

tributes the fall to pride and disobedience, while Buddhism attributes it to craving and desire.

The Six Realms of Rebirth

Within any given world–system there exist qualitatively different modes of existence, some more pleasant than others. The sources commonly speak of six domains or “realms” into which an



The bhavacakra or ‘wheel of life’ depicted in a Tibetan thangka.

individual can be reborn. Some of these realms are visible to us here and now, while others are not. The ones we can see are the human and animal realms, and the ones we cannot see are those of the gods, the asuras (explained below), and hell. On the borderline is the realm of the ghosts, beings who hover on the fringes of the human world and who are occasionally glimpsed as they flit among the shadows. As the wheel of samsāra moves around, beings migrate through the various realms of rebirth in accordance with their karma, or the good and evil deeds committed in each life. The scheme of the six realms is commonly depicted in the form of a wheel known as the “[wheel of life](#)” (bhavacakra), which sets out the relative position of each of the six domains.

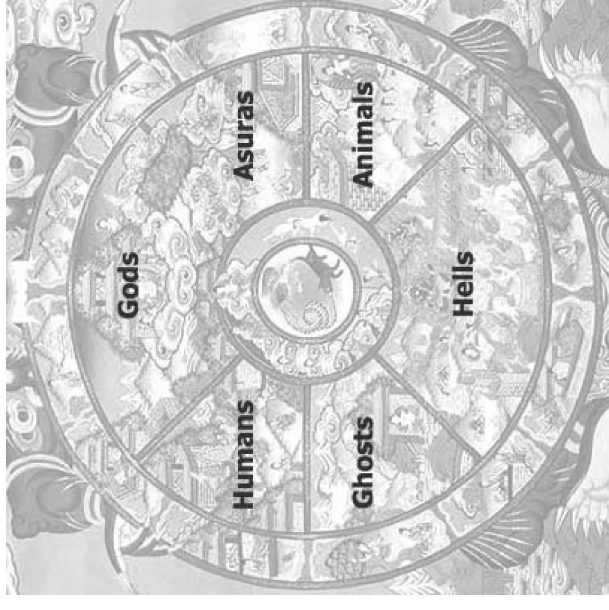


Diagram showing the six realms of rebirth depicted in the wheel of life

If we look at the circular diagram of the wheel of life, we see three realms below the line and three

above. This simple division reflects a qualitative difference in that the three realms below the middle line (hell, the ghosts, and animals) are unfortunate places to be reborn, while those above the line (heaven, the asuras, and the human world) are more pleasant. The wheel of life is often depicted in Tibetan thangkas or wall hangings, like the one shown above. The wheel is a symbolic representation of the process of cyclic rebirth or *samsāra*, and shows the six realms of rebirth in the grasp of the demon Yama, the Lord of Death (also known as *Māra* and by other names). The skulls in Yama's headdress show that he represents death, time and impermanence. On some accounts the wheel represents a mirror held up by Yama to a dying person revealing the various possibilities for the next rebirth open to them.

At the very center of the wheel are shown three animals: a cock, a pig and a snake, which represent the “three poisons” of greed, hatred and delusion. It is these forces that create bad karma and fuel the endless cycle of rebirth. Placing these mental forces at the centre of the diagram reveals the important place that Buddhism accords to psychology and the profound influence it has on our experience of the world by causing us to be reborn in one realm or another. The close connection between psychology and cosmology is also seen in meditative theory, where the various levels of trance (*dhyāna*) are classified in the manner of physical planes in the scheme of thirty-one levels explained below.

Most schools of Buddhism believe that the transition from one realm to another at death is instantaneous (one authority compares it to someone swinging across a river on a rope tied to the branch of a tree). Some Buddhist schools, however, notably those in Tibet, believe there is an intermediate state known as the *barido* which

acts as a buffer between lives and in which the spirit of the deceased person remains for up to forty-nine days before being reborn. During this time the spirit glimpses all six realms of rebirth before being attracted—as if by magnetism—to the one most in keeping with its karmic state.

Perhaps the view of the world just described seems alien and strange, but the notion of the cosmos having various realms or divisions is not unfamiliar in the West. Traditional Christian teachings depict God dwelling at the summit of his creation surrounded by angels and saints, while Satan inhabits an infernal region beneath our feet. Human beings are somewhere in between, poised, so to speak, between two eternal destinies. Traditional teachings also speak of a fourth domain—purgatory—existing as a temporary abode for departed souls undergoing purification in order to be worthy to enter heaven. This gives us a total of four possible states or modes of existence, all of which are found in the Buddhist scheme. To these four Buddhism adds another by subdividing the world we now inhabit into separate domains for animals and humans. It then adds a final one, namely the domain of the asuras mentioned above. These are figures from Indian mythology who did battle with the gods as part of an eternal struggle between good and evil. In Buddhist teachings they are depicted as warlike demons consumed by hatred and a lust for power who cannot refrain from expressing their violent impulses in a futile struggle for a victory they never achieve. Instead, their conduct reveals that hatred breeds only hatred, and one battle leads simply to the next. However, as noted, the asuras are not of great importance in this scheme of things and are omitted in the earliest descriptions, which speak only of five

realms (it is not impossible that they were added to the scheme simply to balance the circle).

There are also some important differences to the Christian conception of the cosmos. The most notable is that in the Buddhist scheme no-one is condemned to abide permanently in any given realm. Hell is not a place of permanent damnation, and heaven is not a place of eternal happiness. The wheel revolves continuously, and individuals may move repeatedly in and out of any of the six destinations or “gatis,” as they are known. In this respect the Buddhist hell is more like the Christian concept of purgatory. The second difference is that the **Buddhist hell** is more varied, and is thought to have cold as well as hot areas in which the departed spirits suffer until their evil karma is purged.

The world of the ghosts is a realm of suffering of a special kind. The denizens of this realm are pictured as beings who were selfish and greedy in their previous life and who are now suffering the consequences by being denied the ability to enjoy the pleasures they crave. In popular art they are depicted with swollen stomachs and tiny mouths through which they can never pass enough food to satisfy their constant hunger. Generosity (dāna) is highly valued in Buddhism, and the greedy seem to merit a special punishment all of their own. These sad wraiths live in the shadows of the human realm, coming out at night to consume the food left out for them as offerings by pious layfolk.

The last of the three unfortunate realms is that of the animals. Rebirth in animal form involves physical suffering due to being hunted both by humans and other predators, as well as the inability to reason and to understand the cause of their predicament. Driven mainly by instincts they cannot control, and without a language capable of communicating the subtleties of Buddhist teachings, animals can only hope for an existence

relatively free from pain and to be born in a better condition in the next life. Buddhist folk-tales depict animals as being capable of virtuous behaviour to some degree, and modern studies also suggest that the higher mammals are capable of altruistic behaviour, but for the most part animals are limited in their capacity for autonomous moral choices. Although there is no dogma on this point Buddhism seems to envisage the realm of animal rebirth as limited to mammals, which means that contrary to popular belief you are unlikely to come back as an ant. The Jātakas—a collection of stories about the Buddha’s previous lives—depict the Buddha at various times as having been a deer (no.12), a monkey (no.20), a dog (no.22), a bull (no.28), a bird (no.36), an elephant (no.72), and many other creatures. However, there are also some early sources which speak of human beings being reborn as scorpions and centipedes (A. v. 289) or even worms and maggots (M. iii. 168), so it is not possible to be categorical on this point.

The most pleasant of the six realms of rebirth is undoubtedly heaven, which appears at the top of the diagram. Heaven is the residence of the gods (deva), namely beings who have accumulated sufficient good karma to justify a rebirth in paradise. These are somewhat like angels in the Christian tradition who reside in the various mansions of heaven. In Buddhism there are no special theological implications associated with a heavenly rebirth: the gods do not create the cosmos, control human destiny, forgive sins, or pass judgement on human beings. Humans may make offerings to the gods and seek their help, but while the gods are revered they are not worshipped in the fashion of the theistic traditions. Nor is heaven a place of permanent salvation: the gods are subject to the law of karma just like any-

one else, and in due course they will be reborn in a lower realm when their good karma expires.

Mythology locates the heavens above a great mountain known as Meru which was believed to lie at the centre of the world. Later sources (from the fifth century C.E. onwards) subdivide the heavenly realm into twenty–six different levels or “mansions” which are increasingly sublime. If we add to these the five other realms of rebirth shown in the wheel of life (bhavacakra) we reach a total of [thirty–one possible rebirth–destinations](#). The lower heavens were thought of as being on the slopes of Mount Meru, the higher terrestrial ones on its summit, and the more sublime heavens floating above it in space. The gods at different levels live for different periods of time. At the lower levels their lifespans are hundreds of times those of humans, and at the top their lives are measured in millions of years. Time is believed to be relative, however, and the gods perceive it differently according to their station: thus a million years of human time might seem like a week to the gods on the lower levels, and a day to the gods at the summit. The top five heavens are known as the “Pure Abodes,” and are reserved for those known as “non–returners” (anāgāmin): these are individuals in the human world who are on the point of gaining enlightenment and will not be reborn again as human beings.

It might seem strange to Western ears to hear that rebirth in heaven is not the ultimate goal, and this statement needs some explanation. In practice, many (if not most) Buddhists would be only too happy to find themselves in heaven in their next rebirth, and almost all (both monks and laymen) make efforts to bring this about. However, Buddhists believe that heaven is only a proximate goal, and the final aim is to attain nirvana and put an end to rebirth altogether. There

can even be a danger in being reborn in heaven—that one may become complacent and lose sight of the omnipresence of suffering and impermanence. It is thought that being insulated from suffering causes the gods to lose sight of the painful realities of life the Buddhist drew attention to in the First Noble Truth (see chapter three), and to slacken their efforts to reach nirvana. For this reason the human world is thought preferable as a place of rebirth since it contains a better balance of pleasure and suffering.

The human world is found in the fifth segment of the bhavacakra and is thought to be very difficult to attain. The great advantage of human existence is that it reminds us constantly of the realities of suffering and impermanence, and so keeps our minds focused on those factors which spurred the Buddha to attain enlightenment. Had he remained cosseted within the palace walls as a young prince (a situation analogous to that of the gods) he would never have found a permanent solution to life’s problems. Human beings, unlike animals, are also endowed with reason and free will, and are in position to use these faculties to understand Buddhist teachings and choose to follow the Noble Eightfold Path. While suffering certainly exists in human life, so does pleasure, such that the human realm offers a “middle way” between the higher and lower realms which are either too pleasant (heaven) or too painful (hell). It is thus believed that suffering works like the grit in the oyster to produce the pearl of nirvana.

The Three Spheres of Rebirth

Buddhist cosmology often seems untidy and contradictory, and this is because it is made up of competing schemes which do not always integrate perfectly with one another. Different conceptions of the world developed

in a random fashion in myths and legends, and Buddhism absorbed many popular ideas from folklore and local tradition. Alongside the scheme of the six realms of rebirth, for example, is found an ancient Indo-European conception of the world as divided into three layers—known variously as *avacaras*, *dhātus* or *lokas*—and probably based originally on the idea of earth, atmosphere, and sky.

In this tripartite model the surface of the earth is the world of human beings, and above that are various atmospheric phenomena such as clouds, lightning and thunder, which became personified and regarded as divinities. Just as the earth's atmosphere becomes more rarified in higher levels like the stratosphere, in the scheme of the three spheres matter becomes increasingly refined at the upper levels, eventually tapering off into realms which appear to consist of pure thought. The lowest and most earthly of the three spheres is known as the "sphere of sense-desires" (*kāmāvacara*), and includes all of the realms up to the sixth heaven above the human world. Next is the "sphere of pure form" (*rūpāvacara*), a rarefied spiritual space in which the gods perceive and communicate by a kind of telepathy. This extends up to level twenty-seven. Highest of all is the "sphere of formlessness" (*arūpāvacara*), a state without material shape or form (*rūpa*) in which beings exist as pure mental energy.

The gods in the four highest levels, those of the sphere of formlessness (*arūpāvacara*), are thought to apprehend phenomena in four increasingly subtle ways: in the lowest

(level twenty-eight) as if all that existed was infinite space; in the second (level twenty-nine) as if there were nothing but infinite consciousness; in the third (level thirty) as "nothingness," or the idea that even consciousness has been transcended. After leaving behind even the thought of "nothingness," there arises an ineffable state of mind known as "neither perception nor non-perception" (level thirty-one). This is the summit of existence and the highest state in which anyone can be reborn. As already noted, Buddhist ideas about cosmology dovetail with its meditational theory, and the names of the two highest levels of rebirth (levels thirty and thirty-one) bear the same names as the two highest stages of meditation. Access to these places or states can thus be gained either by being reborn in them or by tuning into their "frequency" through meditation. Here again we see the close association between psychology and cosmology in Buddhist teachings.

Karma

In the cosmology set out above, **karma** is the mechanism that moves people around from one realm of rebirth to another. We could picture it as a kind of elevator that takes people up and down inside a building. Good deeds result in an upward movement and bad deeds in a downward one. In popular usage in the West karma is thought of simply as the good and bad things that happen to a person, like good and bad luck. However, this oversimplifies what for Buddhists is a complex of interrelated ideas which embraces

both ethics and belief in rebirth, and which is summed up in the word *samsāra*, (“flowing on”).

The doctrine of karma is concerned with the ethical implications of Dharma, or the Buddha’s teachings. Karma is concerned primarily with the moral dimension of those teachings and denotes primarily the consequences of moral behaviour. For Buddhism, karma is thus neither random—like luck—nor a system of rewards and punishments meted out by God. Nor is it destiny or fate: instead it is best understood as a natural—if complex—sequence of causes and effects. In the Buddhist scholastic tradition known as *Abhidharma* it is classified (for example, *Atthasālinī* 2.360) as *karma-niyama*: this means that it is seen as just one aspect of the natural order, specifically as one function of the universal law of causation known as dependent origination (*pratītya-samutpāda*) which will be explained in chapter three.

The literal meaning of the Sanskrit word *karma* is “action,” but *karma* as a religious concept is concerned not with just any actions but with actions of a particular kind. The Buddha defined *karma* by reference to moral choices and the acts consequent upon them. He stated “It is intention (*cetanā*), O monks, that I call *karma*; having willed one acts through body, speech, or mind” (A.3.415). In this emphasis on intention the Buddha modified the traditional understanding of *karma*, which tended to see it as a product of ritual rather than moral acts. In a discussion with a follower of Jainism concerning which of the three modes of actions—body, speech or mind—is most reprehensible, the Jain states that bodily action has the greatest power to produce bad *karma*. The Buddha disagrees, stating that mental actions are the most

potent of the three, thereby illustrating the innovative ethical perspective adopted by Buddhism.

So how can we tell if an action is good or bad in terms of *karma*? From the way the Buddha defined it the main criterion seems to be one of intention or free choice. In Buddhist psychology there are said to be three basic kinds of motivation known as “roots.” These have two forms, good and bad, giving a total of six in all. Actions motivated by greed (*rāga*), hatred (*dveṣa*), and delusion (*moḥa*) are bad (*akuśala*) while actions motivated by their opposites—non-attachment, benevolence, and understanding—are good (*kuśala*). It will be recalled that these are the same as the “three poisons” depicted at the centre of the wheel of life (*bhavacakra*) shown above. Sometimes these terms go by different names, for instance “craving” (*rāga*) is often called “attachment” (*lobha*), but the different terminology is of little importance. What matters to a Buddhist is to ensure that his or her motivation is always of a whole—some kind, since this is the way that good *karma* is accumulated and progress to *nirvana* is made.

Agriculture provides a familiar metaphor for *karma* in Buddhist sources, and creating *karma* is often likened to the planting of seeds in the earth. Some seeds are good and some are bad, and each bears sweet or bitter fruit at the appointed time. So it is with good and bad deeds. The karmic choices we make today will come to “maturation” (*vipāka*) or bear “fruit” (*phala*) tomorrow. Sometimes *karma* will bear fruit in the same lifetime, but other times it may manifest itself many lifetimes in the future. An example of how *karma* bears fruit in the present life is the way the features of an angry person become progressively distorted and ugly with time (M.3.203–6). Various aspects of the life to come are said to be karmically determined, including the family into which one is born, one’s caste or so-

cial standing, physical appearance, character and personality. Any karma accumulated but not yet spent is carried forward to the next life, or even many lifetimes ahead. In this sense individuals are said to be “heirs” to their previous deeds (M. 3.203). The precise manner in which karma operates, and the mechanism that links given acts and their consequences, is a matter of debate among Buddhist schools. The Buddha simply described the process as profound, and as inconceivable (*acinteyya*) to anyone except a Buddha (A.4.77).

It is important to grasp that the doctrine of karma is not the same as Determinism. This is the belief that everything that happens to a person is preordained and brought about by fate or destiny. The Buddha made a distinction between karma and deterministic fate (*niyati*) in this sense, and accepted that random events and accidents can happen in life. Not everything need have a karmic cause, and winning the lottery or catching a cold can be simply random events. In the *Aṅguttara Nikāya* (3.61), for instance, the Buddha disagrees with certain of his contemporaries who held the view that “whatever good, bad, or neutral feeling is experienced, all that is due to some previous action,” explaining that certain illnesses, for example, could be attributed to physical causes (the “humours”) rather than the effect of karma.

Merit

Good karma is highly prized by Buddhists, and is often spoken of as “merit” (*puṇya*, Pāli: *puñña*). Its opposite, bad karma, is referred to as “demerit” or *pāpa*. A good deal of effort is put into acquiring the former and avoiding the latter. The purpose of acquiring merit is to enjoy happiness in this life and to secure a good rebirth, ideally as a god in one of the heavens. Some Buddhists think of merit

as if it were a commodity, like money in a bank account which can be earned and spent. Some even go to the extreme of carrying a notebook in which they record their good and bad deeds and total up their “balance” every day! This materialistic conception of merit is not one the orthodox teachings would support, since the motivation behind it seems to be largely a selfish one. If a person is motivated to do good deeds simply for personal gain, then one could say the underlying motivation is actually greed, and accordingly not likely to generate much merit. In practice in most cases of this kind the motivation is probably a mixed one, partly selfish and partly altruistic, so a limited amount of merit may be produced, but such behaviour cannot be said to be acting in accordance with the spirit of Buddhist teachings. In particular it misses the important point that merit is produced as by-product of doing what is right and should not be sought as an end in itself.

Merit Transference

Many Buddhists believe that merit can be transferred from one person to another, just like donations can be made to charity. Many rituals and good deeds are preceded by a dedication to the effect that any merit that arises from the act should be directed towards a named recipient or group. This practice of “[merit transference](#)” has the happy result that instead of one’s own karmic balance being depleted, as it would in the case of money, it increases as a result of the generous motivation in sharing. It is doubtful to what extent there is canonical authority for notions of this kind, although at least the motivation to share one’s merit in a spirit of generosity is karmically wholesome and would lead to the formation of a generous and benevolent character.

A very common way to earn merit, particularly for the laity, is by supporting and making donations and offerings to the sangha or order of monks. This can be done on a daily basis by placing food in the bowls of monks as they pass on their alms round, by providing robes for the monks at the annual kāṭhina ceremony held at the end of the rainy-season retreat, by listening to sermons and attending religious services, and by donating funds for the upkeep of monasteries and temples. Merit can even be made by congratulating other donors and empathetically rejoicing (anumodanā) in their generosity.

Western Perspectives

We have explained Buddhist ideas about karma and rebirth at the start of the book because these notions are often puzzling to Western readers who are exposed to different cultural presuppositions about time and history, as alluded to earlier. In particular, many questions often arise concerning the coherency of such notions. For example, it might be asked why, if we are all reborn, do so few people remember previous lives? In part this may have to do with the way we are brought up and taught to think in certain ways. In societies where there is no supporting framework for a belief in reincarnation, such as in the West, memories of previous lives may simply go unrecognized or unacknowledged. When such memories are reported by children they are commonly dismissed by teachers and parents as the product of an overactive imagination. Again, individuals may experience peer-pressure and be unwilling to risk ridicule by reporting experiences that society (and in particular the scientific establishment) does not accept. There is, however, a growing body of evidence from individuals who claim to