

THE WHEEL OF LIFE

ILLUSION'S GAME

The whole Dharma is the language of samsara. That is why this painting is called the Wheel of Life or Bhavachakra—the wheel of existence, or becoming (samsara). This wheel is the portrait of samsara and therefore also of nirvana, which is the undoing of the samsaric coil. This image provides a good background for understanding illusion's game, based as it is on the Four Noble Truths as the accurate teaching of being in the world. The outer ring of the nidanas describes the truth of suffering; the inner ring of the six realms describes the impetus of suffering; and the center of the wheel describes the origin of suffering, which is the path.

The outer ring of the evolutionary stages of suffering is the twelve nidanas. Nidana means chain, or chain reaction. The nidanas are that which presents the chance to evolve to a crescendo of ignorance or death. The ring of nidanas may be seen in terms of causality or accident from one situation to the next; inescapable coincidence brings a sense of imprisonment and pain, for you have been processed through this gigantic factory as raw material. You do not usually look forward to the outcome, but on the other hand there is no alternative.

The Wheel of Life is always shown as being held by Yama (a personification meaning death, or that which provides the space for birth, death and survival). Yama is the environment, the time for birth and death. In this case it is the compulsive nowness in which the universe recurs. It provides the basic medium in which the different stages of the nidanas can be born and die.

The death of the previous nidana gives birth to the next one within the realm of time, which is itself compulsive. Rather than one ending and another beginning, each nidana contains the quality of the previous one. Within this realm of possibility, the twelve nidanas develop.

The first stage is ignorance, avidya. This is represented by a blind grandmother who symbolizes the older generation giving birth to further situations, but remaining itself fundamentally blind. The grandmother also represents another element, the basic intelligence which is the impetus for stirring up endless clusters of mind-body material, creating such claustrophobia that the crowded situation of the energy sees itself. At this point the sense of intelligence is undermined—nothing matters but the fundamental deception or loneliness. Simultaneously the overcrowded, clumsy discrimination (thingness, solidified space) is in the way. This is experienced as a subtle irritation combined with subtle absorption. This irritation extends to the grandchild but still remains the grandmother.

This absorption could be called fundamental bewilderment, the "samsaric equivalent of samadhi," an indulgence in something intangible which is the bewilderment. The solidified space results from trying to confirm this intangible and is the beginning of self-consciousness at that level. You begin to discover that there are possibilities of clinging to intangible qualities as if they were solid. You feel as if there were desolation in the background. You have broken away from something and there's an urge to create habitual patterns. There is a sense of discovery for you have found some occupation after a whole trip of exploring possibilities, but at the same time you sense the possibility of losing ground forever.

The next nidana presents itself mechanically with the image of a potter's wheel. There is a sense of occupation and responsibility as though you are a child suddenly condemned to be the director of a big corporation. This second stage is samskara or impulsive accumulation, which enables you to turn the potter's wheel constantly.

But now you are in charge of an individual and

samskara, the potter's wheel

vedana, feeling, an arrow
through the eye

trishna, craving, drinking milk and honey

quite private game, and have a sense of individuality and privacy. At this point, the inkling of a sense of power begins to develop, because you are able to sow a seed or set the wheel in motion. But there is a need of furthering this ambition, which leads to the next nidana — consciousness, or vijñāna. The symbol for consciousness is a monkey.

The next nidana is a gesture of hope and of a dream coming true. It is *namen-rupa*, or name and form, symbolized by a person in a boat. When an object has a conceptualized name it becomes significant. You name the person in terms of your intellectual discoveries and you create the image of the form of the person in accordance with the house (or castle for that matter) which you create. You call it Princess So-and-so or King So-and-so. Name and form are the same. The verbal concept and the visual concept are the same. The names and forms serve as political or philosophical reinforcement. If you have a king or a lord who occupies this particular castle, you would automatically expect that he ought to have an accompanying sense of dignity, and that the title should fit the person who occupies this accommodation.

This leads us to the next nidana, *sadayatana*, sensation or sense consciousness, which is represented by a monkey in a six-windowed house. Some kind of a sense of establishment is necessary, purely from the point of view of administration. The six sense organs and the six sense-consciousnesses provide a relatively secure home, but still there is the sense of the absence of somebody. Here the whole situation is still tentative and embryonic. In other words, you need to have occupants for the structure, someone quite sophisticated and capable of running the place you've already created. The inquisitive quality of this politician is represented by the monkey, and he is relatively awake as far as his ape qualities can function. There is some paranoia in that you suspect that the castle's occupant is very undignified, because this ape has to function both as guardian and as director. This dual role naturally leads to some sophistication and a sense of diplomacy.

The maintenance of the kingdom leads us to the next nidana, represented by a married couple. It is *sparsha*, or contact between the masculine and feminine concepts which complement each other. By trying to capture the fascination and make it into a solid thing, this pair develops a sense of personality and self-respect which is not

based upon domestic affairs alone but also upon foreign relationships.

At this point the next nidana presents itself. This is feeling, vedana, which is symbolized by an arrow through the eye. A foreign power introduces itself but the inquisitive mind pretends to accept this as a delightful surprise, even as a convenience, because it has no choice. There is sharp dramatic feeling but there is no chance to indulge in a sudden unexpected invitation. You have already magnetized the foreign diplomat (the arrow) and simultaneously you have confirmed your kingdom. It is the first real perception of this and that, which is the world outside. This brings us to the next nidana, trishna or craving, symbolized by drinking milk and honey.

You are embarrassed because the whole-hearted and eager reception of the foreign diplomat was too impulsive and there is a tendency to tone down. In spite of that tendency you try your best to relate to him, but at the same time you experience a natural self-indulgence and craving for further contacts which are like the flavor of milk and honey. There is also a tendency to sip and taste and to try to resist swallowing. A possible feeling of repulsion goes through the whole ritual because it is overcrowding, but the impulsive situation takes over and leads us to the next nidana. This is upadana or grasping, symbolized by gathering fruit.

The subtle manipulation of wishful desire is not enough. There is a tendency to be boyish, to do things as you feel them; you are not concerned with who owns the orchard, but you run out of this stuffy castle and roam around the grounds trying to be outrageous. You pick up fruits and eat them—they are something very definite, lumpy and satisfying. It is very reassuring to hold them, even more so to bite into them without peeling them. At this point there is an inevitable tendency to feel that someone else could possibly share this experience, or that at least there might be someone to relate to; and this feeling provokes a sense of loneliness and a longing for companionship. This leads us to the next nidana, bhava or becoming, which is symbolized by copulation.

Bhava celebrates the achievement of relating with another mind-body. It shows new dimensions—the shapes and sculptural qualities of the world are extremely satisfying to feel. It seems that this is the only way of appreciating organic and natural situations. You develop a tremendous awareness of

things including the visual aspect of sense perceptions. At the same time this sensual overindulgence invites valid proof, and you want the evidence of being father or mother to provide a sense of legitimacy. This leads us to the next nidana, jati or birth, symbolized by a woman in childbirth.

Having given birth to something, a sense of power begins to develop at this point. The simplicity of being creator of the universe is not far away. Becoming goes so far into action that it produces karmic results in this nidana. For example, in a situation of murder, hate gives birth to a corpse. And there are many other possibilities.

But that vitality does not last. The discovery of change becomes irritating and the achievement of this self-indulgence becomes questionable. There is nothing to relate with in terms of continual entertainment; it becomes empty. You have to face the possibility of decay, feebleness and imminent death. It is inescapable. The exuberance of youth relates to this crescendo of old age which follows it automatically. Here extremely cunning intelligence is led to extreme clumsiness in that pure demanding no longer fulfills its function. You see that your game of efficiency is not that efficient after all. But you do not realize that this derelict situation contains another outrageous discovery, which is the next nidana, jara marana, or old age and death, symbolized by a funeral procession.

Death is the physically overpowering situation of too many things you have to manage. Once upon a time too many things were exhilarating, but that excitement becomes questionable at this point. The many massive objects and relationships which you have created become the inspiration for the charnel ground.

The confused mind finds different styles of occupation. Therefore the six realms of the world can be said to be psychological states, rather than external situations such as a heaven above and a hell below. The realms are known as the whirlpool of illusion—samsara. There is no starting point and no definite order—you can take birth in any realm at any given time. According to the description of the Abidharma, birth into any of the realms is a matter of a sixtieth of a second. And here the concepts of time are also dependent on the involvement in ignorance.

The human realm is said to be the land of karma, because human beings can perceive and work with the karmic force. In this realm suffering is of the

nature of dissatisfaction. The intelligence of human nature itself becomes a source of endless pain. Deliberate self-inflicted struggles lead to the pain of birth, growing up, illness and death. The constant search for pleasure and its failure pushes the inquisitive intelligence into neurosis. But certain karmic coincidences bring the possibility of realizing the uselessness of struggling, and these coincidences are the particular attribute of the human realm. Therefore the human realm presents the rare opportunity of hearing the Dharma and practicing it. The solid body and seemingly real situations act as a vessel to preserve the Buddha's teaching; whereas the other realms are so exclusively involved with their own extreme situations that the Dharma cannot be heard, and changes happen only as the karmic force of the hallucinations wears out.

The hungry ghost realm is one of an intense state of grasping in the midst of a continual overwhelming psychological poverty. The definition of hunger in this case is the fear of letting go. There are three types of hungry ghost: the external veil, the internal veil and the individualistic veil. The external veil comes as a result of too much accumulation. You long to become hungrier so you can accumulate even more. The internal veil is having been able to accumulate whatever you want and then the end product becoming something unexpected, usually turning into the reverse, so that the satisfaction turns into dissatisfaction. The individualistic veil is trying any possible way of satisfying your hangups; but then a disappointment of a different nature comes in unexpectedly. Things attack from every direction — wanting and not wanting. This is the state of conflicting emotions.

On the whole the pain of this realm is not so much that of not finding what you want; rather it is the frustration of wanting itself which causes excruciating pain.

The stupidity of the animal realm is more that of laziness than that of actual dullness. It contains the refusal to venture onto new ground. There is a tendency to cling to the familiar situation and to fight your way through to still another familiar goal, but this does not contain openness or dance. Another quality of the animal realm is that whenever there is an overpowering force which might lead you to explore new territory, the immediate reaction is to play dead or to camouflage yourself as though you were not there. The stubbornness of this realm regards individual involvement as very

precious, and you are intoxicated with yourself.

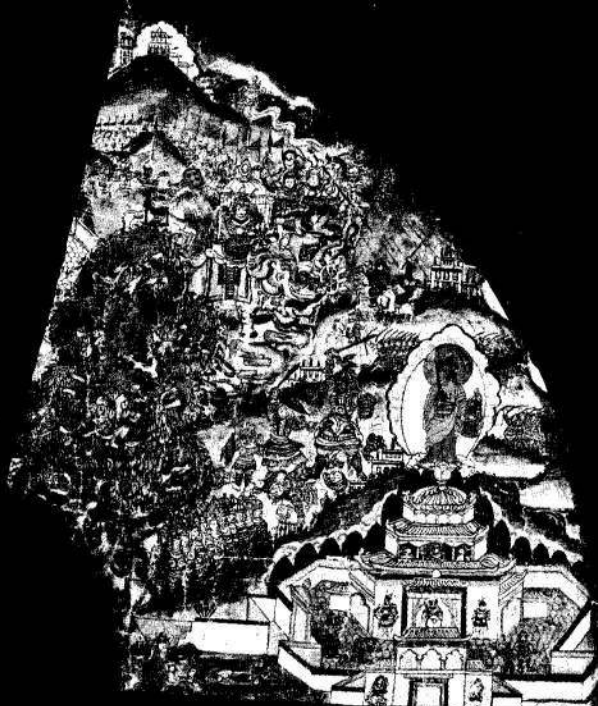
The realm of hell is not only the extreme of aggression and its passionate quality but extends beyond the extreme. This extension backlashes and creates not only a force of energy, but also an all-pervasive environment which is so intense that even the wildness of anger itself finds it unbearable to exist. Therefore there is a tendency to try and escape and that notion of escape intensifies the imprisonment. Two images have been used to describe this realm. One is intense heat which creates helplessness, and the realization at the same time that you are radiating this heat yourself. And trying to find a way to turn off the heat becomes too claustrophobic. The other image is intense cold. Any movement towards trying to solve the problem is irritatingly painful; therefore you try to internalize the intense aggression, to freeze it. Although it no longer cuts with a sharp edge in this case, its blunt edge hurts instead.

There is a tendency to commit suicide for the relief of a change of scene, but each moment of change and repetitive birth seems to take millions of years in this realm of hallucinations. There is not a moment to spare for anything other than your own existence in hell. Basically it could be said that because of such paranoia, the pain increases greatly. The process does not allow you a moment for preparation or even to get involved in each instant; there is no pulsation to the pain — it is constant.

The realm of the gods, also known as heaven, is the product of self-indulgence in ideal pleasure. This realm has different degrees; each degree of intensity of pleasure is based on corresponding degrees of maintenance of the pleasure and fear of losing it. The joy of "meditative" absorption saturates your seemingly solid body so that the basic energy is completely undermined. There are occasional flashes of thought which irritate and bring a tremendous threat to the meditative intoxication. Basically the reason why the realm of the gods is regarded as an impermanent state is that it is based on ego's game of maintenance in which the meditation is a separate experience from your own being. When the karmic situation of being in heaven wears out, there are suddenly violent thoughts accompanied by suspicion and the whole blissful state collapses, including the self-conscious concepts of love and the security of being "in love;" another hallucination takes control and you are in another realm.



realm of the gods



realm of the jealous gods

In the realm of the asuras, or jealous gods, the ambition of gaining a victory or the fear of losing a battle provide a sense of being alive as well as causing irritation. You lose the point of an ultimate goal, but in order to keep the driving force you have to maintain the ambition. There is a constant desire to be the best, but the sense of losing your game is too real. There is an occasional tendency to punish yourself, so that you learn to strive away from the pain. Whenever you see any pleasurable, appealing situations they seem to be too distant. The desire to bring them close to you is overwhelming, so finally the whole world is built out of golden promises; but it is irritating even to venture to fulfill them. Sometimes you tend to condemn yourself for not striving for strict discipline and for not achieving the satisfaction of these promises.

This brings us to the center of the Wheel of Life, which is seen as the path. Having experienced the monotonous and familiar games of the six realms of the world and having heard the Buddhadharma, the truth of pain and the reality of suffering as you have experienced them now bring primordial mind into a state of doubt. At the same time the conclusion arises as a possibility that after all "things may be just as they are." At that moment the subtler message of the First Noble Truth begins to click and you are about to sense the meaning of all those useless ventures into the false occupation of ego. The first step is bewilderment, where the teaching is too potent and too true. It seems impossible to be so precise and accurate. It almost feels like a personal insult that there are certain awakened minds and that their teaching can communicate to your basic nature. There is a sense that you have been careless and not able to keep up your secrets.

The first hearing of the teaching is a shock. The sense of inhibition is broken through and therefore personal preservation through ignorance does not apply any more. Traditionally that ignorance, that deliberate ignoring, is symbolized by the ignoramus pig with its built-in blinkers. It is non-discriminating perception which relates purely to the sense of survival expressed by consuming whatever comes up, whatever is presented to be consumed.

But that non-discrimination becomes grasping before the comfortable, snug ignorance finds its place. So this confused venture of passion is depicted in the symbol of the rooster. Passion feels

inadequate so it presents its spiky, sharp points in order to lure like a fishhook, to draw in so that it consumes and attracts attention at the same time. This display by the rooster of its colorful feathers, as well as its beak, can draw in the object of passion; so passion is seen as eliminating the beauty of the phenomenal world. Passion draws in these beauties by a succession of games. Where there is any possible threat to the success of drawing in, it appears that the only possible way of accomplishing the process is to subjugate the object of passion — either by putting out poison to paralyze it or else by overpowering it. This is much the way a snake would proceed, either projecting poison through its fangs or else coiling around the object of desire until it has been completely subdued. Thus the snake is the symbol of aggression. So the whole pattern of aggression and passion is seen as capturing that which is close or else destroying that which is beyond your control. This pattern is at the center of the wheel.

The essence of samsara is found in this turmoil, in this complex situation, as well as in the misunderstandings of bewilderment, passion and aggression, so the situation also provides the possible means of eliminating these aggravations. But at the same time, unless you relate to these three as path — understanding them, working with them, treading on them — you do not discover the goal. So therefore, as Buddha says: "Suffering should be realized, origin should be overcome and, by that, cessation should be realized because the path should be seen as the truth." Seeing the truth as it is, is the goal as well as the path. For that matter, discovering the truth of samsara is the discovery of nirvana, for truth does not depend on other formulae or alternative answers. The reality of samsara is equally the reality of nirvana. This truth is seen as one truth without relativity.

—Chögyam Trungpa, Rinpoche



the center of the wheel, the three poisons