THE WHEEL OF LIFE
The Cycle of Rebirth in Buddhism

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The Wheel of Life assumes great significance in Buddhist teachings. Its importance can be judged by the fact that a picture of the Wheel of Life is to be seen on the wall of all monasteries in the regions of the Buddhist Himalayas. The tradition of depicting the wheel of life in wall-paintings goes back as early as the Ajanta caves themselves. The obvious purpose of putting up the wheel of life on public entrances was to acquaint and educate the people about the theory of the endless process of reincarnation in Buddhism. The important thing shown in it is the cause of recurring life and once the cause is ascertained, it becomes easier for one to understand its remedy - a complete cessation of birth and suffering. Emancipation from the shackles of life and death is the primary aim of Buddha’s teachings.

At any monastery, on the entrance gate, the first scene one's eyes capture is the wheel of life. A dreadful form, Yama "The Lord of Death", holds our entire existence in the firm grip of his jaws. This Lord of Death is the embodiment of impermanence. This wheel has three rings of lines: outer, middle and innermost. A pig, a cock, and a serpent, symbolizing ignorance or stupidity, animal desire and violent anger are shown within the innermost circle. The Buddhist concept of six realms of:- heaven or gods (lha), titans or demi-gods (lha.mir), animals (dud.'gro), hell (dmyal.ba) hungry-ghosts (yi.dwags), and humans (mi), are shown in the middle ring. Reincarnation may return us to any one of these realms, depending on our behaviour; one should endeavour to return as a human, for only thus can one hope for enlightenment and release from the wheel.

The greatest contribution of the Buddha is His invention of the Law of Causation known as Dependent Origination. The function of this law is expressed through the chain of twelve factors. These factors are shown in the outer circle of the ring. Although separate elements, these twelve factors are linked by the law of causation. Any one factor of this chain of twelve factors is inevitably caused by the factor preceding it, and itself becomes the cause of the factors that follow.

1. **Beginningless Ignorance** is the first factor in the chain of 12 members of the wheel of life. As one sees, ignorance is represented by a blind woman. Due to her blindness she sees all as darkness; such is the state of ignorance which can not make any
distinction between what is desirable and what is not desirable, or what is meritorious and what is not meritorious. From ignorance grows the negative emotions like lust, anger, selfishness etc. And as long as ignorance exists, suffering continues to exist, giving birth to volition.

2. From ignorance arise emotional Karmic constructions, the 2nd factor in the chain of twelve factors. Karma is represented by a potter. He always keeps himself busy by molding clay pots, implying that every ordinary being keeps himself busy in the accumulation of various habitual reactions. A seed starts germinating as soon as necessary conditions are fulfilled with. In the same manner Karma works in creating a new life in the future.

3. Karmic constructions give rise to Consciousness. As one lamp lights another lamp, in the same manner one period of a consciousness is linked to another, thus creating a new-life. Such a re-incarnating consciousness is represented by a monkey. As a monkey leaps from one tree to another, the previous consciousness passes from its former position to a new position, and new life begins in the mother's womb.

4. Consciousness gives rise to Name and Form, the 4th factor in the wheel of life. This is represented by a raft or ship. In fact, name and form arise simultaneously with consciousness. Like a ship which travels from one shore to another shore, so mind and matter (name and form) also move from one life to the next.

5. Name and form give rise to the Six Organs of Sense, the 5th factor of the chain of twelve members. Sense organs are represented by an empty house, signifying their undeveloped state in the embryo.

6. Due to the sense organs Human Contacts arise, with a combination of objects, organs and movement. It is an awakening state, causing sense activities or sensory feelings.

7. This acute sensation gives rise to Feeling. The intensity of feeling is as acute as the piercing of an arrow to the eyes, the most sensitive part of a body. Feelings are of various kinds — both happiness and unhappiness. It is feeling that creates desire.

8. Desire is conditioned by feeling. Desire is a lust for desirable objects. Thus desire is represented by a drunkard. It is a cause affected by other factors too, just as a seed is stirred by moisture and manure etc.; in the same way desire leads to actual grasping of objects. Ignorance and desire are the two main causes and while the former is responsible for creating the present life, the latter creates future life.

9. Desire leads to Grasping. It is represented by a man
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grasping a fruit. Desire is represented by feeling a fruit, but grasping
is the actual handling of the fruit. Grasping also creates false views
like 'my' and 'mine'.

10. The feeling of 'my and 'mine' gives rise to Becoming,
that is desire for existence. Desire for existence is represented by a
courting couple. The couple is in the process of accumulating more
desire for existence in the present life.

11. Due to becoming, physical Re-birth takes place in the
world. Such birth is represented by the conception of a baby.

12. Due to birth, Old age, death, disease etc. follow. In
reality, death commences in the embryo and thus birth and death are
simultaneous in Buddhist metaphysics. Such is the working of the
wheel of life which revolves endlessly round and round.

References
3. The Buddha and His teaching by Narada Maha Thara, p.240.

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The twelve factors (nidanās) of conditioned causation
(pratītyasamutpāda)

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Note. I am indebted to John Crook for the table above, which supplements the text.
There is a more detailed account by Zara Fleming in The Middle Way, 66, 4. p.223
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