

BUDDHIST COSMOLOGY

Buddhists share the same general understanding of the cosmos as other Indian religions. The cosmos is not permanent or created. At the summit are the four realms of purely mental rebirth, without form. Below them are the realms of pure form, where the gods dwell. Gods are prominent in ordinary Buddhist life, but they are not permanent, let alone eternal; they are themselves subject to rebirth and must seek enlightenment. At the lowest level is the realm of desire. This consists of the heavens, in which dwell the 33 Vedic gods of Hinduism, including Indra, known as Sakka, who is the protector of Buddhism. Also included here are the levels on which animals, humans, and asurs (jealous gods) live. Below these are the realms of the hungry ghosts (pretas) and the hell.

Three Cardinal Faults

At the center of the *Wheel of Life* lie the three symbols of cardinal faults of humanity: **greed** (the pig), **hatred** (the snake), and **delusion or pride** (the cock). The Buddha stated: "Consumed by craving, enraged by hatred, blinded by delusion, overwhelmed and despairing, man contemplates his own downfall, that of others, and both together."



The Lord of Death. To symbolize the finite limitations of all existence on the Wheel of Life, **Yama**, the Lord of Death, holds the Wheel in his teeth and claws.

Beings in Hell (Naraka-gati in Sanskrit):



The lowest and worst realm, wracked by torture and characterized by aggression. Cold-hearted hatred and burning anger transport creatures to the hell realms, the darkest of all worlds, to suffer the tortures of fiery heat and icy cold. An **purple Buddha appears with water (patience) and fire (the light of hope)**. He preaches the virtue of patience and reveals the way to the light.

Hungry Ghosts (Preta-gati in Sanskrit; Gaki in Japanese):



The realm of hungry spirits; characterized by great craving and eternal starvation. Insatiable greed gives rise to the hunger and thirst suffered in this realm, represented by grotesque figures with tightened throats and swollen stomachs. A **red Buddha** carries a vessel of **celestial nourishment** as a gift to the hungry ghosts and preaches the virtue of generosity and sacrifice.

Animals (Tiryagyoni-gati in Sanskrit):



The realm of animals and livestock, characterized by stupidity and servitude. The realm of beasts is ruled by ignorance, apathy, lethargy, instinctive action, and spiritual incapacity. This state brings suffering upon the animals: humans use them as their beasts of burden; they hunt and devour one another. A **blue Buddha** holds the **Book of Insight** in order to teach the animals the benefits of perfect wisdom, entry into the realms of knowledge, and the cosmic laws.

Asura (Asura-gati in Sanskrit):



The realm of anger, jealousy, and constant war; the asura (Ashura) are demigods, semi-blessed beings; they are powerful, fierce and quarrelsome; like humans, they are partly good and partly evil. The perpetual war in this realm is caused by the boundless envy of all creatures, often represented by people fighting over the fruit of the wishing tree. A **green Buddha** appears in a warrior's armor **holding a flaming sword**. He declares the virtue of moral restraint, and orders the asuras to end their mighty struggles.

Humans (Manusya-gati in Sanskrit):



The human realm; beings who are both good and evil; enlightenment is within their grasp, yet most are blinded and consumed by their desires and cravings. Suffering in the human realm is caused by egoism, ignorance and desire. This gives rise to the perpetual cycle of birth, sickness, old age, and death. It is the most important of all the realms, because this is the only world in which a being has the power to control behavior, and to chose the Path of Bliss to enlightenment. A **yellow Buddha preaches the virtue of will power** and dispensable energy, through which people may find the path to enlightenment.

Deva (Deva-gati in Sanskrit):



The realm of heavenly beings filled with pleasure; the deva hold godlike powers; some reign over celestial kingdoms; most live in delightful happiness and splendor; they live for countless ages, but even the Deva belong to the world of suffering (samsara) -- for their powers blind them to the world of suffering and fill them with pride -- and thus even the Deva grow old and die; some say that because their pleasure is greatest, so too is their misery. Happiness transcends suffering. However, this existence is transitory, and a **white Buddha with a lute reminds the gods** that once their good karma is exhausted, they will leave this realm.

In the outer circle, the 12 Karma formation, or links of dependent origination are illustrated. The Buddha taught that everything arises and exists in dependence on other things, and to free oneself from the 12 karma formation is to achieve nirvana.

1. **Clinging:** The man plucking fruits from a tree represents the sensual entanglement of desire and possession.
2. **Becoming:** The man and woman are prisoners of the sensory stimulation of touch.
3. **Rebirth:** The natural consequence of sensual contact and marriage is birth.
4. **Old age and Death:** The inevitable consequence of birth is illness, anxiety, old age, and death.
5. **Ignorance:** Ignorance represented here by a blind man, is the first in the traditional list of 12 factors.
6. **Acts of Volition:** The potters mould their own fate (karma) in the pots they produce, each one representing a deed, such as acting, thinking, and speaking.
7. **Consciousness:** The monkey swinging randomly from branch to branch represents the absence of control over consciousness, one of the goals of Buddhism.
8. **Name and Form:** The activity of consciousness conditions the arising of name and form, symbolized here by two figures.
9. **The Six Senses:** The six senses acknowledged by Buddhism are sight, smell, taste, hearing, touch and mind.
10. **Contact:** The operation of the six senses results in contact with the things of the world and this in turn leads to the arising of feeling and desire.
11. **Feeling:** The arrow piercing this figure's eye shows the way in which emotions strikes us.
12. **Craving:** Two young people are falling in love, representing the emotion of craving.