

## The Concept of Enlightenment According to the Buddhist Wheel of Life

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### Abstract

*This paper aims to answer the question: what is the concept of enlightenment according to the Buddhist wheel of life, also known as Bhavacakra. The very aim of Buddhism is to attain Nirvana, not a temporary rebirth in happy realms such as heaven or gods. There are few ways to understand enlightenment (bodhi) and several levels according to either Pali scripture. The Sanskrit scripture represents by the Tibetan and Chinese scripture also given a various range of interpretation. In order to have a broader view then it will be logical to look at those sources. Buddhists aim to attain the highest happiness that is Nirvana. Buddha himself and many teachers have laid down so many methods for us. Our ancestor teachers such as Nagarjuna, Aryadeva, and Buddhaghosa also gave many significant commentaries on this matter, especially those recorded in the Buddhist Wheel of life, teaching the twelve interdependent links.*

### Keywords

Enlightenment; bhavacakra; art; afflictions; happiness; Nirvana



### I. Introduction

Buddhist followers acknowledged that The Shakyamuni Buddha had attained the highest awakening, full enlightenment, also known as sammāsambodhi (S: samyaksambodhi). The term enlightenment is translated from an abstract noun Bodhi, the consummate knowledge that transforms the experience of liberation (vimoksa) from the samsara or the cycle of birth and death.

The root word is budh means “to awaken” or “to open up” (as does a flower), the one who has awakened from the deep sleep of ignorance and opened his consciousness to encompass all objects of knowledge. The term Buddha was used in ancient Indian times by many spiritual groups, but the word Buddha is very closely related to the historical Buddha, Shakyamuni.

There are many contributing factors to Buddha's awakening. The apparent term found in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta is “ekāyano maggo” which is being translated as the single path or the direct path to Nirvana that is the foundation of the practice, mindfulness. According to Vetter, the Buddha's enlightenment is attained by discovering the four noble truths by the practice of meditation. The long way to Nirvana might involve doing no evil, engaging in what is wholesome, purifying one's mind; this is the teaching of the Buddhas (Dhammapada 183). Pranata (2021) state that cultural customs develop in the middle of society with their respective characteristics, acculturated with their beliefs. The cultural traditions that are integrated with Buddhism are complementary and in line with each area where Buddhism develops, this makes Buddhist communities have their own characteristics in

each region. Nowadays, the role of religion when it is related to the lifestyle and mindset of the younger generation (Generation Z) is feared to begin to lose function due to the limited time for children to study religion compared to playing gadgets with all its negative aspects (Wijoyo, 2020).

## II. Research Methods

This paper is a qualitative research study. In order to provide the most fundamental knowledge on the topic by surveying various scholarly sources on the subject of enlightenment, a literature review is the most suitable method. The literature review also provides a general summary of the most current knowledge, allowing the researcher to identify relevant theories to fill previous research gaps. There are three steps in this literature review research: collecting relevant data, examination and categorization, and formulation of conclusion.

### 2.1. Collecting Relevant Data

The process of collecting relevant data mainly from journals, papers, thesis, dissertations, and books. Nowadays, there are primarily electronic-based sources available on the internet. The central question is to answer the concept of enlightenment according to the wheel of life. This approach tries to identify the current understanding of the general idea about enlightenment, then focus on the wheel of life, also known as *Bhavacakra*.

### 2.2. Examination and Categorization

The keywords play an essential role in deciding the relevancy of the data. The simplest way is to read through the abstract and partially examine each material. The reviewer needs to use personal judgment to determine whether the sources are reliable and related closely to the research topic. The process of examination might consume a lot of time and concentration. Once this is done, the reviewer puts all the sources together to categorize them according to the defined keywords, and then the next step is to synthesize them into a new hypothesis. If those theories are inadequate, the reviewer might need to repeat the steps above to fill the gap.

### 2.3. Formulation of Conclusion

The conclusion can be drawn by reviewing all the data that have been collected and categorized. The formulation of a conclusion is done by combining and comparing all theories highlighted from various sources. According to theoretical perspectives, it is essential to look for the common similarity, patterns, and different interpretations offered by various scholars. The final step is to synthesize all relevant concepts to give a more precise statement.

## III. Result and Discussion

A long journey to attain Nirvana is possible since all beings have Buddha-nature. The fundamental realization of the four noble truths is essential. All beings have the innate potential to be enlightened, but for the moment, they are clouded by three poisons, namely greed, hatred, and ignorant. The way of transformation is to transform the three poisons. The step-by-step transform three poisons to help the Buddha-nature to manifest can be seen in the drawing of the wheel of life (*bhavacakra*). It is a piece of art that contains the essence of

liberation, the highest enlightenment. The highest happiness is liberation from cyclic existence, achieving enlightenment whether traveling to the path of the hearer (savaka Buddha), solitary realized (pacekka Buddha), or full enlightenment (sammasambuddha).

### 3.1 Knowledge, Enlightenment, and Nirvana

There are three types of Buddha, as mentioned by Snelling. The first is Arhat, also known as Sāvakabuddha. Sāvaka means hearer or disciple. An Arhat is a person who has fully transcended all passion and desire and attained Nirvana by following the teaching and instruction of the fully enlightened Buddha. The second type is solitary Buddha, also known as Paccakabuddha, who attain Nirvana through self-realization and unaided by the Buddha. Solitary Buddha does not teach the Dharma, but they might provide a moral example for others. The last type of Buddha is above Arhat, and solitary Buddha, a fully-fledged Buddha known as Sammasambuddha, who reached Nirvana by his own efforts and wisdom then teaches the Dharma to others.

The full enlightenment of a Sammasambuddha involving the attainment of three kinds of knowledge as clearly recorded in the Mahāsaccaka Sutta which are: The knowledge of recollecting past lives, the knowledge of the passing away and reappearance of beings, and the last is the knowledge of the ending of the mental fermentations. According to Bronkhorst, only the third knowledge has an obvious connection with the enlightenment concerning the three bits of knowledge. The first two knowledge seemed as a later addition. According to the commentary by Warder, the four noble truths formed the essentials of the Buddha's enlightenment, the unhappiness, its origination, its cessation, and the way leading to this cessation.

Nirvana means 'going out' like a flame; what kind of flame? The fire of greed, hatred, and ignorance. Nirvana is closely related to the third noble truth, that is, niroda, cessation of suffering. Going out of this fire is the ending of samsara which is the cycle of birth and death. Nirvana is also described as "the unconditioned," which means that because everything we experience is conditioned, then we cannot know the nature of Nirvana. However, by meditation, we may experience it.

The concept of no-self (Anattā) and emptiness (Sunyata) is the fundamental essence to be realized. Nirvana, the prime soteriological activity, meditation, is suitable for all, either monastics or lay practitioners, male and female, young or old, to strive for Nirvana, there is not necessarily entering the monastic life.

Attaining Nirvana according to Theravada tradition is to attain Arhat, including the abandonment of the ten fetters. Arhat is closely related to the four stages of Jhāna (meditation absorption). Mahayana asserts that the attaining of Nirvana should reach the highest Nirvana, that is, the fully enlightened Buddha since all beings have the Buddha-nature.

That is why the Mahayanist tend to pursue the path of the bodhisattva by the given rise to bodhicitta and perfecting the six noble qualities (sad pāramitā). The Sammasambuddha is the highest level that one can attain in order to help all sentient beings easily, in contrast with Theravada view that Sammasambuddha can only be one for an extended period.

### 3.2. The Three Poisons

The three poisons include the idea that they are the root of all afflictions. The action rooted in the mental state of greed, hatred, and ignorance bears unwholesome results. Any deed that emerged from greed (lobha), hatred (dosa), and ignorance (moha) is unskillful, blameworthy, results in suffering.

A concrete example given by Buddha to Rahula recorded in Ambalatthika-rahulovada Sutta (Majjhima Nikaya I:414), mentioned that anyone who feels no shame at telling a

deliberate lie would end up losing their integrity. The power of reflection is crucial; if repeated examination on any bodily, verbally, and after deep thought, one found out that particular mental actions that will cause afflictions, unfortunate result, then it is not a worthy action.

The Buddha ever being asked how to ascertain whether spiritual teaching is actual, then the advice that one should check whether the particular "things" or "qualities" that are skillful (kusala), blameless (anavajja), praised by the wise (vinnuppasattha), and when put into practice, are conducive to happiness—using the last criterion to transform greed to non-greed, hate to non-hate, and ignorance into non-ignorance.

The root of afflictions is the mental states that cloud the mind. Unwholesome actions started with this kind of disposition, such as anger, frustration, depression, anxiety, etc.; these states obscures the clarity of mind.

The wise one suggests that to free ourselves from all sorrows, one must watch over their speech, well-controlled their mind, and avoiding evil bodily actions. . The medium of human action of body, speech, and mind are called the three doors. . The term door is self-explanatory; it is an entrance through which one enters or leaves a room or building; it is the same applies to either skillful or unskillful actions.

Buddha draws a comparison to a mirror in order to show the similarity of the power of reflection to bodily, verbal, or mental action. One should give up unskillful actions and choose to continue skillful actions instead. The mind plays a vital role in human life. As stated in the Dhammapada:

*Mind precedes all mental states. The mind is their chief; they are all mind-wrought. If with a pure mind a person speaks or acts, happiness follows him like his never-departing shadow.*

An analogy of a never-departing shadow seemed like a vivid illustration of the acts or speech with the pure mind; then, happiness will always be followed. The mind is paramount in that sense; that is why training the mind is considered very important.

The dialogue between Mahakaccayana and Avantiputta, the king of Madhura, set an example that if a man from whatever caste has committed unskillful actions such as stealing if he has been captured, then for sure the king will either kill, ruin, or banish him. The motive behind the stealing can be varied, such as due to greediness or hatred, or ignorance.

### **3.3. The Art of Bhavacakra**

On Account to Bhikkhu Khantipalo , he mentioned that there are many suttas recorded about interdependent origination. Buddhaghosa in Visudhimagga compared the interdependent origination to a wheel. The Pali scripture somehow said the wheel of interdependent origination but seemed never depicted it at all. The explanation of interdependent origination also found in Mahayana sutra such as Praṭītya-samutpāda-sūtra. (The Noble Mahāyāna Sūtra on Dependent Arising) and Ārya-śāli-stamba-nāma-mahāyāna-sūtra (The Noble Mahāyāna Sūtra “The Rice Seedling”).

The Sarvastivada school recorded a vivid description of this teaching by a picture of the wheel of dependent origination in the Rudrāyaṇa-avadāna. Avadāna is similar to Jataka Stories in Pali scripture. King Rudrāyaṇa made a very precious gift to King Bimbisara of Magadha. King Bimbisara did not know how to offer an equivalent in return, so he went to Buddha for a piece of advice. The Buddha gave an explicit instruction to draw the Bhavacakra and send it to King Rudrāyaṇa. It is mentioned in the Avadāna that after studying the bhavacakra in-depth, King Rudrāyaṇa attained realization.

The painting of the wheel of life (Bhavacakra) has adorned the gateways on sarvastivada monasteries during ancient India time. But nowadays, it is not possible to find any of them anymore. Since the teaching traveled to Tibet, then we can see the picture of Bhavacakra in almost every Buddhist monastery, the pictures for representing the twelve links of interdependent origination. It is said that the translation was from Nagarjuna then taken to Samye, the first Tibetan Monastery.



*Figure 1. Bhavacakra (The Wheel of Life)*

### **3.4. The Central Part**

The central part of the hub of Bhavacakra is symbolized by a rooster, a snake, and a pig wheel around. Each of them having their mouth biting the tail of the animal in front. The rooster represents greed (lobha), the snake represents aversion (dosa), and the pig represents ignorance (moha). These three are the root of cyclic existence (samsara). Liberation or enlightenment is the way of working on the transformation of these so-called three poisons.

### **3.5. The First Ring: The Black and White**

The first ring after the central part is the ring of black and white. This is the ring of karma, the law of cause and effect. One half with a white background symbolizes the wholesome action (kusala karma) that will bring to higher realms rebirth such as human, deva, and demi-god. The other half with black background symbolizes the unwholesome action (akusala karma) that will bring to lower realms rebirth such as hell, animal, and hungry ghost. They are representative of those who practice wholesome action by body, speech, and

mind and also two classes of persons: "going from dark to light" and "going from light to light."

The white path going upward means to be born to higher realms by performing the wholesome actions. The dark path is going down to be reborn to lower realms by performing unwholesome actions. There is still a close connection to the three poisons in the hub that will be propelled to rebirth in either higher realms or lower realms that is the next ring.

#### The Ring Second Ring: The Six Realms

The next ring is the ring of six realms. Three upper part is considered higher realms consist of the realm of deva, demi-god, and human. Then the three lower part is regarded as a lower realm consist of animal, hungry ghost, and hell.

The realm of deva is the place where gods enjoy lives full of pleasure. The conditions make them never have the opportunity to think about Dharma, let alone practicing it. They spent their lives for a very long time, and when death comes, they are entirely unprepared; they are spending their good karma and probably will reborn in a lower realm. The demi-god constantly rages war against deva due to their jealousy. The demi-god always lost in the battle. Humans suffered from physical and mental suffering, such as hunger, thirst, heat, cold, birth, old age, sickness, and death. The human realm is the most suitable place for practicing the Dharma.

The three lower realms suffered the most. The animal suffered from being attacked and eaten by other animals, lives full of fear, and slaughtered by humans. Hungry ghost suffers from extreme hunger and thirst, wandering from place to place to find food and drink. The hell realm has to endure continual unbearable torments, either hot or cold.

#### The Third Ring: The Twelve Links of Dependent Arising

The rim of Bhavacakra is the ring portraits the twelve links of dependent arising. The shape looks like a chain through the universe. That is why the twelve links are called the wheel of life, the relationship of the past, present, and future life.

The "first" link is avijjā (not knowing), not knowing the four noble truths, three poisons, kilesa (defilements), also means lack of wisdom. It is not only general knowledge or fact but the fundamentally mistaken view towards the world that is blinded by three poisons. That is why the picture depicts this link is a blind lady with a stick walking through a petrified forest strewn with bones, a very long and exhausting journey. The lady is walking near the edge of a cliff, and she quickly falls into the lower realm of rebirth. The beginning of darkness is well represented by blindness.

The second link is Saṅkhāra (mental formations) literally means "that which puts together" or conditioned phenomena formed due to volition, or sometimes refers to karma leading to conditioned arising. The formation is the latent energy that will cause retribution in the future. The picture depicts this as a potter shaping a vessel or pot. A successful and beautiful pot is a wholesome action; when he cracks the pot carelessly, it becomes an unwholesome action. The image of the pot is common in Indian culture and is considered a daily live item.

The third link is viññāṇa, translated as consciousness that related to senses bases (āyatana), aggregates (khandha), and causes (nidana). The latter provides a ground for karma, rebirth, and liberation. The picture depicts this link as a monkey jumping from one tree to the other aimlessly. Monkey is the traditional image for human consciousness. An old tree symbolized previous life has died, and then the mental continuum continues to another tree. The new tree will bear either good or blemished fruits. The Tibetan picture shows a monkey eats fruits immoderately.

The fourth link is Nāmarūpa (name and form) refers to the constituent of a human being. Nāma refers to psychological elements, and rūpa is the physical. Name consists of

feeling, perception, intention, contact, and attention. Both name and form exist in one personality that is why the picture depicts this link by two separate men in one boat and floating unstably. The mind is doing the work of punting the boat on the river of cravings; then the body is the passenger. The Buddhist rejects the idea that name and form are permanent.

The fifth link is *saḷāyatana* (six sense bases), the sense organs and their objects. The eye and vision, ear and hearing, nose and olfaction, tongue and taste, skin and touch, and mind and thought. The six sense-bases arise from the name and form. The picture depicts this link as a dwelling with six windows.

The sixth link is *phassa* (contact, touching, sense-impression). When the sense organ, sense object, and sense consciousness are coming together, then *phassa* appears. *Phassa* has a function to provide a basis for feeling, either pleasant, neutral, and unpleasant. The symbol of this link is a couple kissing or hangout together or a man and a woman embracing. Imagine if there are no sense organs, then it would not be possible to have contact.

The seventh link is *Vedanā* (feeling or sensation). The three feelings are: pleasant, neutral, and unpleasant. For the feeling to function, it has to associate with consciousness. Craving and clinging to feeling leads to suffering, vice versa; if one concentrates, be mindful, and clearly comprehends the feeling, it will lead to enlightenment. The picture depicts this link as a man pierce his eyes with an arrow; this is a powerful illustration.

The eighth link is *Tañhā* (thirst, desire, craving, either physical or mental). *Tañhā* refers to endless desires for gratification. This desire leads to the suffering of frustration and motivates people to perform various actions, leading to further rebirths, leading to conflict between individuals and groups. The force of past habits will be swept us away and grow stronger. We need mindfulness to recognize, and then through contemplation can help us be aware of three poisons and the manifestation of any kind of feelings. The picture depicts this link as a picnic of eating and drinking intoxicants due to hunger and thirst. Human beings tend to attach to pleasant feelings and reject unpleasant feelings, which reinforces attachment and aversion.

The ninth link is *Upādāna* (laying hold of or grasping) is the intensified craving for material things, sensual pleasures, views opposite to Dharma, rites, ritual, and soul or self that is being permanent. The resultant or karma of all previous and the cause of all future lives. The other meaning of *Upādāna* is "fuel," *Upādāna* and *tañhā* are the two most important causes of suffering. The cessation of *Upādāna* and *tañhā* leads to Nirvana. The symbol of this link is a monkey picking fruit. The monkey will never stop picking the fruits, same a human when they develop a desire to obtain or reject something, and then it is challenging to stop it.

The tenth link is *bhava* (being, worldly existence, becoming, birth). In the context of dependent origination, then the meaning is becoming due to craving and grasping. *Bhava* is the continual becoming in the sense of rebirth from one realm to the other, the maturation of life. *Bhava* also means habitual or emotional tendencies. The symbol of this link is a couple having sexual intercourse.

The eleventh link is *Jāti* (birth), or the arising of mental phenomena. The birth is conditioned by becoming (*bhava*) then giving rise to old age and death in a living being. The symbol of this link is a woman giving birth.

The twelfth link is *Jarāmaraṇa* (old age and death). *Jarāmaraṇa* is the self-evident meaning of impermanent; all phenomena in the samsara will not last long. There is nothing in this world that can stay the same forever, and if there is birth, then there will be old age and death. Birth, old age, and death indeed identified as the aspect of suffering. Human beings are composed of five aggregates; there are always in the process of constant change, being born

and dying. The symbol of this link is a corpse being carried away (and bodies on the ground).

### **3.6. The Lord of Death and the Moon**

The wheel is grip by a fearsome being is the represents impermanence (Anicca). That particular being is known as Yama, the Lord of Death. Yama is the king of hell in the Buddhist pantheon and is also considered a divinity (Deva). According to Indian and Chinese sources, Yama is described as the judge of the dead. Everything in this wheel is constantly changing; that is why it is the symbolized meaning of impermanence.

According to Bhikkhu Khantipalo, the crown of five skulls on Yama's head is the impermanence of five aggregates, or sometimes five poisons. The third eye of the Yama is the wisdom eye that understands impermanence. We shall see the tiger skin hanging beneath the wheel symbolizes fearfulness. At the bottom of the figure of bhavacakra, we can see the endless tail symbolize the interminable and countless of the cyclic existence, the repeating of our good and bad karma that binds us in samsara. Yama has four limbs clutching the wheel to symbolize the suffering of birth, old age, sickness, and death.

The high above to the left of the figure of bhavacakra is the moon. The bright full moon is depicted as enlightenment, and it is related to the third noble truth, the cessation of suffering. The moon is waxing the dark clouds due to the transformation of three poisons. There are few different drawings, such as the pure land school of Mahayana, which may show the image of a pure land rather than a moon. Sometimes the moon is being replaced by the bodhisattva of Avalokiteshvara, the emanation of great compassion.

On the opposite side of the moon is the figure of Buddha pointing his hand to the moon. The Buddha already freed himself from the cycles of birth and death; that is why he is outside the bhavacakra. The hand pointing is the Dharma instruction, and the direction is to the moon means that the instruction to attained full enlightenment, to the other shore of highest happiness, Nirvana. The Dharma instruction is the Noble Eightfold Path, and for Mahayana will be the step-by-step path of the bodhisattva to full enlightenment for the sake of all sentient beings.

### **3.7. An Example in Everyday Life**

Once there was a young man who is working for a Buddhist College. There were few dogs live nearby, everywhen the young man passed by the college, nothing happened to him, until one day he was feeling unwell and at that time he walks past by a dog, out of his frustration he kicked the dog, of course, the dog felt deep pain and run away. The next day when the young man passed by the college again, the dog from yesterday attacked and bitten him; once again, the man was so frustrated.

The ignorance is that the young failed to recognize why he was unwell on that day, which is nothing to do with the dog. As a result, the young man gives rise to the mental formation, and he projects his unwell feeling of frustration to the dog when he saw it. Under the influence of his mental formation, he thought (consciousness) the way to reduce his unwell feeling is by harming the dog. The young man was using his leg (body) to kick the dog, and he was so satisfied to learn that the dog was in pain; his facial expression changes his mind, given satisfaction at the same time given rise to fear.

Six sense bases the touch by his leg and ear listen to the crying dog, which is the contact. He was feeling guilty and not comfortable. The next day, when he passes by the college again, a craving arises again about the unwell feeling; when he saw the dog again, then the craving intensified becomes clinging, which he interpreted as a direct challenge from



the dog. Under the influence of craving and clinging, the young man was trying to attack the dog once again, this is the becoming, but this time dog has successfully bitten his leg.

The birth is the wound caused by the dog, and the relationship between the young and dog somehow became deteriorate. The aging and death process, in this case, is the continuation of their relationship. Maybe the young man's fear might increase or decrease, and the hatred of the dog also the same.

## IV. Conclusion

To conclude this paper, I would like to summarize my points about the concept of enlightenment according to Pali, and Mahayana scripture is the attainment of Nirvana. The cessation of all suffering, the third noble truth. Concerning the bhavacakra, it is the hub depicted by the snake (hatred), rooster (greed), and pig (ignorance) that bind us to samsara.

The Theravada school is aiming for the attainment of Sāvaka Buddha (Arhat), and the Mahayana school aspires to walk the bodhisattva path by giving rise to bodhicitta for the sake of all sentient beings.

The art of bhavacakra gives an evident description with the image of each essential teaching of the Buddha. The three poisons, the wholesome and unwholesome actions, the six realms, and the twelve links of interdependent origination. There is the teaching to help us realize the enlightenment and attain our final goal, Nirvana.

Therefore, the concept of enlightenment is Nirvana, either travels through the path to Arhat or the path of a bodhisattva, the essence of the enlightenment is the knowledge or wisdom, the blowing out (Nirvana) of all disturbing emotions and fetters, this is the highest happiness of the teaching of the Buddha.

### 4.1. Postscript

The teaching of the Buddha has been giving a profound impact since then, about 2600 years ago. The way Buddha elaborates his insight was eloquent yet easy to understand. During ancient India, the method of transmitting the teaching was by oral tradition, and I supposed that the capacity to memorize the teaching is pretty high during that time.

There is no doubt that the capacity of memorizing the teaching has been decreasing over many years; that is why people start to find many ways to preserve the teaching. One of the ways is by using pictures or drawing. The bhavacakra is considered a gift from ancient India that traveled to Tibet. The Tibetans have been continuing to draw this image and put it on the wall of their monastery.

The way to communicate the Buddha's teaching by using pictures is a brilliant idea, especially for those known as visual learners; by looking at the picture, they can create a mental image, memorize all the details, and easily relate the teaching. For those who are familiar with listening is considered as an audio learner. And then there is also audio-visual learner can learn according to their tendency respectively.

The teaching has been passed down from generation to generation. Our duty as the continuation of the Buddha is to preserve the essential teaching and work towards the enlightenment to the other shore of the highest happiness, Nirvana. Now and then, we do need new ways of presenting the ancient teaching of the Buddha to benefit many people.

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