

### THE PICTORIAL WHEEL OF LIFE.

The *Sī-pa-i-khor-lō* or "Cycle of Existence"—(*vide* PLATE VII) for a copy of the Tashiding temple-picture<sup>2</sup>—is a graphic exposition of metempsychosis, one of the most fundamental laws of Buddhism—the secret of Buddha having consisted in the means he devised for escaping from this ceaseless round of re-births with its attendant sufferings.

This picture is one of the purest Buddhist emblems that the lāmas have preserved to us. And by its means I have been able to restore the fragment of a cycle in the verandah of Ajantā Cave No. XVII hitherto uninterpreted, and merely known as "the Zodiac." This picture portrays in symbolic and concrete form the three original sins and the recognized causes of re-birth (*Nidānas*), so as to ensure their being vividly perceived and avoided; while the evils of existence in its various forms and the tortures of the damned are intended to intimidate evil-doers. As the Sikkim copies of the picture misplace the order of the *Nidānas*, and are deficient in many details, I here describe the orthodox form of the picture as found in Tibet.

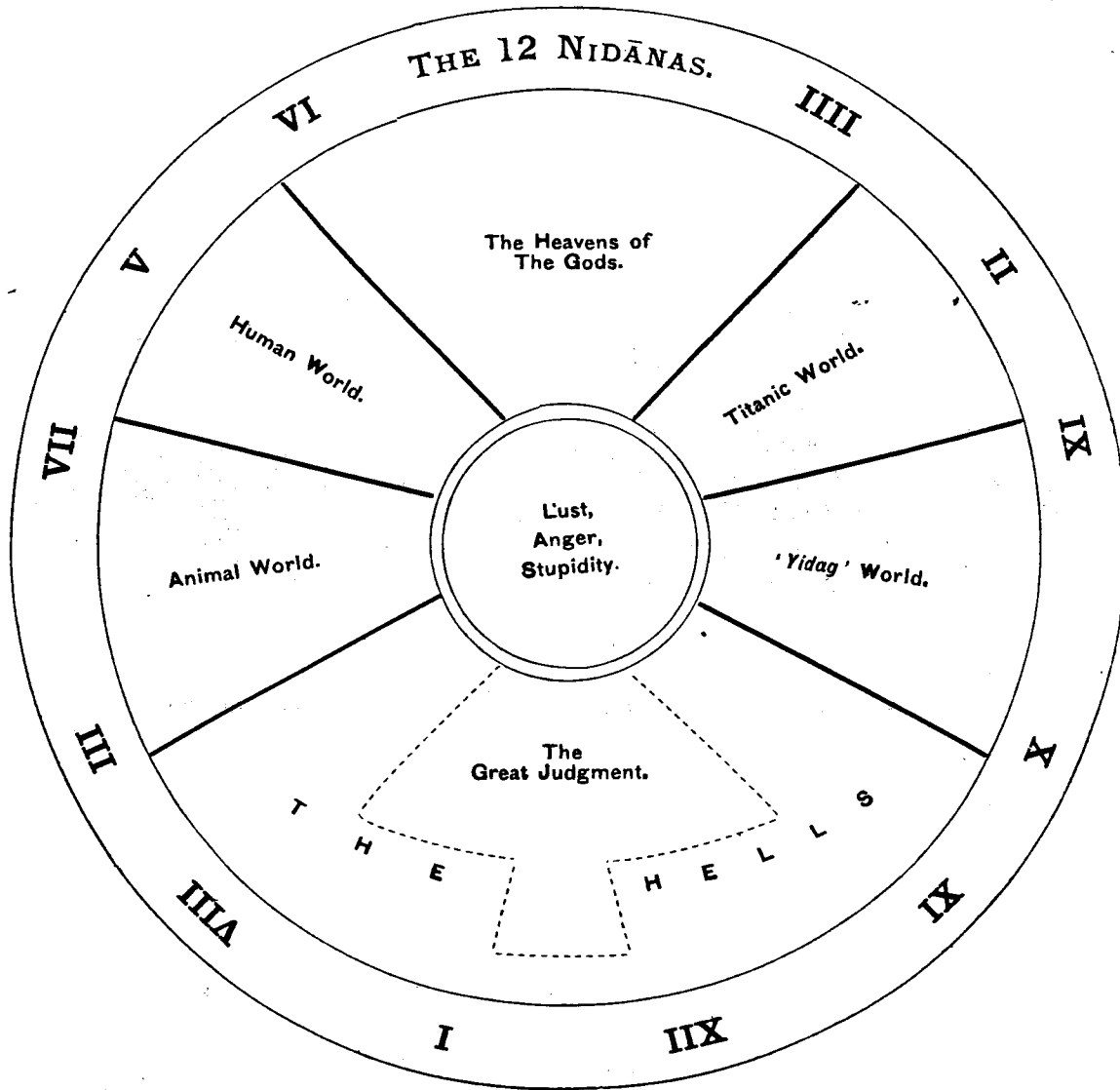
The picture consists of a large disc, the circular form of which symbolizes the ceaseless round of wordly existence. It is held in the clutches of a monster, whose head is seen overtopping the whole. This angry demon, who grips the disc with his claws and teeth, typifies the passionate clinging of the people to existence. In the centre of the disc are symbolized the three original sins, and around the margin the twelve linked chain of causes of re-birth; while the remainder of the disc is divided by radii into six compartments, which represent the six regions of re-birth.

These pictorial symbols of the abstract conceptions of the early Buddhists are extremely valuable as showing what is the traditional interpretation of the ambiguous Sanskrit and Pali metaphysical terms for the *Nidāna* found in the Indian Buddhist books, and the real

<sup>1</sup> *Sīd-pa-hi khor-lō*.

| <sup>2</sup> Kindly supplied by Mr. White.

KEY TO PLATE VII.  
**THE WHEEL OF LIFE**  
*From Tashiding Monastery.*



interpretation of which has formed a subject of much controversy amongst Western scholars.

The three original sins are depicted as (a) a *pig*, which has hold of the tail of (b) a *cock*, which has seized the tail of (c) a *snake*, which in its turn has hold of the pig's tail, thus forming a circle which revolves continuously around the world. The *pig* symbolizes the ignorance of stupidity; the cock, animal desire or lust; and the snake, anger.<sup>1</sup> If these three sins be avoided, then virtue results and merit is accumulated.

The causes of re-birth—the *Nidānas*—are categorically given as twelve in the form of a linked chain, the result of the first cause being the cause of the second, and so on; the ultimate result being suffering.<sup>2</sup> The illustrations with their lāmaic paraphrases are:—

I.—A blind old woman groping her way<sup>3</sup> = *marig-pa* (Skt. *Avidyā*) or “want of knowledge,” which is the cardinal

<sup>1</sup> These sins are thus depicted by Sir E. ARNOLD in *The Light of Asia*, p. 164:—

“ Patigha—Hate—  
With serpents coiled about her waist, which suck  
Poisonous milk from both her hanging dugs,  
And with her curses mix their angry hiss.  
Then followed Rūparaga—Lust of Days—  
That sensual sin which out of greed for life  
Forgets to live; and Lust of Fame \* \* \* (and) Fiend of Pride  
\* \* \* \* \* and—Ignorance—the Dam  
Of Fear and Wrong, Avidya, hideous hag  
Whose footsteps left the midnight darker.”

<sup>2</sup> Sir E. ARNOLD (*loc. cit.*, p. 165) thus expresses the *Nidānas*:—

“ Whirling on the Wheel,  
\* \* \* \* \*  
*Avidya*—Delusion—Sets those snares,  
Delusion breeds *Sankhāra*, Tendency  
Perverse; Tendency Energy—*Vidānā*—  
Whereby comes *Nāmarūpa*, local form  
And name and bodiment, bringing the man  
With senses naked to the sensible,  
A helpless mirror of all shows which pass  
Across his heart, and so *Vedanā* grows  
‘Sense-life’—false in its gladness, fell in sadness;  
But sad or glad, the Mother of Desire,  
*Trishna*, that thirst which makes the living drink  
Deeper and deeper of the false salt waves  
Whereon they float, pleasures, ambitions, wealth,  
Praise, fame, or domination, conquest, love;  
Rich meats and robes and fair abodes and pride  
Of ancient lines, and lust of days and strife  
To live, and sins that flow from strife, some sweet,  
Some bitter. Thus Life's thirst quenches itself  
With draughts which double thirst.”

<sup>3</sup> In the older pictures a man, who represents Buddha, is guiding the blind woman. But as the Ajanta painting gives for this a man leading a (blind) camel, it is evident that the Lamas constructed their picture from a written description, and interpreted the word *nga-mo* (nga-mo), a camel—an animal practically unknown in Central Tibet—as *ga-mo* (rgad-mo) “an old woman.”

- cause of existence leading people to mistake for happiness the miseries of existence.
- II.—A potter with his wheel making pots = *du-che* (Skt. *Saṅskāra*) or *impressing*—literally “preparation or fashioning + action,” showing the fruits of worldly labour are perishable objects—action being misdirected as a result of ignorance.
- III.—A monkey eating fruit = *nam-she* (Skt. *Vijñāna*) or “entire knowledge” of good and evil fruits—tasting every fruit in the sense of a roving libertine without system; thus engendering *consciousness*.
- IV.—A dying man with a physician feeling pulse<sup>1</sup> = *ming-zug* (Skt. *Nāma-rupa*) or “name and body,” *i.e.*, individual being. Its fleeting character is shown by the man being about to lose his individuality and name in death.
- V.—An empty house = *kye-chhe* (Skt. *Shudāyatana*) or “the five mortal sense organs and mind,” illustrates the organs and the will which are the result of individual being—the hollowness of these is typified. The Ajanta painting depicts this by a mask, which is a much more appropriate symbol.
- VI.—A pair of lovers kissing = *reg-pa* (Skt. *Sparsha*) or contact which results from the exercise of the sense organs and will.
- VII.—An arrow entering a man’s eye = *tshor-wa* (Skt. *Vedanā*) or “perception,” the result of a contact. It includes joy and sorrow as well as pain.
- VIII.—A man drinking wine<sup>2</sup> = *sre-pa* (Skt. *Trishṇā*) or “desire for more,” including thirst and affection, which results from the exercise of the perceptive faculty.
- IX.—A man gathering a large basketful of flowers = *len-pa* (Skt. *Upādāna*) “or taking”: grasping indulgence in worldly matters—the result of desire.
- X.—A pregnant woman = *srid-pa* (Skt. *Bhava*) or “continuity of existence,” a desire for inheritance—the result of the clinging to worldly life and wealth.
- XI.—A mother in childbirth = *kye-wa* (Skt. *Jati*) or birth as a result of No. X.
- XII.—A human corpse being carried off = *ga-she* (Skt. *Jāramarana*) or “decay and death” with all their sufferings, which are the result of birth.

<sup>1</sup> The newer style has a boat with human passengers being ferried across the ocean of life.  
Another form is a pair of caressing lovers.

The six forms of re-birth—*gro-baī rigs* (Skt. *Gati*)—are shown in the inner circle. In the order of their superiority they are—

1. The gods or *lhū* (= Skt. *Sura* or *Deva*)—the highest form of existence.
2. The Titans, literally “ungodly spirits” or *lha-ma-yin* (= Skt. *Asura*).
3. Mankind or *mī* (Skt. *Nara*).
4. The Beasts or *du-dó* (Skt. *Tiryak*).
5. The Tantalized ghosts—*yī-dag* (Skt. *Preta*).
6. The inhabitants of hell, *nyal-wa* (Skt. *Naraka*), the lowest of all.

The first three forms of existence are classed as good and the last three are bad; and all are under the immediate care of a Buddha, who stands in the centre of each compartment, and is a form of the Bodhisatwa Ché-ré-si (*Avalokita*), who is incarnate in the Dalai Grand Lāma at Lhasa.

The place of one's re-birth is determined solely by one's own deeds—although the lāmas now make faith and charms and ritual take the place of the good works of the earlier Buddhists. If the virtues are in excess of the sins, then the soul is re-born in one or other of the first three forms: as a god if the virtue be of the first degree, as an ungodly spirit if the virtue be of the second degree, and as a human being if the virtue is of the lowest order. While those whose sins preponderate are re-born in one or other of the last three forms, the most wicked going to hell, and the least wicked to the beasts.

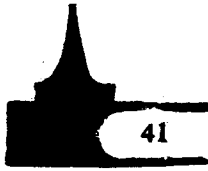
The judgment is in every case meted out by the impartial “*Shinje chho gyal*” or “Religious King of the Dead,” a form of *Yama*, the Hindu god of the dead, who holds a mirror in which the naked soul is reflected, while his servant *Shinje* weigh out in scales the good as opposed to the bad deeds; the former being represented by white pebbles, and the latter by black.—This incident usually occupies the upper portion of the hell-compartment of the *Sī-pa-i khor-ló* picture.

The details of these several regions are briefly as follow:—

I. *The Gods*.—These are the gods of Indra's heaven of Hindu mythology rendered finite. Their life is the longest of all beings; but they, too, are within the operation of the law of continuous metamorphosis, and may be re-born in hell or in any other of the six regions. Their abode is the Mt. Meru (Tib. *Ri-rab*) of the Hindus, a mythical and invisible mountain-heaven<sup>1</sup> in the centre of the universe according to Hindu cosmogony.

The picture of the region of the gods shows a three-storied palace in the heavens of Indra, Desire occupying the lower, Brahma the middle, and the indigenous *Dā-lha*, the Tibetan war god, the

<sup>1</sup> “heaved up.”



upper compartment. This curious perversion of the usual order of the heavens is notable, as the Lamas have placed the embodiment of passion—their war-god—above Brahma. These gods are surrounded by other gods, all with shining bodies and the special attributes of a god of this heaven, namely, (1) goddess-companions; (2) a lake of perfumed nectar (*amrita*), which is their *elixir vitæ* and source of their bodily lustre; (3) the *pag sam shing* or wish-granting tree, which bestows at once any fruit or food wished for; (4) the wish-granting cow, which yields instantly any drink wished for; (5) the horse of knowledge, which *Pegasus*-like carries his rider to the worlds of the present, past, and future; (6) his splendid dress and ornaments; (7) a fine palace; (8) a charming garden with flowers, which form his wreath, and pretty animals and singing birds. Along the border separating this world from that of the *lhamayin* (Asuras) are some of the gods armed with spears and other weapons under the direction of the war-god *Dā-lha* resisting the encroachments of the *lhamayin* of the lower world.

The human being who has been sufficiently charitable, virtuous, and pious during his earthly life may be re-born as a god and enjoy bliss for an almost incalculable time—one god's day being one hundred human years. And he is born into heaven in a full-grown state. But when his merit is exhausted, then his lake of nectar dries up, his wish-granting tree and cow and horse die, his splendid dress and ornaments disappear, his garden and flowers wither, his body, no longer bathed by nectar, loses its lustre, and his person becomes loathsome to his goddess companions and the other gods, who shun him, and he dies miserably. If he has led a virtuous life during his existence as a god, then he may be re-born in heaven, otherwise he goes to a lower region and may be even sent to hell.

II. *The Titans (Lhamayin) or ungodly spirits.*—These are the Titans or *Asuras* of Hindu mythology, and occupy the base of Mt. Meru, and are therefore intermediate between heaven and the earth. They have numerous joys and comforts; but are discontented, and envy the greater bliss of the gods, with whom they are continually fighting for some of the fruits of the heavenly wish-granting tree, which has its roots and trunk within their region.

This region is represented with a light yellow atmosphere, and contains a fortified house, with a lake and flowers and numerous animals. The people are all clad in full armour, and are engaged mostly in fighting with the gods across their frontier. Many of them are dead, or dying, or horribly mangled by the weapons of the gods, the most deadly of which is a wheel with teeth like a circular saw, which is thrown like the Sikh quoit. They always die in battle from their wounds, as they have no access to the nectar by which the gods obtain instant recovery when wounded.

As existence here is rather miserable, although it is above mankind, only the proud and envious are re-born here, but re-birth from this region mostly occurs in hell owing to the wicked life led during existence here.

III. *Mankind*.—The atmosphere of this region is blue or colourless. It shows the miseries of human existence which have to be endured by all alike, from prince to pauper: family troubles, striving after wealth, position, or necessaries of life, &c., &c.

The following phases of life are depicted amongst others:—

1. *Birth*.
2. *Old age*.—Decrepit old man and woman hobbling along.
3. *Disease*.—Sick man, with doctor feeling his pulse, or sick attempting to drink.
4. *Death*.—A dying man surrounded by weeping relatives, with a lāma doing worship near his head, and another monk ascertaining whether the breathing has ceased. Another scene depicts the dead body being carried off, preceded by a lāma, who carries the end of a scarf affixed to the corpse, and in the lāma's hand are a *damāru* (hand-drum) and a thigh-bone trumpet, while in the distance is the funereal pyre to cremate the body.

Other scenes illustrate worldly pleasure and business. A man sitting under a tree in front of his house, drinking tea or wine, and children at play, and hills in the distance. Traders bargaining, also a drunken man, a borrower, and a criminal being punished for crimes.

IV. *The Beasts*.—The atmosphere of this region is darker, but it has hills and trees and also some men, as it is merely a different aspect of the human world. Ruskin says "the fish is freer than the man;" but the lāmas think otherwise. They class all aquatic animals as "the Bonded Animals," and only terrestrial and flying animals are "The free." Hence the animal region is divided into an aquatic and a land-section, each peopled by characteristic animals. This is a state of greater misery than the human, as the animals prey on one another, and man also kills many of the animals and uses others as beasts of burden or for other utilitarian purposes.

The picture shows land animals of various kinds, some devouring others, and some human hunters killing game animals. In the water are fish and a variety of animals, also preying on one another.

V. *The Yidags or Tantalized Ghosts*.—The atmosphere of this region is also darkish. This is the special place of those who on earth were miserly, envious, and uncharitable. They have jewels and food and drink in plenty, but cannot enjoy them, and are always gnawed by hunger and thirst, as they are given huge bodies with microscopical

mouths and gullets. And when any food is taken it is transformed to sharp knives and saws, which lacerate the bowels and come out externally, making large painful wounds. Others have fires constantly burning in their mouths.

VI. *The Hells.*—The atmosphere of the hells is black. Only eight hells are mentioned in the older Buddhist works, but the lāmas describe and figure eight cold and eight hot hells, and give two extra hells named *nyi-tshewa*, which includes the state of being flies and insects in the human world, and *nye-khorwa*, a milder hell filled with fiery ashes and rubbish and bodies in which those escaping from hell must dwell for a further period.

In the upper portion of this region is figured the King and Judge of the dead in the act of trying the spirits of the dead, with the good recording angel on his right hand, counting out the good deeds by white pebbles from his purse, and the incarnation of evil on his left hand displaying before the Judge the bad deeds as a pile of black pebbles. In front is the scale-holder, who weighs the good as against the bad deeds.

Those who have sinned in anger are sent to the hot hell, while those who have sinned through stupidity go to the cold hell, and each receives some appropriate punishment for misdeeds during life. To show the superiority of the lāmas to such tribunals, several are introduced walking serenely through the hells twirling their prayer wheels.

The hot hells are to the left (of spectator) and the cold to the right.

#### I. THE HOT HELLS—

1. *Yang-Sö* (Skt. *Samjiva*) = "again revived." Here the bodies are torn to pieces and then revived only to have the process repeated *ad libitum*.
2. *Thi-nag* (Skt. *Kālasutra*) = "black lines." Here the bodies are nailed down and 8 or 16 black lines marked along body, which is then sawn in sections along these lines by a burning hot saw. Another punishment here is the especial one of the slanderer or gossip, who has his or her tongue enlarged and pegged out and constantly harrowed by spikes ploughing through it.
3. *Du-fom* (Skt. *Samghāta*) = "concentrated oppression." Here bodies are squeezed between animal-headed mountains or monster iron books (this is an especial punishment for monks, laymen, and infidels who have disregarded or profaned the scriptures). Others here are pounded in iron mortars.
4. *Ngu-bod* (Skt. *Rāurava*) = "weeping and screaming." The torture here is to be kept in glowing white iron houses and have melted iron poured down the throat.



5. *Ngu-bod Chhenpo* (Skt. *Mahārāurāva*) = "greater weeping and screaming." Here they are cooked in pots containing molten iron.
  6. *Tshewa* (Skt. *Tāpana*) = "heat." The body is cast upon and transfixed by red-hot iron spikes.
  7. *Rabtu-tshawa* (Skt. *Pratāpana*) = "highest heat." A three-spiked burning spear is thrust into body, and later rolled up within red-hot iron plates.
  8. *Nar-med* (Skt. *Avichi*) = "endless torture." This is the most severe and longest punishment. The body is perpetually kept in flames, though never consumed.
- II. THE COLD HELLS which have no place in the mythology of the Indian and Southern Buddhists are:—
1. *Chhu bur chen* = "blistered and wrinkled." The torture here is constant immersion of the naked body in icy cold water, under which the body becomes covered with chilblains.
  2. *Chhu-bur dolwa*.—The chilblains are forcibly cut and torn open, producing raw sores and deep chaps.
  3. *A-cchu* = "achū!" an exclamation of anguish which vents itself in this expression and which resounds throughout this hell.
  4. *Kyi-hüd*.—A worse degree of cold in which the tongue is paralysed and the exclamation "*kyi-hü!*" alone possible.
  5. *So-tham-pa*.—The teeth and jaws are rigidly clenched through cold.
  6. *Ut pal tar-gé-pa*.—Livid sores which become everted like blue utpal flowers.
  7. *Pé-ma tar gé-pa*.—The raw sores become red like lotus (*padma*) flowers.
  8. *Pé-ma chhen-po tar-gé-pa*.—The flesh falls away from the bones like the petals of the great red lotus (*padma*), leaving raw sores which are continually gnawed and pecked by birds with iron beaks.

The duration of the stay in hell lasts until the great sins committed during the previous existence are expiated. This period may vary from a few years to thousands of years. From hell the usual course is back to earth, by the merit of good works done in a former existence. The lāmas explain this by saying that it is like the discharge of a criminal who has expiated his offence in jail: on release he gets back his clothes and any other personal properties he can justly lay claim to, and the benefit of any virtuous deeds he had formerly done.

The history of the *Sī-pa-i khor-lō* as given by the lāmas is that Buddha on one occasion plucked a stalk of rice, and with its grains illustrated to his disciples his arguments on the 12 causes of existence and the continuous metamorphoses of animated beings in the six regions; and that later he personally directed the preparation of the picture in what is now known as the 'new' style which was specially intended for the conversion of the king of U-tra-ya-na (? Udhayana) and latterly introduced into Tibet in the 11th century A.D. by the Indian monk Atisha, who had received it from the followers of Phagpa Thogs-med or Arya Asaṅga. The "older" style, that is, as regards Tibet, is reported to have been the copy sanctioned by Lōpōn Lu-tub or Guru Nagarjuna, the founder of the Mahāyāna system, and a copy of it was brought to Tibet by Bande Ye-shi in the 8th century A.D. in the reign of the Thi-srong-de-tsan, and reproduced in the monastery of Samyé. The present picture in the Samyé monastery is said to measure about 15 to 20 feet in diameter, and differs from the "newer" style chiefly in the absence of a figure of Buddha in the upper right-hand corner and of the Munis in each of the six regions.