth in the three lower realms due to their negative karmic actions. The beings in the white half are depicted in a happy state being lead upwards to rebirth in the three upper realms due to their positive actions.

THIRD CIRCLE

This is normally divided into five or six sections, depending on whether or not the anti-gods and gods are depicted in separate sections. Earlier versions had only five sections, but now one normally sees six. These sections show examples of the lives of various beings in the hell, hungry spirit, animal, human, anti-god, and god realms.

OUTER CIRCLE

This depicts graphically the twelve links of interdependent origination that make up the Wheel of Life:

1. Ignorance

A blind man with a cane. Just as a person with no eyes depends upon something else to find his way, ignorance obscures our minds and we need to depend on something in order to obtain liberation.

In the twelve links ignorance is described as the wrong consciousness that conceives the opposite of how things actually exist.

2. Karmic Formations

A potter making pots of many shapes. Karmic formations can lead to many different types of aggregates within the six realms depending on our deeds. In dependence upon ignorance karmic formations or compositional actions bring about our rebirth into the various realms.

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3. Consciousness

A monkey in a tree or a monkey going from tree to tree. Just as the branches of the tree support the monkey, the consciousness acts as a basis upon which the karmic imprints are held until they give rise to their result. The monkey going from tree to tree symbolizes the consciousness going from life to life.

Karmic formations leave an imprint on the causal consciousness that ripens at the death time throwing us into the next life leading to the very first moment of the next life which is called the effect consciousness

4. Name and Form

A man in a boat. This symbolises the 5 aggregates (body/mind). The effect consciousness joined to the form of the next life.

5. Six Sense Organs.

A house with six windows. This refers to the development of the basis that the six consciousnesses need in order to function.

6. Contact

The contact of a man and a woman. A consciousness that distinguishes objects as pleasurable, painful, or neutral upon the coming together of object, consciousness, and sense organ.

7. Feeling

A man with an arrow in his eye. Feeling is a mental factor that experiences pleasure, pain, or a neutral feeling upon the object having been distinguished as pleasure, pain, or a neutral feeling by contact. Pleasurable feelings generate a strong desire for more and pain generates a strong desire for avoidance.

8. Craving.

A man drinking wine. A type of desire, a mental factor that increases desire but is not satisfied.

9. Grasping

A monkey holding an uneaten fruit but still reaching for more fruit. A stronger desire than Craving. One generates Craving to stay with pleasurable objects and to separate from painful objects, when this is produced over and over again and develops strongly, this is Grasping.

10. Becoming

A pregnant woman about to give birth. Sometimes called Existence, this is the ripening of the seed of the second link by the eighth and ninth links to the moment before it brings the next life.

11. Rebirth

A woman giving birth. The moment of birth.

12. Old age and death.

A corpse being carried on someone's back. This takes place from the moment after birth until death.

The entire Wheel of Life is held in the jaws of the Lord of Death while being grasped by his hands and feet. This signifies that beings are controlled by death, by their own karma and delusions. Wherever one is born within the wheel one has to experience suffering and death.

Outside the Wheel of Life, usually in the upper right corner, is an image of the Buddha. This indicates that he has gone beyond the Wheel of Life. The full moon on the upper left corner symbolising Liberation. Buddha is pointing to the full moon, indicating; "Such is Liberation, one should attain this goal" which also may be found on some tangkas in some written form.

HOW A PARTICULAR SET OF TWELVE LINKS WORKS

Nagarjuna said:

"Two deluded actions [2,10] arise from three deluded causes [1,8,9], seven uncontrolled results [3,4,5,6,7,11,12] arise from the two deluded actions. Again three deluded causes arise from these seven results. Such a Wheel of life goes around and around."

1. Ignorance
2. Karmic Formations
3. Consciousness
4. Name and Form
5. Six Sense Bases
6. Contact
7. Feeling
8. Craving
9. Grasping
10. Becoming
11. Rebirth
12. Old age and death.

This quote from Nagarjuna means that from **Ignorance (1)** arises **Karmic Formations (2)**. Out of ignorance we create many unskilful actions with attachment and aversion. This lays the karmic imprint, the potential for other rebirths in one of the six realms on our consciousness.

At the time of death, **Becoming (10)** which is the ripening of the imprint to bring the next rebirth, arises out of **Craving (8)** and **Grasping (9)**.

This brings the next life **Consciousness (3)** at the moment of conception of the next life, **Name and Form (4)**, **Six Sense Bases (5)**, **Contact (6)**, and **Feeling (7)**, refer to stages of development in the womb. **Rebirth (11)** refers to birth. **Old Age and Death (12)** are from the second moment after birth until death is completed. In the 12 Links we are experiencing now, all that is left to complete or experience is **Old Age and Death**.

The way to cut the Twelve Links entirely is by severing the **Ignorance** link. If there is no ignorance there can arise no **Karmic Formations**, etc. At that point one becomes an Arya and no longer creates **Karmic Formations**. This is done by the direct realization of Emptiness.

The way to control the way that the Wheel turns is by controlling the **Karmic Formations** link. Not only is it necessary to follow karma, that is, avoid negative actions and practice positive actions, in order to have the necessary basis for realizing emptiness, but also if one doesn't attain that arya state in this life, then at least one will be thrown into the next life by positive rather than negative karma and have some chance to continue on the path. A very important thing to be aware of is that the number of new sets of Twelve Links we create is enormous. We are constantly experiencing feelings and constantly creating karma in relation to them.