



SRID-PAHI-HKHORLO
(Wheel of Life)

Srid-Pa'i 'Khor-lo

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The Wheel of Life which is called "Srid-pa'i 'khorlo' in Tibetan and "Bhava Chakra" in Sanskrit should be painted as fresco on the entrance wall of the Vihara (Gtsug-lag-khang) as mentioned in the Vinaya-vibhanga (lung-rnam-b'yed). This is also mentioned in the Mula Commentary written by the great Pandita Gunaprabha in his Vinaya Sutra (Mdo-rtsa-wa). The reason for having the fresco on the entrance wall of the Vihara is for the purpose of meditation on the Four Noble Truths (Tib. Bden-pa-bshi, Skt. Catvari Satyani) i.e. (i) the truth of suffering (Tib. Sdug-bsngal bden-pa, Skt. Dukhasatya), (ii) the truth of origin of suffering (Tib. Kung-'byung-bden-pa, Skt. Samudayasatya), (iii) the truth of cessation of suffering (Tib. 'gog-pa'i bden-pa, Skt. Nirodhasatya) and (iv) the truth of path which leads to cessation of suffering (Tib. Lam-gyi bden-pa, Skt. Margasatya). The truth of suffering is depicted in a human bondage symbolised by the non-substantive belly of the Lord of Death (Tib. Gshin-rje, Skt. Yama) on which stands the impermanent nature of transmigratory existence. The truth of origin of suffering is depicted through the central navel point of Gshin-rje where lies lust symbolised by a dove, envy symbolised by a snake, and their tails swallowed by ignorance symbolised by a pig. The truth of cessation of suffering, Nirvana, is depicted by a radiant white circle above Gshin-rje which is pointed out by Buddha. The truth of path which leads to cessation of suffering is depicted through two slokas :

Brtsam-par-bya-shing-dbyung-bar-bya/
Sangs-rgyas-bsten-la-'jug-par-bya/
'dam-buhi-kyem-la-glang-chen-bshin/
'chi-bdag-sde-ni-gshom-par-bya/

Gang-shig-rab-tu-vag-yod-par/
Chos-'bul-'di-la-spyod-'gyur-ba/
Skye-bahi-'khor-ba-rab-spang-ne/
Sdug-bsngal-tha-mar-byed-par-'gyur/

It means that "once human life is attained, every effort must be made to enter into the Doctrine of Buddha and lead a virtuous life after knowing the misery and misfortune of worldly existence. In order to be released from the vicious circle one must practice the Four Noble Truths so that one can overcome all temptations connected with death, just as elephant in a swamp tramples reeds and creepers."

It mainly dwells on how one had entered samsara and how one can be released from it and obtain Nirvana. It is mentioned in the Jataka (Mzad-brgya-dpag-bsam-khri-shing) that during the time of Buddha there was a famous Buddhist King Gsugs-can-snying-po (Bimbisara, 582-554 B.C.) of Rgyal-pohi-khab (Rajagiri) in Magadha and another King named U-tra-ya-na (6th century B.C.) of Sgra-Sgrogs (Vatsa). Both their kingdoms were very rich and powerful. During this period, however, when one kingdom was prospering the other one was going through a lean period. It was customary for these two kings to exchange the choicest gifts which were sent through their respective traders. One day King U-tra-ya-na presented King Bimbisara a very rare armour studded with jewels having the power to ward off the effects of weapons, poison, fire etc. King Bimbisara was so delighted with the gift that he could not find words to express his happiness at receiving such a gift. The King ordered his ministers to evaluate the gift and was told that it was priceless and was the rarest armour in the world. King Bimbisara could not find a suitable gift to reciprocate King U-tra-ya-na's gift and was very depressed. He called his ministers and discussed as to what gift should be sent. Then his Prime Minister Dbyar-Tshul (Varshakara) suggested that since Lord Buddha was residing in his kingdom and since he was the most precious jewel in the three worlds, it would be a fitting present if a painting of Lord Buddha was presented to King U-tra-ya-na. This present would also bring good fortune to the Kingdom

of Vatsa and accumulate merits for its people. King Bimbisara was impressed at this suggestion and went at once to meet Lord Buddha. He then explained everything to the Lord and the Lord told the King that he should present the painting as it would have a very beneficial effect on King U-tra-ya-na. Therefore, as advised by Lord Buddha, the painting of the Wheel of Life was commissioned. From that time the tradition of Thangka-painting was started.

Below the painting are inscribed Skyabs-'gro prayers (Sharanagamana) of taking refuge in Buddha Sangs-rgyas-dkon-mchog, Dharma/Chos-dkon-mchog and Sangha Dge-'dun-dkon-mchog; Bslab-pahi gshi (basis of the percepts); Rten-'brel bcu-gnyis (twelve links of causation) and Lugs-byung lugs-ldog (forward and reverse meaning of twelve links of causation).

In the intermediate circle of the Wheel of Life, the five worlds are drawn as advised by Lord Buddha. In the innermost circle of the Wheel of Life are drawn a pig, a dove and a snake. The pig symbolises ignorance, the dove, lust, and the snake, envy. The Snake's tail is drawn as in the mouth of the dove (in Bkha-gdams-glegs-bam, a cock is depicted instead of a dove. Most paintings on the twelve dependent origination also depicts a cock which follows Bkha-gdams-glegs-bam tradition) and the dove's tail in the mouth of the pig. The meaning of this is that envy is caused by lust and lust is caused by ignorance. The rim between the intermediate world and the innermost circle of ignorance, lust and envy, is drawn in half white and half black. White symbolises good deeds and black symbolises sinful deeds. People are shown going upwards in the white portion, who represent people who have performed good deeds in their life time and are now going to take rebirth in a world of gods (Tib. Lha, Skt. Deva) and human beings (Tib. Mi, Skt. Manusha). People shown going down in the black portion represent people who have sinned and are therefore going to take rebirth in the world of animals (Tib. Dud-'gro, Skt. Tiryak), hungry ghosts (Tib. Yi-dvags, Skt. Preta) and hell (Tib. Dmyal-ba, Skt. Naraka).

In the intermediate circle there are five parts,

out of which the two upper parts symbolise virtuous life of the inhabitants of heavenly and human worlds. The remaining three worlds in the lower part symbolise sinful deeds leading to a world of animals, ghosts and hell.

Outermost circle shows twelve different phases of life (Tib. Rten-'brel bchu-gnyis, Skt. Pratityasamutpada) from ignorance to death. *Ignorance* (Tib. Ma-rig-pa, Skt. Avidya) is depicted as an old and blind woman which means that one cannot see one's surroundings and, therefore, cannot know the true meaning of all that exist due to ignorance. *Karmic formation* (Tib. Hdu-byed, Skt. Samskara) is depicted as making a clay pot. As a clay pot can be made into any shapes and sizes, similarly, one's life is shaped by its former actions. Hence some live in happiness and some live in misery, some are rich and some are poor, and some are high and some are of low status. *Consciousness* (Tib. Rnam-ses, Skt. Vijnana) is depicted in the form of a monkey, because a monkey never stays in one place and similarly the mind wanders about. *Name and form* (Tib. Ming-gsugs, Skt. Nama-rupa) is depicted by a man and woman in a boat crossing a river. This shows the mind and body is taking the next stage of development without losing continuity. *Formation of senses* (Tib. Skye-mched, Skt. Ayatana), is depicted by an open house which means one can enter and stay. Similarly, six minds (Rnam-ses-tshog-drug), which have their base in the six sense organs, are to remain in them. *Contact* (Tib. Reg-pa, Skt. Sparsa) is depicted by an embracing couple drawn to each other by lust. This symbolises contact between objects and six sense organs leading to more desires. *Feeling* (Tib. Tshor-ba, Skt. Vedana) is depicted by a man struck by an arrow in the eye which symbolises various feelings of happiness, sorrow and indifference. *Craving* (Tib. Sred-pa, Skt. Trisna) is depicted by a man drinking wine which symbolises the limitless desires arising out of six sensual pleasures. *Grasping* (Tib. Len-pa, Skt. Upadana) is depicted by a monkey plucking fruit from a tree. This symbolises that this action enforces the seed of rebirth, as the seeds of fallen fruits help to grow other fruits. *Becoming* (Tib. Srid-pa, Skt. Bhava) is depicted by

a pregnant woman symbolising the fruit of accumulated Karma leading to a new life. *Birth* (Tib. Skye-ba, Skt. Jati) is depicted by a woman giving birth which symbolises the act of taking rebirth. *Old age and death* (Tib. Rga-shi, Skt. Jaramarana) is depicted by a person carrying a dead body symbolising the aging process leading to death.

All these twelve links of causation come under four major premises (Tib. Rten-'brel-yan-lag-bshi, Skt. Catvarianga-pratitya-samutpada): (i) Projecting causes ('phen-byed-kyi-yan-lag), (ii) Projected effects ('phangs-pahi-yan-lag), (iii) Materializing causes ('grub-byed-kyi-yan-lag) and (iv) Materialized effects ('grub-pahi-yan-lag).

Projecting causes are ignorance, Karmic formations, and consciousness. Projected effects are name and form, six sense organs, contact and feelings. Materializing causes are thirst, attachment and becoming. Materialized effects are birth, old age and death.

The Wheel of Life is drawn in the lap of Gshin-rje symbolising that after taking birth, caused by one's Karma and attachment, one cannot escape from the jaws of the Lord of Death. [In Thup-pai-dgongs-rgyen (Skt. Munimatalamkara), page 119 of Pandita 'jigs-med 'byung-gnes sbas-pa (Skt. Ambayakara, 11th century A.D.), which forms the Tangyur Vol. Ah, it is mentioned that Gshin-rje is also the King of Yi-dvag (Preta).] On top of the outermost circle of twelve links of causation, a full moon is drawn to illustrate the realization of Nirvana at the end. Depiction of the raised hand of Buddha towards the full moon beside the Wheel of Life symbolises the Buddha showing the path to Nirvana.

The Wheel of Life can be discerned through Four Noble Truths and twelve links of causation. Here it is explained from twelve links of causation. Again these twelve links of causation revolve in two different spheres of life - three lower worlds and three upper worlds.

How does twelve links of causation work in three lower worlds (Ngan-'gro)? By the force of ignorance of one's action, a Karma is accumulated which results

in the formation of consciousness having a distinctive mark of various Karmic inclination (vag-chags). This consciousness frequently cultivated by thirst and clinging, leads to three lower worlds of beasts, hungry ghosts and hell. This suffering will last till the exhaustion of Karma accumulated in previous lives. Till the complete ending of various Karma caused by mental delusion, one is subjected to rebirth in another world. Here also one must endure another round of suffering as a water mill to endure the hardship of turning the water for irrigation.

How does twelve links of causation work in three upper worlds (Bde-hgro)? Notwithstanding mental obscuration, caused by the sensual world that prevents one from seeing the true nature of internal and external world, one can still be reborn in upper worlds by the force of virtuous acts of charity (Tib. Sbyin-ba, Skt. Dana), moral conduct (Tib. Tshul-khrim, Skt. Sila), contemplation (Tib. Tin-nge-'zin, Skt. Samadhi) and whatever acts that prevent the mind from vacillation. For example, in the realm of human beings, despite lack of penetration into the real nature, one, however, divert ones mind towards the accumulation of other virtuous acts.

The sum result of these virtuous acts is transferred to a formation of distinct consciousness. This consciousness, cultivated and developed by attachment (Tib. Sred-pa, Skt. Trisna) and grasping (Tib. Len-pa, Skt. Upadana), enters into a mother's womb and then appears in the shape of body and mind. When body and mind gradually develop along with other sense organs (Tib. Skye-mched, Skt. Sadayatana), these sense organs (Tib. Reg-pa, Skt. Sparsa) come into contact with the physical world and experience the sensations (Tib. Tshor-ba, Skt. Vedana) of happiness, sorrow and indifference. The consciousness from its embryonic stage in the mother's womb gradually takes the shape of six sense organs and at the completion of ten months, would appear in the external world. Then it is subjected to yet another vicious circle of suffering. When the body grows it is drawn towards lust (Tib. 'dod-chags, Skt. Raga), anger (Tib. She-sdang, Skt. Dvesa) caused by mental

obscuration (Tib. Gti-mug, Skt. Moha), and as a result he will be overwhelmed by mental and physical affliction. Then he will go again for fresh accumulation of virtuous and sinful Karma. After the completion of previous Karma, his present life will come to an end. However, by the force of various moral and immoral acts cultivated in innumerable past and present lives, his life will be confined within the six realms and go through endless suffering from time to time.

These twelve links of dependent origination are further divided under three heads: (1) Karmic formation (Tib. Las, Skt. Karma), (2) mental defilement (Tib. Nyon-mongs, Skt. Klesa) and (3) suffering (Tib. Sdug-bsnal, Skt. Dukkha). (1) Physical and mental elements (Tib. 'du-byed, Skt. Samskara) and becoming (Tib. Srid-pa, Skt. Bhava) are Karmic formation. (2) Ignorance (Tib. Ma-rig-pa, Skt. Avidya), Attachment (Tib. Sred-pa, Skt. Trisna) and grasping (Tib. Len-pa, Skt. Upadana) are mental defilement. (3) Causative and resulting phase of consciousness (Rgyu-dus dang 'bras-dus-kyi-rnam-ses), name and form (Tib. Skye-mched, Skt. Sadayatana), contact (Tib. Reg-pa, Skt. Sparsa), sensation (Tib. Tshor-ba, Skt. Vedana), Birth (Tib. Skye-ba, Skt. Jati), and old age and death (Tib. Rga-si, Skt. Jaramarana) are suffering.

Emancipation (Tib. Tharpa, Skt. Moksha) means breaking the cord that binds us to transmigratory existence due to ignorance and its Karmic accumulation. By these two factors of ignorance and its consequent Karmic formation, we are bound to the three states of the sensual world (Khams-gsum): 'dod-pa'i Khams, Skt. Kamaloka (the phenomenal world), Gsugs-kyi khams, Skt. Rupaloka (the world of astral forms), Gsugs-med-kyi khams, Skt. Arupaloka (the spiritual world) i.e. the world of formless spirits; five or six worlds: gods and titans, human beings, hungry ghosts, beasts and hell; and four states of earthly existence: born of the womb or viviparous (Mngal-skyes), born out of an egg or oviparous (Sgong-skyes), born out of heat and humidity or moisture sprung (Gdrod-ser-skyes), and born in a supernatural way or apparitional (Rzus-skyes). They have a binding nature and escaping from their cord is called emancipation. Ignorance and its

resulting activities force us to go through this circle of birth and rebirth which is full of suffering. Knowing and contemplating on the Wheel of Life from the standpoint of twelve dependent origination, clearing the fallacies that the six sense organs arise out of nothing (Rgyu-med-pa) or that they are a chaotic creation with no agreement between cause and effect (Mi-mthun-pa'i-rgyu), will attain emancipation. A person who has thought on these in his previous life and continues his endeavour to understand this by virtue of his former inclination will reach the sublime state ('phags-pa'i-go-'phang). This is an excellent method of emancipation from the circle of existence.

On receipt of the painting, King U-tra-ya-na perceived the truth (Tib. Bden-pa mthong-ba, Skt. Satyadar-sana).

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