

# The Wheel of Life

Pali: Bhāvacakra ("Endless Circle of Becoming")

The Wheel visually represents the core teachings of the Buddha. It is a guide to how being alive works, and how to live with greater ease and freedom.

## The Three Fires

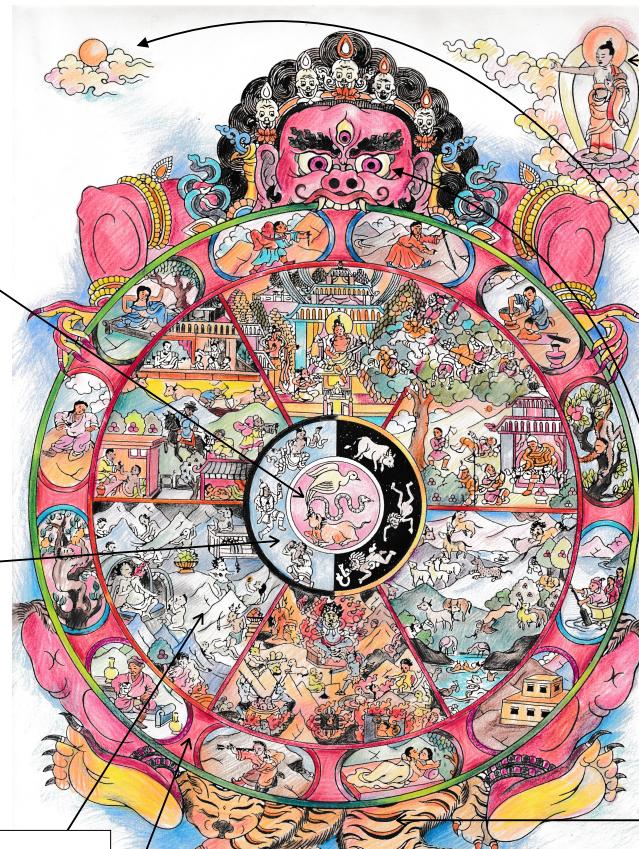
The fires that drive our existence are **desire**, **aversion**, and **ignorance** - wanting, not-wanting, and not-knowing - symbolized by a bird, a snake and a pig. The bird and snake emerge from the mouth of the pig because desire and aversion arise from ignorance.

They are also known as the **Three Poisons**.



## Karma

Karma literally means **action**. Driven by the Three Fires, beings take actions that direct them into the **Six Realms of Existence**. The actions we take tend to direct us into the corresponding Realm. Note the distinction between light and dark, good and bad actions.

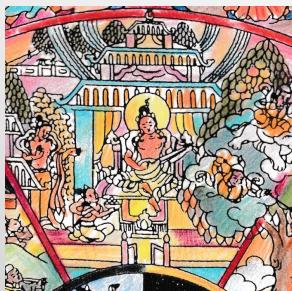


**The Six Realms of Existence** are our stories about who we are, including our **emotions**. We tend to wander the same paths over and over, but we can transform each Realm by applying the **paramitas** (heroic practices). ↓

## The Twelve Links of Dependent Arising

explain in detail how our experience arises in each moment. Each link depends on the previous link, in an endless circle.

The Links are explained on the next page. →



### The Six Realms of Existence

## Heaven Realm

Emotions: Bliss, comfort, ease, joy.

Heaven is where things are going well. The problem is, it doesn't last. And because everything is so pleasant, the beings who dwell there become complacent, and lack compassion.

Problem: Denial of anything unsettling or disruptive.  
Practice: Wisdom. Study impermanence.



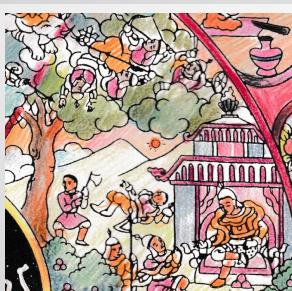
### The Six Realms of Existence

## Hell Realm

Emotion: Anger, fear, grief, frustration, depression.

Intense unpleasantness. But it can also be a "boot camp," to learn some things you probably didn't want to know.

Problem: Hard to believe the suffering will ever stop.  
Practice: Patience/Tolerance: suffering is impermanent. Also Mettā (loving-kindness, or boundless friendliness): recognizing that no one wants to feel this way, can be transformational.



### The Six Realms of Existence

## Titan Realm

Emotions: Envy, ambition, alertness, insecurity.

The jealous and competitive Titans struggle to enter Heaven. We need some of this energy to overcome obstacles; but too much of it creates divisions between self and other.

Problem: Need for dominance leads to problems.  
Practice: Ethics. Follow the Precepts.



### The Six Realms of Existence

## Ghost Realm

Emotion: Craving, longing, addiction, dissatisfaction.

Here, we long for things that we can't have, or things that will not satisfy us even if we have them. It's the irrational shadow of the Titan Realm.

Problem: Thinking that objects will satisfy us.  
Practice: Generosity. Giving leads to gratitude. Contemplate interdependence.



### The Six Realms of Existence

## Human Realm

Emotions: Compassion, curiosity, uncertainty, doubt.

Here we experience a balance of struggle and joy, and we try to understand it all. Here we can develop both knowledge and compassion. It's the best place to achieve liberation.

Problem: We are usually too busy... and then we die.  
Practice: Meditation. Pay attention.



### The Six Realms of Existence

## Animal Realm

Emotion: Passion, anticipation, confusion.

Here the focus is on survival. We don't think much, and follow simple habits to pursue pleasure and avoid pain. We may be on "autopilot"... but at least we don't overthink things.

Problem: We don't know much, and aren't curious.  
Practice: Knowledge. Balance passion with study.

**The Buddha (Awakened One)** points the way to the **dharma**, or **truth**. He is outside the Wheel because he is no longer bound by habit patterns; he has achieved liberation. But he's ready to jump back in at any time to help out.

**The Moon** represents **dharma**: the truth, or law of the universe. To some it represents **nirvana** or **liberation**, but in Zen Buddhism we say "nirvana is samsara": liberation is found on the Wheel itself.

A Buddha appears each Realm, in a guise that the inhabitants can accept. This indicates that liberation can be found *right here and now*.

**Yama** is a deity who represents **impermanence**, the reality that everything changes.

The five skulls, which are on fire, represent the **Five Aggregates** that comprise our experience. His third eye represents the wisdom to see and accept impermanence.

**The sleeping tiger** represents fear of impermanence. To deal with the Wheel of Life, we need to awaken the tiger. We must manifest **virya paramita** (**energy or courage**) and face our experiences in the Six Realms as directly as we can. Impermanence is what drives the universe; it is not to be feared.



# The Twelve Links of Dependent Arising

This guide to the Twelve Links of Dependent Arising, by Kikan, is a synthesis of several sources, especially talks by Dharma scholar John Peacock (e.g. [dharmaseed.org/teacher/91/talk/9768/](http://dharmaseed.org/teacher/91/talk/9768/)), and the book "How Emotions Are Made" by Lisa Feldman Barrett.



## The Twelve Links of Dependent Arising 1. Ignorance

Pali: Avijja: not-knowing, ignoring.  
Image: A blind person wandering.

We have a tendency to *not want to know* about impermanence and interdependence. We want things to be solid and separate.

Ignorance is related to the First Ennobling Truth. In a sense, the universe supports a tendency to exist.



## The Twelve Links of Dependent Arising 7. Feeling

Pali: Vedanā  
Image: An arrow to the eye.

**Feeling** or **sensation** arises in response to Contact. Feeling is simple and direct: it is positive, negative or neutral. It is not yet an emotion.

In Western psychology, this quality of feeling is called *valence*.



## The Twelve Links of Dependent Arising 2. Formations

Pali: Saṅkhāra  
Image: A potter shaping a vessel.

Formations are our concepts, views, habits, and emotional tendencies. They are stored in our body and brain. We are constantly reshaping them.

We are taught many formations by our parents and our society. A few are "built in" by nature.



## The Twelve Links of Dependent Arising 8. Craving

Pali: Taṇhā (an unquenchable thirst)  
Image: A person wanting a drink.

In response to Feeling, wanting or not-wanting (**desire** or **aversion**) arise. This is natural; it can't be avoided. But it may be moderated through practice.

The Second Ennobling Truth is that the cause of dukkha (unsatisfactoriness) is taṇhā (Craving).



## The Twelve Links of Dependent Arising 3. Consciousness

Pali: Viññāna  
Image: A monkey jumping from branch to branch.

The Buddha described consciousness as "like a monkey jumping from branch to branch." This is our brain working. Our Formations (2) are like the branches. Our **emotions** (11) direct the monkey to different parts of the "tree".



## The Twelve Links of Dependent Arising 9. Grasping

Pali: Upādāna  
Image: A monkey grasping a fruit.

Here, our sense of **self** arises, to guide us from "what we have" to "what we want to have." If we grasp our thoughts and feelings less tightly, our minds can move more freely, and new possibilities arise. *This is a key practice point.*



## The Twelve Links of Dependent Arising 4. Name and Form

Pali: Nāmarūpa  
Image: Two people in a boat. (Three, in this version.)

Based on Formations and Consciousness, our mind looks for patterns or **essences** of objects.

It may seem strange that Name and Form (4) comes before Contact (6), but recent scientific research tells us this is actually how the brain works, in a process called simulation, or construction.



## The Twelve Links of Dependent Arising 10. Becoming

Pali: Bhava  
Image: A person moving or jumping, or pregnancy.

Based on our sense of self, we **take action**. This might be movement, speech, body language, or thought. Life is complicated, but good actions tend to lead to good results, bad actions to bad results. This is **karma**.



## The Twelve Links of Dependent Arising 5. Sense Fields

Pali: Saḷāyatana  
Image: A building with six windows.

Our five senses plus mind receive information. The amount of it would be overwhelming; but our brains reduce it to Name and Form, or 'essences'.

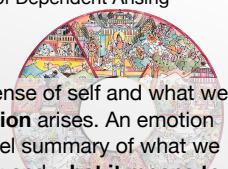
Science says this includes sensations of the body itself, such as hunger. This is called interoception.



## The Twelve Links of Dependent Arising 11. Birth

Pali: Jāti

Based on our sense of self and what we are doing, **emotion** arises. An emotion is like a high-level summary of what we are experiencing and **what it means to us**. In the next cycle of arising, this story about our self continues on, affecting all of the Links.



## The Twelve Links of Dependent Arising 6. Contact

Pali: Phassa  
Image: Two people kissing.

When our brains match Name and Form to incoming Sense Field information, we have Contact. We **perceive a sense object**: a sight, sound, smell, touch, taste, thought, or body sensation.



## The Twelve Links of Dependent Arising 12. Aging and Death

Pali: Jarāmarana  
Image: A person wandering in the mountains.

Everything changes and fades away; this gives the opportunity for new things to arise. Awareness of **impermanence** leads to compassion, which can lead us to liberation.



Return to step 1!