

The Inner Circle

At the center of the wheel are The Three Spiritual Poisons, represented by three animals constantly chasing each other. The pig/boar represents spiritual ignorance, the bird desire, and the snake anger.



The Second Circle

Outside the central circle is another one. This circle is half white and half black. This shows us that after death, Buddhists believe there are two 'paths' beings can travel: the 'white path' of good karma that leads to good rebirth, or the 'black path' of bad karma that leads to a bad rebirth.

The three types of beings moving upwards on the white side show us the three types of good rebirth in samsara: human, demi-god, and god. The three types of beings moving downwards on the black side show us the three types of bad rebirth in samsara: animal, hungry ghost, and hell-being.



The Third Circle, Part I

Outside the black and white circle is another circle that is divided into six sections, like the slices of a cake. These are called the six realms of rebirth ('realm' means place) If we look at the pictures of these realms, we can see many of the different sufferings Buddhists believe we experience if we are born in these realms.

The 3 lower realms:

- Hell: tortured and tormented by intense heat or cold
- Hungry Ghosts: extreme hunger and thirst
- Animals suffer from being attacked by other animals and used as slaves.

The 3 upper realms:

- Human beings suffer the hardships of birth, ageing, sickness, and death.
- Demi-gods (who are a bit like the Viking gods) suffer from jealousy and constantly fighting with, and losing to, the gods (who are a bit like the Greek or Hindu gods).
- Gods: The main suffering of the gods themselves comes when they die. Because they have used up so much good karma, when they die, they come back as the lowest of the low; seeing their future rebirth with their psychic powers, their torment is said to be worse than rebirth in hell!

Even though it is said that the three upper realms are good, Buddhists say they are suffering because beings in them still believe in a 'self' which is the root of desire & the cause of suffering. They are also suffering because, like everything in samsara, these rebirths are impermanent-even if you are reborn as a god you die and can then come back as a toad!

Each of these different circles is the cause of the next one. Because of ignorance, desire and hatred, the three mental poisons, beings create 'black' and 'white' karmas that drive them down or up to their next rebirth. There, they experience the different sufferings of samsara.

The Third Circle, Part II



The Hell Realm



The God Realm

The Outer Circle

The twelve pictures show that all of the different suffering experiences in samsara originate from ourselves, as the result of ignorance or belief in the "self."*



A monkey symbolizes our mind jumping from tree to tree.



A blind person represents someone stumbling through life, blinded by ignorance.



Our mind guides our path through life, like this rower guiding people across a river.



Our feelings & experiences lead to cravings, like this man drinking beer. Our cravings may vary.

Outside the Circle

The whole of the wheel is in the grip of Yama, the Buddhist Lord of Death. This is to remind followers of the Buddha that everyone in samsara must die one day.

There is usually a picture of a Buddha standing outside the wheel and pointing at a moon. The reason the Buddha is outside the wheel is to show that he has escaped samsara. The moon represents the end of suffering and by pointing at it, it is like the Buddha saying 'I have reached the end of suffering'.



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*This is a very complicated concept; don't worry too much about it.