

**20 February 2021**

## **The First Vow**

*If, when I attain Buddhahood, there should be in my land a hell, a realm of hungry spirits or a realm of animals, may I not attain perfect Enlightenment.*

The first of Dharmakara's 48 vows has to do with the three lower realms. These lower realms are part of our cycle of existence, very much linked to our karma. One can view them from a psychological point of view as well as places where one might experience the horrors of life.

They are depicted in the Bhavachakra painting which is an illustration often found painted on temples in Tibet and India and elsewhere. Bhava is sanscrit for *worldly existence* or *birth*, chakra means *wheel* or *cycle*. Combine the two and we get a complex picture called the Wheel of Life. It is a mandala that shows the reasons why we go around and around in circles. The inner circle is encircled by another circle, which is encircled by another one, and so on until we get to the outer rim which shows the 12 links of dependent origination. It shows the causes and conditions that give rise to our sense of who we are, complete with all the passionate emotions of a foolish human being, either going down into the hell realms or up into the Godly realms until we get to Yama, the God of Time or Death. Glancing quickly, one might feel a sense of despair and hopelessness, however, if you look closely, you will see the Buddha pointing beyond Yama to a moon. Thankfully for us, there is a Buddha found in each of the 6 realms, in a little bubble, showing a way out of this samsaric world.

As with many stories in Buddhism, it is difficult to pinpoint the origin of the Bhavachakra but the depiction of the wheel of life is found in an ancient story about King Bimbisara who was an old friend of the Buddha's. The king who has received a magnificent jewelled robe from King Rudrayana is worried that he has nothing of equal worth to offer back, so he goes to the Buddha to ask him for advice on what he can give in return. The Buddha tells him to paint the wheel of life as an offering.

At the very centre of the image, you will see a rooster, a snake and a pig. They are chasing each other and almost biting off the tail of the animal in front of it. These represent the three poisons found at the heart of all human existence; the pig is ignorant, the rooster is greedy, and the snake is full of spite and anger. Circling around this is a circle of people in which half of the circle is in the dark and the other one is in the light.

Around these two inner circles are the 6 realms of samsara; three godly realms, and the three lower realms. If it is our behaviour that is the cause of going around in circles then it is not impossible to think that we are also responsible for the existence of these realms. One would think one hell would be enough but no, in this illustration it is clear that the three realms are distinct and characterised by particular attributes.

Here we find a realm for hungry ghosts, greedy individuals whose thirst and cravings are never satisfied. The hell realm is a place for those who are angry and hateful. They experience burning fires of rage in addition to the freezing cold of indifference. The animal realm is for those who are ignorant or weak. There is never a moment's rest in this realm for the animals are constantly chased and hunted down by either humans or other animals.

Here is a stark characterisation of the reality that we have to live with, and yet, there is hope. We can find a way out to nirvana at any point even from the very centre of the hub. If only we get rid of the three poisons then we are free. However, our experience from life and many different situations, even from the Buddha's own life, teaches us that this is not easily accomplished. In fact, the Buddha's own story of his encounter with Mara shows us that the way to liberation is not by 'getting rid' of them but by accepting them and being very clear in oneself when they are rising and when they are passing away.

Accomplishing this as the Buddha did is not an easy feat. Observing toddlers can help us to see the ways into the lower realms. We can see greed most clearly when two year olds play with other children. Children are known to love their toys and so it is natural for them to feel worried or scared that another child will take their toy away. If they haven't got a toy or they see another child playing with a better toy then it is natural for them to want what the other child is playing with. I've also seen a contented child change in the blink of an eye as soon as they see another child playing with their favourite toy.

Once a child has got it in her mind that they want their toy back, her greed can quickly change to anger and hatred. Parents like to think that we can placate this child easily by giving them any old toy but most times nothing except the desired object will do. They reject all other toys and remain bad tempered and inconsolable until they get what they want.

This child has instincts and processes that are so quick that we don't even notice how she has gone through all the lower realms again and again in the space of 5 minutes. From "*I want*" to "*I don't like that*" to "*it's mine, Mine, MINE!*" And then back to "*I want*"...

If we look closely in each of the six realms including the three lower ones on the Bhavachakra mandala there is a Buddha in a circle in each of the lower realms. In the animal realm, the Buddha is often seen holding a sword. The Buddha is teaching them to use the sword of wisdom to cut through delusion. As soon as one's ignorance is destroyed then one can find the way out of that realm. In the hell realm, the Buddha is teaching the condemned to use water to clean and wash; symbolic of love and patience washing away our anger, cooling our passions and applying patience. In the realm of the hungry ghosts, the Buddha is teaching the hungry ghosts to make offerings, to be generous and to make sacrifices.

Dharmakara's vision starts with a place where there are no lower realms. This first vow points us to the antidotes to the three poisons. If we want something, then there are many things we can do about it. We don't have to act on every impulse of ours that says, "Mine, mine, mine." We can practice visualising a place where people are generous and helping others. We can imagine what acts of loving-kindness, patience, and cutting through delusion might look like in our own lives and maybe even try them out.