



Bhavachakra, Linen, Thangka, Tibet, c.a 1890 to 1905.

Buddhism became predominant in Tibet in the 6th century. From the 7th century onwards, while extensive literary activity began and the composition of Tibetan literature was in progress, a corresponding development in art also took place.¹

This Thangka depicts the Bhavachakra, which refers to the ‘Wheel of Life or Wheel of Samsara.’ Thangka paintings are Tibetan Buddhist scroll paintings on cloth. The Buddhist cosmology model of Bhavachakra is based on the Abhidharma literature of the Theravada and Sutrayana vehicles.² Bhavachakra is a real picture of Dharma taught by Buddha.

Many such museums have housed the painting of Bhavachakra, one such is been showed here is the Philadelphia Museum of Art³ (an image has been attached)

¹ *Sacred Arts of Tibet: Art from the Roof of the World*, Educator Workshop presented by the Asian Art Museum, Chong-Moon Lee Center for Asian Art and Culture, April 21, 2001.

² "Wheel of Life," *Himalayan Art Resources*, accessed August 1, 2025, <https://www.himalayanart.org/search/set.cfm?setID=6023>.

³ Artist/maker unknown, *Bhavacakra, The Wheel of Existence*, 19th or early 20th century; colors on cloth mounted on cloth; image painted surface approx. 110.5 × 80 cm (overall 111.4 × 188.6 cm); Gift of Mrs. George S. G. Cavendish, 1961; Accession No. 19612252; Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia.



The large figure of Yama, the Lord of Death, is striking with its red and orange colours. It has one face, two hands, a crown of skulls, and flaming orange hair. Yama holds the circular wheel of existence near its mouth, ready to swallow it at any moment. This represents how quickly things

can change or end. Yama has three eyes that symbolise impermanence, harm, and non-self as it grips the wheel. The five skulls represent freedom from old age, sickness, death, decay, and rebirth.⁴ The bone ornaments are notable features in Tantric art and echo the costumes of demons from Indian mythology. Skull cups and bone ornaments show the awareness of impermanence, which is vital in Buddhist teachings.⁵

At the centre of the wheel are the three poisons, vividly represented by three animals: a black pig, symbolising ignorance; a venomous snake, embodying anger; and a fierce rooster, signifying desire. These creatures are the fundamental sources of suffering in life, tirelessly driving the wheel of existence. Each animal is depicted biting tightly onto the tail of the one in front, creating a relentless cycle—greed, hatred and blindness intertwining in an unending dance of turmoil.

The Second Layer of the wheel illustrates the concept of Karma⁶, depicting the results of one's actions. On the left half, it portrays beings ascending to higher realms, symbolising the positive outcomes of virtuous actions. Conversely, the right half shows beings descending into lower realms, highlighting the negative consequences of non-virtuous actions. This duality emphasises that all actions are motivated by the triad of ignorance, desire, and hatred, ultimately shaping the experiences of suffering or joy in one's existence.

Outside of that is a circle of five sections portraying the six realms of existence: god, asura, human, animal, ghost and hell. All of these sectors represent the level of suffering in terms of birth. Each

⁴Deepak Dong Tamang, "A Comparative Study of Bhavacakra Painting," *Historical Journal* 12, no. 1 (2020): 60–70, <https://www.nepjol.info/index.php/hj/article/download/35447/27934>.

⁵Peter Della Santina, *The Development and Symbolism of Tibetan Art and Iconography* (Singapore: Tibet House, 1995).

⁶Deepak Dong Tamang, "A Comparative Study of Bhavacakra Painting."

realm offers unique lessons and experiences, reflecting the complexity of existence and the interplay of suffering and enlightenment. Each is separated by an orange dividing line.

The outermost circle is composed of 12 scenes which represent the Twelve links of the Dependent Arising sequence, the links in this chain of cause and effect, starting at the top and moving in a clockwise direction⁷:

- A blind old man holding the stick, which represents Ignorance.
- A monkey in a tree shows the lasting impact of actions, which carry into future lives.
- Travellers in a boat depict how consciousness enters the womb, developing into a body.
- An empty house symbolises the emergence of the six senses in the growing embryo.
- A couple holding each other represents contact, allowing for communication as the senses mature.
- A man shot in the eye represents the ability to feel pain and pleasure, helping individuals understand the results of their actions.

-The triangular shape with fire and a man joining hands suggests a path to escape the cycle of existence.

-A woman giving alcohol to a man symbolises desire caused by attachment, leading to further entanglement. The image of a man grabbing fruit illustrates grasping, showing how strong attachments complicate life.

-The pregnant woman symbolises new life. Grasping and attachment at death become seeds of karma, carried into the next life.

-A woman in childbirth represents the growth of these karmic seeds.

-Finally, the individual is represented by a person carrying a heavy bundle, which is symbolic of the burden of karma that the individual created during the past lives.

At the top right and left of the painting, the pair of Buddhas is standing with their left hand in a teaching pose and with the index finger of their right hand pointing to a moon on the other side. The moon symbolises liberation. Buddha is pointing out that freedom from pain is possible.

The Bhavachakra is a diagram that shows the cycle of life. It explains how our actions, or karma, impact us and how ignorance leads to suffering. It highlights the possibility of freedom through spiritual practice and breaking the twelve links of dependent origination.

⁷"Wheel of Life (Bhavachakra)," *Himalayan Art Resources*, object no. 591, accessed August 1, 2025, <https://www.himalayanart.org/items/591>.