

# The Tibetan Wheel of Life and its Symbolism: A Western Archetypal analysis of the Tibetan Buddhist Psychology.

E-poster Project: SMN New Paradigm Navigators Symposium

Alice Letts, Durham University, Durham, England.  
Software: Biorender

References : Jung, C. G. (1948). The Phenomenology of the Spirit in Fairy Tales. The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious, 9(Part 1), 207-254.  
Volkan, Kevin (1984) 'A Comparative Study of Archetypal and Tibetan Psychologies.' Sonoma State University.

Saxby, G. (2020) 'An Analysis of the Tibetan Wheel of Life as a Psychological Model.' available at [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/346700117\\_An\\_analysis\\_of\\_the\\_Tibetan\\_Wheel\\_of\\_Life\\_as\\_a\\_psychological\\_model?channel=doi&linkId=5fcdf52299bf188d4000932&showFulltext=true](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/346700117_An_analysis_of_the_Tibetan_Wheel_of_Life_as_a_psychological_model?channel=doi&linkId=5fcdf52299bf188d4000932&showFulltext=true)

## 2. The centre and Inner circle

The centre of the wheel contains three animals; the pig, the rooster and the snake; each biting the others tail. These animals represent the inter-dependant, driving forces of ignorance, greed and hatred. These underlie all other modes of suffering depicted by the outer layers of the wheel. The next (black and white) concentric circle from the centre depicts a number of men in various attitudes. The men on the left are performing good deeds, the ones on the right engage in perverse activities. These figures represent a chain of events that show the ego as it fluctuates between good and evil.

## 4. The Six Realms - Lower half

In each of the six central sections of the wheel there is a scene which represents one perspective or mode of being. They are different styles of samsaric occupation, in which we dwell within a particular version of reality. The Six Realms are in service of the ego and describe the flow of the unconscious as it has been sublimated by the ego. The images presented in the Six Realms are of archetypal origin, but should also be seen as crossing over into the personal unconscious. **The Hell Realm (central lower section)** contains images of destruction and torture. This depicts a state of mind that is claustrophobic and frustrated. The God Yama holds up a mirror, indicated ones own projections create these hellish conditions. The suffering of the hell realm is not necessarily bad, as the Buddha appears carrying the fire of purification. The next mental state is the realm of the **Hungry Ghosts (bottom left)**. This depicts a state of mind where we feel we deserve better, thinking up many different possibilities of satisfaction. Spending so much time in this state means we ultimately never accomplish any one of these possibilities. This leads us to think of even more possibilities. Thus this realm is characterised by infinite longing. A modern image for this state of mind is that of a drug addict. **The Animal realm (bottom right)** is characterised by ignorance. In this state of mind there is no reason to deal with a situation unless it is forced into your awareness. The Buddha appears in this realm with a book, symbolizing the power of discriminating knowledge.

1. The Tibetan Wheel of Life depicts the cycle of samsara, i.e., the cycle of death and rebirth. The Tibetan usage of the wheel is representative of the driving force of the power of the ego, understood as entrapment within Samsara. Liberation from the wheel is to achieve enlightenment, Nirvana. The comparison between the two systems of Tibetan Buddhist psychology and Archetypal psychology supports the view that both western and eastern methods of contacting the unconscious involve the use of archetypal imagery.



6. The Six realms can be broken into three sets of dualities: the God/Hell realm, the Jealous God/Hungry Ghost realm, the Human/Animal realm. The duality is a continuity of three principles: Spaciousness- where the God realm has an infinite amount of space, the hell realm has none. Striving- where the Jealous God realm would be striving to keep power, and the Hungry Ghost realm would be striving to keep it. Discriminating intelligence- where the Human realm has too much, and the Animal realm not enough. The three main dualistic principles or a triad imply growth, development and movement in time. This aligns with the idea of the wheel powering the psychological characteristic of the ego. Jung (1948) felt however that the Wheel is not a mandala without a fourth principle. The number four depicts structural wholeness, completeness, something eternal. Incorporating a fourth syzygy leads to a new synthesis. This might be the point the Tibetans are trying to make with the Wheel of Life. The fourth principle then is a tantric practice of bringing together Samsara and Nirvana. This is because striving to escape Samsara in pursuit of Nirvana is futile, to fully become one with Nirvana, one must have a partnership with the ordinary world, as Anima Mundi (world soul) . It is only with the addition of the fourth principle that the movement of the triad ceases, and is seen as an illusion. There was really no place to go, the wheel was spinning eternally unto itself.

## 3. The outer circle

The outside rim of the Wheel of Life depicts twelve states of human existence often referred to as the twelve links of dependant origination. All things arise in dependance on another action and so represents a constant change inherent within all things. Taken within a western psychological context, the change of perception of ones experience is possible at any time, and so this enables a greater acceptance of circumstances.

## 5. The Six Realms- Upper half.

The next realm is characterised by the qualities of discrimination and passion- the **Human realm (top left)**. There is great emphasis given to intellect in the human realm because there is a feeling that something is missing. This is what the discriminating intellect attempts to figure out. The Buddha appears with a begging bowl and a staff to show discriminating intelligence is best used for the spiritual path. This is also the realm where the mind is able to correctly judge the other realms and see the suffering inherent in each. The next realm is the realm of the **Jealous Gods (top right)**. This depicts a materialistic state of mind. Like the realm of the Hungry Ghosts this realm is a hunger, but a hunger for power characterised by fear of loss of control. There is also a spiritual thrust in this state of mind but it takes the form spiritual materialism, a spiritual path that is used to strengthen the ego. The final realm is the **God realm (top centre)**. In this realm the material struggle for control becomes completely mental- it is like being fully awake in a dream you have created. Desires are satisfied by thought, anything can be created by the power of the ego. The Buddha appears in this realm with a lute. This is to remind us that this state, like the sounds of the lute, has a beautiful, yet fleeting existence.