

The Wheel of Life



**EVER WONDERED WHAT HAPPENS
AFTER WE DIE?**



Wheel of Life

Samara

- Pali - bhavacakka
- Sanskrit - bhavacakra
- Indian origins
- (Ajanta cave in south India)
- A visual “map” of the birth, death, rebirth, and the workings of karma.
- shows the cycles of existence or samsara
- This wheel is often depicted in Tibetan Buddhism, but the original idea originated in India around the time of the Buddha.



Rebirth in the Zen Tradition



Rebirth in the Zen Tradition

In the great work of life and death, time will not wait for you.

If you die tomorrow, what kind of body will you get?

Is not all of this of great importance?

Rebirth in the Zen Tradition

The Five Precepts

The First Precept: I vow to abstain from taking life.

Killing roots out our seeds of love and mercy. To kill another is to feast on one's friends and relatives. Some day we shall be in one of the three painful realms in payment for our killing, for it is by bestowing life that we receive human life in return.

The Second Precept: I vow to abstain from taking things not given.

The taking of things not given cuts off the roots of virtue and wisdom; attaining ease, we shall lose this ease. By but desiring anything of another, we are brought in the future face to face with animal rebirth.

The Third Precept: I vow to abstain from misconduct done in lust.

Unchastity cuts off the seed of purity. Impurity is ultimately of the pure dharmakaya. Look rather at the cauldron, for therein are all those who in future years break this precept.

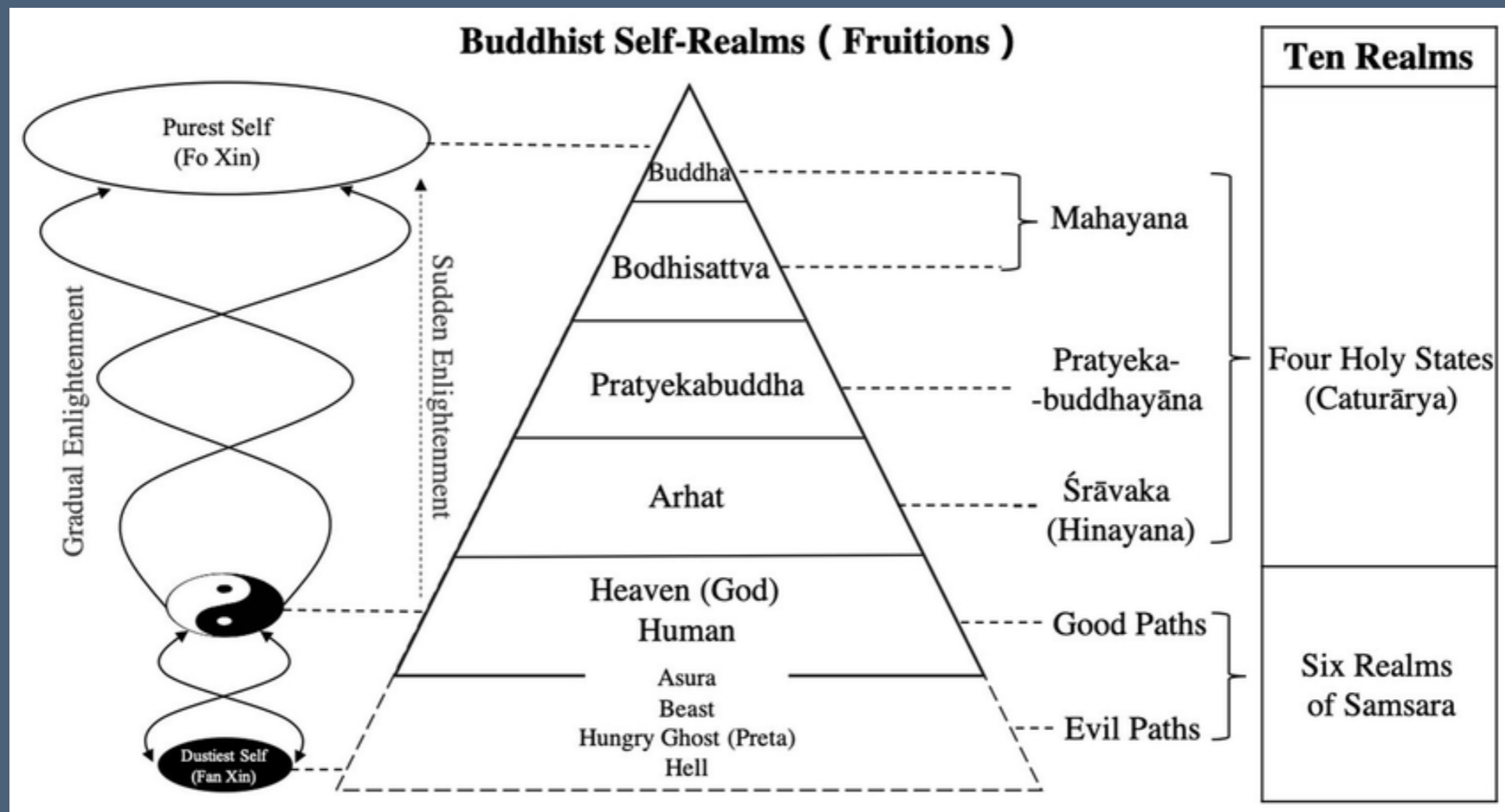
The Fourth Precept: I vow to abstain from lying.

Lying cuts off the seed of the truth; heaven does not allow the cheating of the saints, nor lying against the holy ones. Should liars avoid the hell where their tongues are ripped out, then they will be reborn as birds, in recompense for their evil.

The Fifth Precept: I vow to abstain from intoxicants, taken to induce heedlessness.

Liquor cuts off the roots of wisdom; generation after generation we remain in a stupor, as one drunk. The Buddha teaches that one who does not keep these five precepts shall in a future life lose their human stature.

Buddhist Cosmology 101



Buddhist Cosmology

- In Buddhism, the concept of **eternity** doesn't exist because the core principle is impermanence (anicca), meaning everything, including the self, is constantly changing and subject to decay, not permanent. This contrasts with the idea of a fixed, eternal soul or self.
- **Kalpa** - a vast period of time, often used to describe the cycles of creation, existence, and the destruction of a world or universe.
- 1 kalpa = 16 million years
- small kalpa = 1000 regular kalpas or about 16.8 billion years
- medium kalpa = 336 billion years
- great kalpa = 1.3 trillion years

Differences Between Concepts of Devine

Abrahamic Religions (Judaism, Christianity, Islam)	Dharmic Religions (Buddhism, Jainism)
God is Singular	No creator god (Deities may continuously manifest)
God is omnipresent, omniscient, omnibenevolent, omnipotent, eternal	Deities, Dharma Protectors, Elementals (Nagas), and Supernatural beings are fluid, subject to change, and pluralistic (Emanations)
Salvation through personal relationship	Self-realization, enlightenment, liberation

JAINISM

No
creator
god
eternal
souls
(*jīvas*)

HINDUISM

One
ultimate God
and a soul
(*ātman*)

BUDDHISM

No creator
god
and no eternal
soul (*anattā*)

Elementals

Sanshin or Sansin

If we stretch the definition, The Korean Sanshin and Buddhist Naga shares traits with an Earth and Water elemental:

- Deep connection to the landscape.
- Guardian of natural terrain.
- Embodiment of natural power and fertility

But these spirits are more anthropomorphic, personal, and divine than typical elementals. It can receive offerings, communicate in visions, and be prayed to.

Nagas





MUKALINDA



MUBDHINDA



SAMUDDHAJA



VIRUPAKSHA



ERAPATHA



KULIKA



VIRAUPAKSA



VIRUPAKKA



NAGA PANTHEON

- The **Naga** is a familiar figure in most of south Asia—a dragon or serpent-like figure that can also take on the form of a man.
- It is generally a friendly spirit, dwelling beneath lakes and rivers or at the root of trees; and it will protect villages near its home.



- **Mukalinda** - A prominent naga who sheltered the Buddha from rain and storms while he meditated.
- Often depicted with a multi-headed hood fanning out over the Buddha.

Sanshin

Korean Mountain Spirit



MusangSa - Seung Sahn International Zen Center



MusangSa - Seung Sahn International Zen Center





- Sanshin or Sansin are local mountain spirits in Korean Shamanism and folk beliefs. In South Korea, most Buddhist temples and major shamanic shrines, and some traditionalist villages, have a dedicated shrine called a sanshin-gak or an altar called a sanshin-dan dedicated to the local sanshin.
- This nature-deity is typically represented in the enshrined icons as an elder male (in rare cases, mature female) figure in royal-Confucian clothing, always accompanied by at least one tiger and a Korean Red Pine tree.

The Wheel of Life



Yama

- The terrible face of Yama, who represents impermanence, peers over the top of the Wheel. In spite of his appearance, Yama is not evil. He is a wrathful dharmapala, a creature devoted to protecting Buddhism and Buddhists.
- In legend, Yama was a holy man who believed he would realize enlightenment if he meditated in a cave for 50 years. In the 11th month of the 49th year, robbers entered the cave with a stolen bull and cut off the bull's head. When they realized the holy man had seen them, the robbers cut off his head also.
- But the holy man put on the bull's head and assumed the terrible form of Yama. He killed the robbers, drank their blood, and threatened all of Tibet. He could not be stopped until Manjushri, Bodhisattva of Wisdom, manifested as the even more terrible dharmapala Yamantaka and defeated Yama. Yama then became a protector of Buddhism.



Wheel of Life - Central Symbols

- The Three Poisons
- At the Wheel's center, three creatures symbolize the three poisons or the three primary afflictions that keep us bound to samsara.
- The **pig** signifies ignorance.
- The **snake** symbolizes anger or hatred.
- The **rooster** represents greed.
- These three afflictions keep the Wheel turning. The animals usually are drawn chasing each other in a circle, sometimes biting the tail of the animal before. (Lion's Roar - Buddhism A-Z)



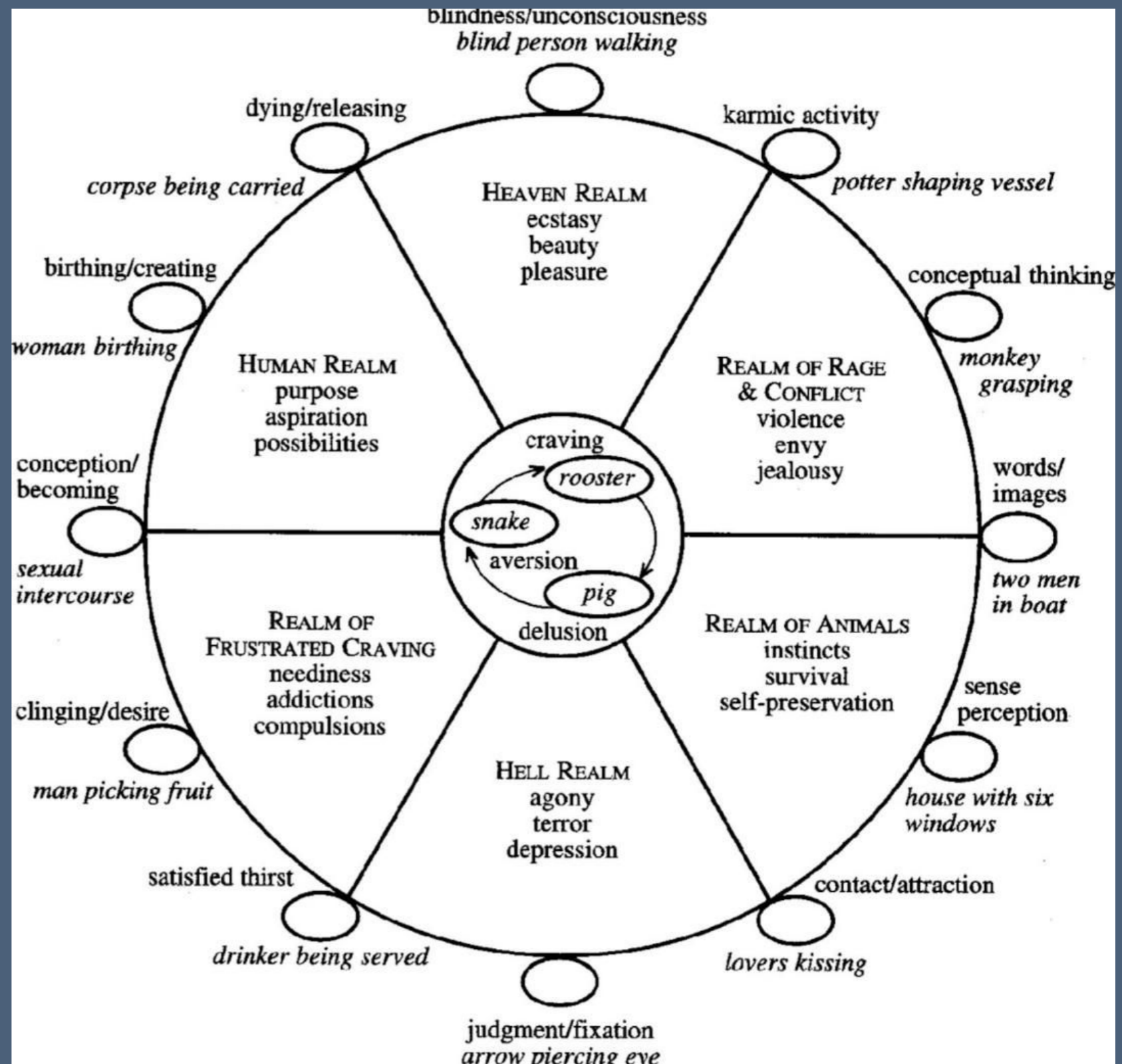
Wheel of Life - Second Layer

- The second layer represents the fruits of karma.
- Here, the Wheel presents two half-circles:
 - a **bright one** portrays individuals ascending to a fortunate rebirth or possibly liberation from the Wheel.
 - The people in the **dark half-circle** are heading for one of the less pleasant of the Six Realms. (Lion's Roar - Buddhism A-Z)



Wheel of Life - Third Layer - The Six Realms

- The third layer of the Wheel is the largest one. It illustrates six realms of samsara, or the six realms of desire which may be understood as physical places or as mental or psychological states.
- Usually, in each realm, the artist adds a buddha or bodhisattva, offering compassion and the dharma.



Wheel of Life - Third Layer - The Six Realms



The Deva Realm (Realm of the Gods)



The Deva Realm (Realm of the Gods)

- This is at the top of the standard Wheel. The devas are gods or celestial beings. They enjoy wealth and power and live very long lives. However, their privileges blind them to the suffering of others, and they do not develop wisdom and compassion. Even the devas eventually die and are subject to another rebirth.
- The Realm of the Gods (Devas) sounds like a nice place to live. And, no question, you can do a lot worse. But even the Realm of the Gods isn't perfect. Those born in the God Realm live long and pleasure-filled lives. They have wealth, power, and happiness. So what's the catch?

The Deva Realm (Realm of the Gods)

- The catch is that because the Devas have such rich and happy lives they don't recognize the truth of suffering. Their happiness is, in a way, a curse, because they have no motivation to seek liberation from the Wheel. Eventually, their happy lives end, and they must face rebirth in another, less happy, realm.
- The Devas are perpetually at war with their neighbors on the Wheel, the Asuras. This depiction of the Wheel shows the Devas charging the Asuras.

Compass of Zen Commentary

- The heavenly realm is a place of stillness and bliss. In this state, there is only complete happiness. Sentient beings can get to this state by doing only good actions and making the good karma that comes from it.
- This is not like the biblical heave. In this realm, the beings do not follow some god. It is a realm or state of mind created by those who have made bliss karma. And eventually, having enjoyed the blissful fruit of doing good actions, their good karma is exhausted - you could say that the balance account is used up.
- When this occurs, they must fall back to some lower realm realm after a period of time. The heavenly realm is like a vacation land, a very good situation, so you cannot practice there.
- If you attach to heaven, then you cannot function everywhere to help all beings. So don't make anything, not even heaven: then you are free.

The Asuras (Jealous God Realm)



The Asuras (Jealous God Realm)



The Asuras (Jealous God Realm)



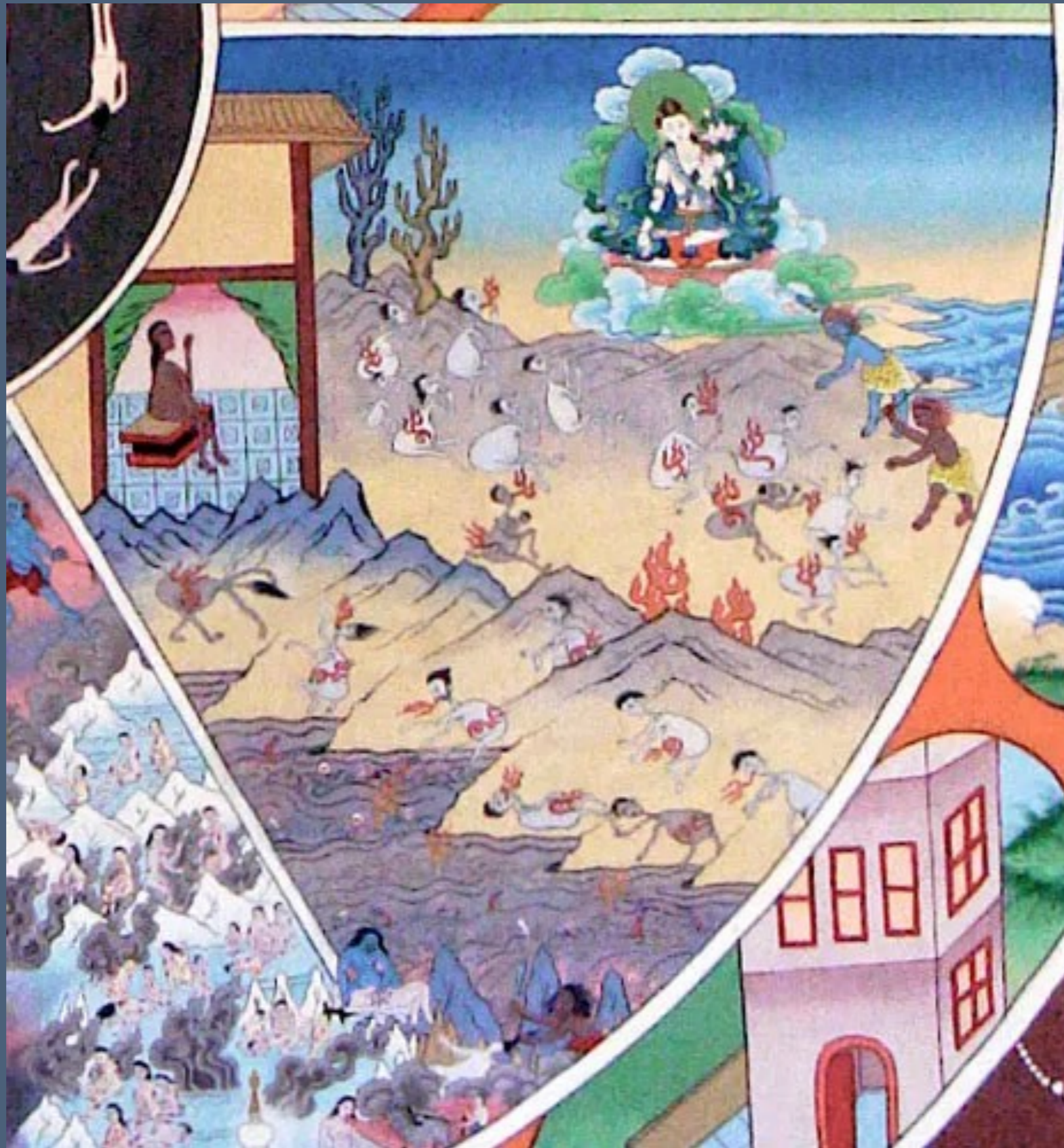
The Asuras (Jealous God Realm)

- Moving clockwise from the Deva Realm is the Asura Realm. Asuras also are powerful and privileged, but they are also envious. They hunger for power, for status, for everything the devas have. Some Wheels show the asuras attacking the devas.
- Asuras are hyper-competitive and paranoid. They are driven by a desire to beat their competition, and everyone is competition. They have power and resources and sometimes accomplish good things with them. But, always, their first priority is getting to the top. I think of powerful politicians or corporate leaders when I think of Asuras.

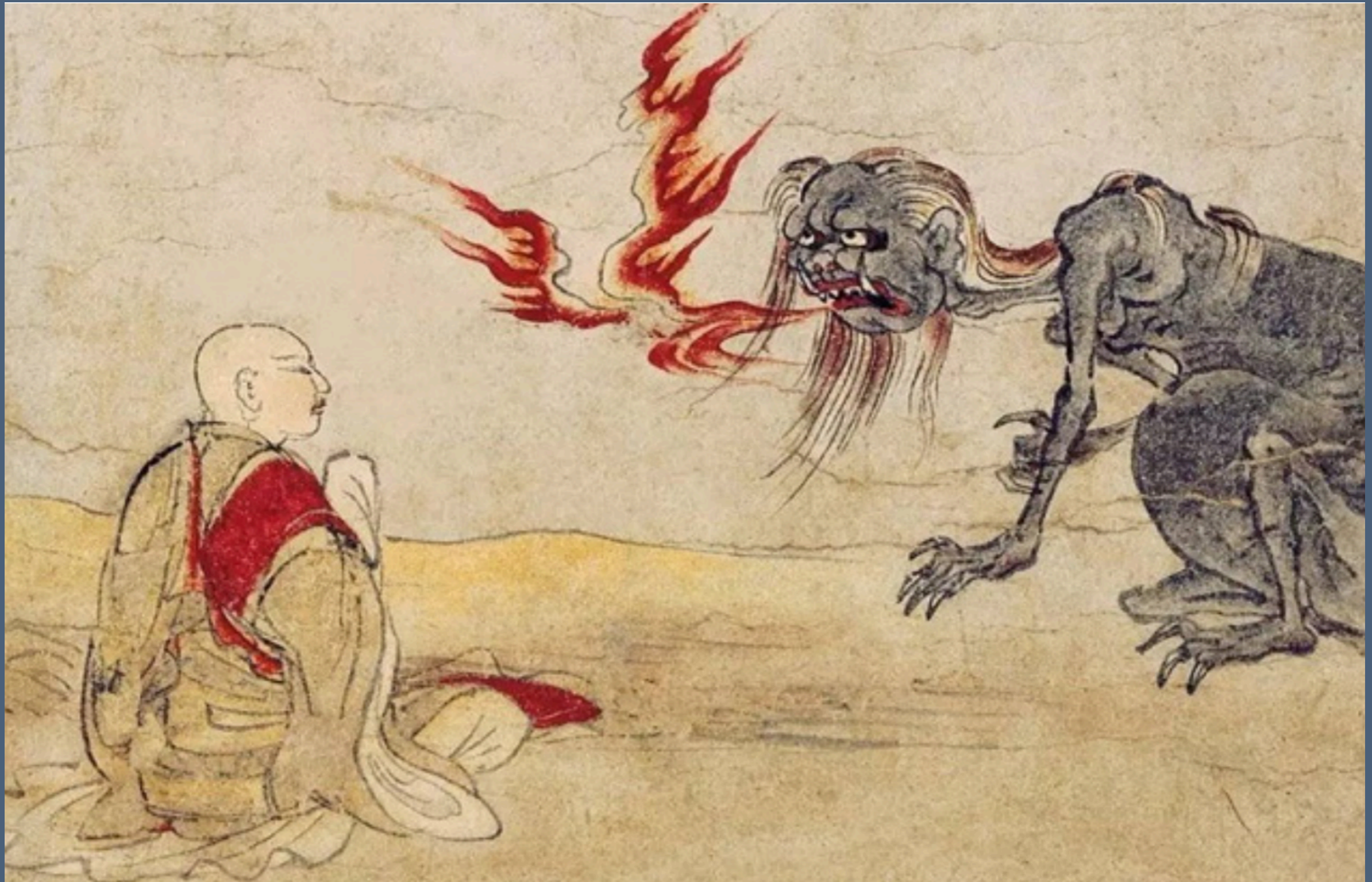
Compass of Zen Commentary

- The asura realm is the condition of fighting mind. We sometimes call this the god army. If you have some anger, or jealousy, and strong dharma energy, you become an asura. These are the fighting spirits. The place is not so good, and not bad.

Preta or Hungry Ghost Realm



Preta or Hungry Ghost Realm



Preta or Hungry Ghost Realm



Preta or Hungry Ghost Realm

- The Preta or Hungry Ghost Realm is usually right beneath the Asura Realm. Hungry ghosts are pitiful beings with huge, empty stomachs. But they have tiny mouths, and their necks are so thin they cannot swallow. They are characterized by insatiable hunger and craving and are also associated with addiction, obsession, and compulsion.
- Greed and jealousy lead to rebirth as a Hungry Ghost. The Hungry Ghost Realm often, but not always, is depicted between the Asura Realm and the Hell Realm. It is thought the karma of their lives was not quite bad enough for a rebirth in the Hell Realm but not good enough for the Asura Realm.
- Psychologically, Hungry Ghosts are associated with addictions, compulsions, and obsessions. People who have everything but always want more may be Hungry Ghosts.

Compass of Zen Commentary

- The hungry-ghost realm is the mind that only follows its strong desires. The Buddha taught that these beings are like creatures with very, very large mouths, but their throats are very thin.
- Although they are always hungry, even one grain of rice or a single tiny crumb cannot pass down their throats, so they are never satiated. If you only stay attached to your desire-mind, we call that having a hungry-ghost mind.
- You want many, many things in this life, but you cannot get anything. So you are always suffering a great deal. We can see this kind of mind functioning in many people nowadays. Be careful!

Hungry Ghost Festival



Making traditional street offerings to the Pretas or Hungry Ghosts during Hungry Ghost Festival on the 15th day (full moon) of the 7th Lunar Month. Making offerings properly (burning or blessing them) allows suffering Hungry Ghosts to be relieved from suffering.

SEVENTEEN Things NOT to Do During Ghost Month

1. NEVER disturb the offerings. Traditionally offerings are placed out in Buddhist and Daoist areas on the street. Avoid disturbing them. If you accidentally knock them or step over them, always apologize.
2. NEVER whistle at night unless you want to attract a hungry ghost.
3. NEVER sit in the front row of a theatrical or movie performance during Ghost Month. The front row is for the Hungry Ghosts.
4. AVOID swimming at sea, lake, pond or river during Ghost month. Ghosts like yin areas, water, fog, darkness.
5. DO NOT pick up any object, especially money, from the ground or street. You may bring home a ghost.
6. DO NOT Stay out too late, or if you can't avoid night, stay with other people.
7. REFRAIN from wearing red clothing during Ghost month.
8. NEVER mention ghosts or death, especially at night.
9. AVOID making negative comments, gossip or other negative speech.
10. DO NOT tap someone on the shoulder. If you feel someone tap on your shoulder, ignore it.
11. REFRAIN from moving into a new house or other large life milestone events during Ghost Month
12. NEVER Open an umbrella indoors.
13. DO NOT take photos at night.
14. DO NOT hang up wet laundry at night during Ghost Month.
15. NEVER take the last bus or train during Ghost Month.
16. NEVER point your slippers at your bed. Always point them away. (Pointing them at your bed is an invitation for a "ghost" to join you.)
17. DO NOT SING or WHISTLE when out alone at night — ghosts are attracted by the sound.

The Animal Realm



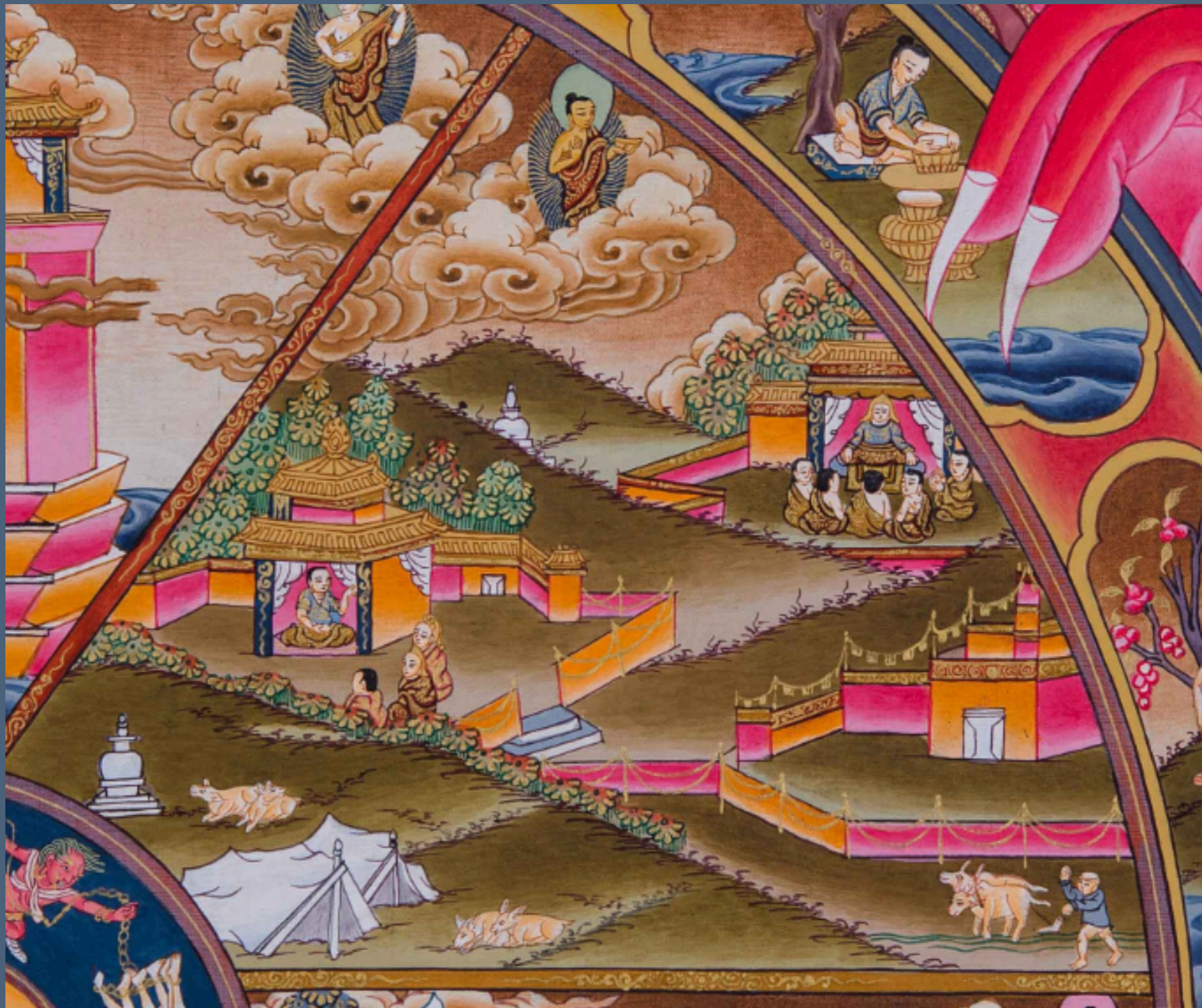
The Animal Realm

- The Animal Realm. Animal beings are marked by prejudice and distrust of anything unfamiliar. They constantly fear becoming prey to other animals.
- Animal Beings (Tiryakas) are solid, regular, and predictable. They cling to what is familiar and are disinterested, even fearful, of anything unfamiliar.
- The Animal Realm is marked by ignorance and complacency. Animal Beings are stolidly un-curious and are repelled by anything unfamiliar. They go through life seeking comfort and avoiding discomfort. They have no sense of humor.
- Animal Beings may find contentment, but they easily become fearful when placed in a new situation. Naturally, they are bigoted and likely to remain so. At the same time, they are subject to oppression by other beings—animals do devour each other, you know.

Human Realm



Human Realm



Human Realm

- The Human Realm. On the upper left, between the Animal and Deva realms, is the Human Realm. It is only from this realm that one may escape the Wheel and enter Nirvana.
- Liberation from the Wheel is possible only from the Human Realm.
- The Human Realm is marked by questioning and curiosity. It is also a realm of passion; human beings (Manushyas) want to strive, consume, acquire, enjoy, and explore.
- Here, the Dharma is openly available, yet only a few seek it. The rest become caught up in striving, consuming, and acquiring, and miss the opportunity.

Compass of Zen Commentary

- The Buddha taught that this is the most precious and difficult birth to obtain because only human beings can hear the Dharma and practice. Only human beings can get the enlightenment that cuts off birth and death and transmigration among these realms.
- Getting a human body is very difficult, so we should not waste this opportunity. It is very, very precious. If you fall from the human realm, it takes many, many kalpas to return to your human state.

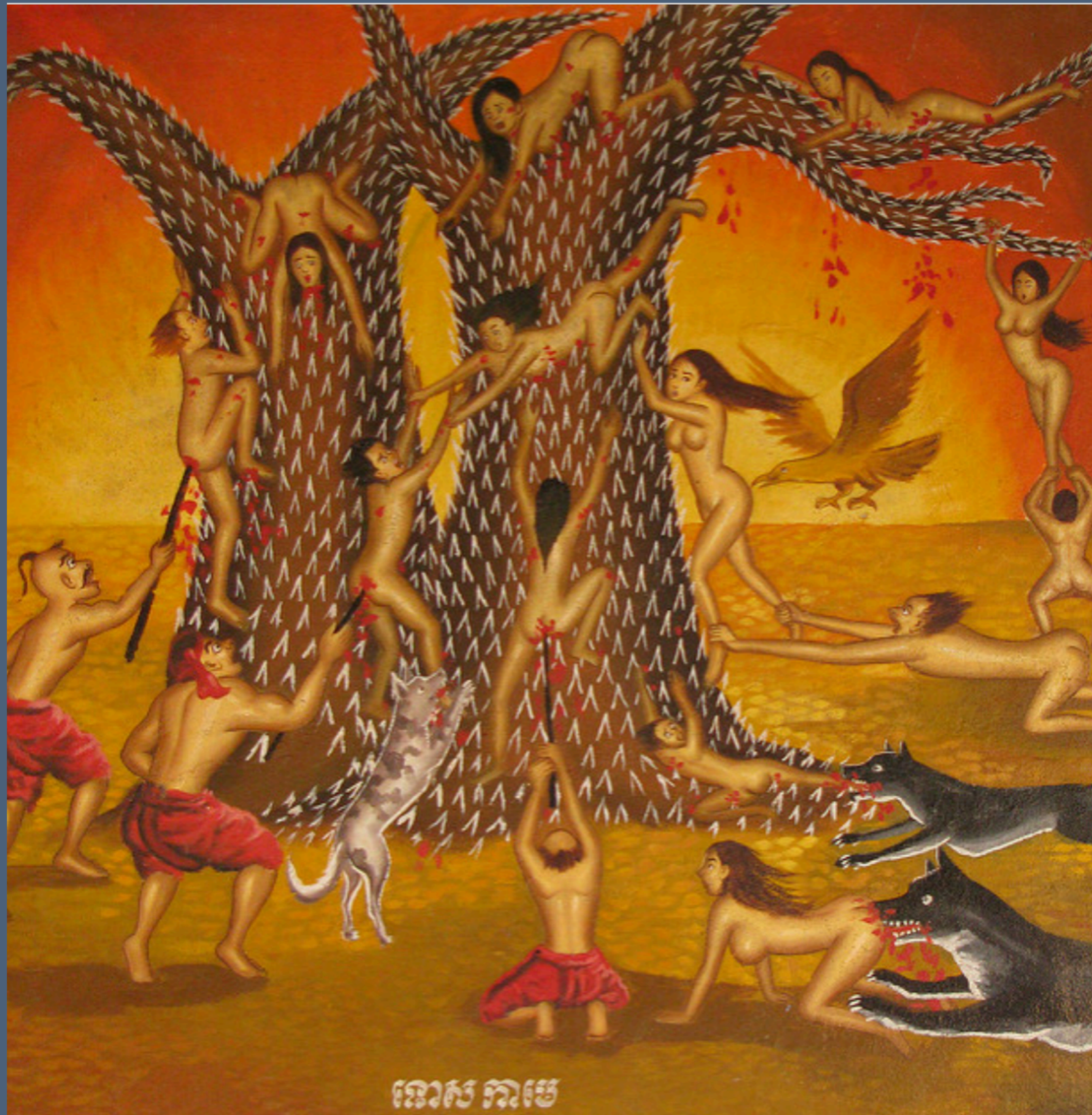
Naraka (Hell Realm)



Naraka (Hell Realm)



Naraka (Hell Realm)





NARAKA

𑖀𑖩𑖫 *Niraya*

- **Naraka** is not eternal, though when a timescale is given, it is suggested to be extraordinarily long.
- No God is required to be involved in determining a being's entry and exit to and from the realm.
- Rather, the mind ends up here—as is the case with all the other realms in Buddhist cosmology—by natural law: the law of karma, and it remains until the negative karma that brought it there has been used up.

Naraka (Hell Realm)

- Naraka or the Hell Realm. This usually is the realm at the bottom of the Wheel. This is the most terrible of the Six Realms. Unchecked anger and aggression lead to the Hell Realm. It is also marked by anger, terror, and claustrophobia.
- The Hell Realm is depicted as a place partly of fire and partly of ice. In the fiery part of the realm, Hell Beings (Narakas) are subjected to pain and torment. In the icy part, they are frozen.
- Interpreted psychologically, Hell Beings are recognized by their acute aggression. Fiery Hell Beings are angry and abusive, and they drive away anyone who would befriend or love them. Icy Hell Beings shove others away with their unfeeling coldness. Then, in the torment of their isolation, their aggression increasingly turns inward, and they become self-destructive.

Number of Hells	Name / Type	Tradition / Region	Description
16 Hells	8 Hot + 8 Cold Hells	Theravāda (Sri Lanka, Thailand, Myanmar)	Found in the Visuddhimagga and Pāli Canon. The hot hells (like Sañjīva, Kālasañjīva) are places of burning and pain; the cold hells (like Arbuda, Nirarbuda) involve freezing torment. These are non-eternal realms based on karma.
18 Hells	Shíbā dìyù (十八地獄)	Chinese Mahāyāna (China, Taiwan)	Systematized in folk Buddhism and temple art. Each hell corresponds to a specific moral transgression (e.g., lying, theft, disobedience). Often connected to the Ten Kings of Hell (Yama).
64,000 Hells	Symbolic countless hells	Vajrayāna / Esoteric Mahāyāna (Tibet, Mongolia, Nepal)	Found in texts like the Abhidharmakośa and tantric commentaries. The number is symbolic, reflecting infinite karmic permutations. These are categorized under main hells with countless subhells.

Compass of Zen Commentary

- This is the realm of complete suffering. If you make very bad karma, this karma pulls you into some kind of hell mind. When you die, this condition of extreme suffering continues for many kalpas of existence.

Korean Hells



Buddhist Hells or “Jiok – 지옥” in Korean

1. Hell of Hanging Bars	10. Hell of Ice
2. Hell of the Wrongful Dead	11. Hell of Molting
3. Hell of the Pit of Fire	12. Hell of Dismemberment
4. Fengdu Hell	13. Hell of Oil Cauldrons
5. Hell of Tongue Ripping	14. Hell of Darkness
6. Hell of Skinning	15. Hell of the Mountain of Knives
7. Hell of Grinding	16. Hell of the Pool of Blood
8. Hell of Pounding	17. Avici Hell
9. Hell of Dismemberment by Vehicles	18. Hell of Weighing Scales

The Ten Kings of the Underworld



Siwang - The Ten Kings of the Underworld

- An important part of Buddhist rituals, the practice of worshipping the ten kings of hell, along with its corresponding visual culture, was soon introduced to Korea and flourished during the Goryeo dynasty (918–1392).
- Throughout a 49-day mourning period, family members of the deceased make offerings to each of the ten kings of hell at proper intervals to ensure that the newly dead person could escape severe judicial torture and earn a pardon.
- Spirits whose families failed to make proper offerings were left to endure the worst trials and pay fully for past sins in their next lives.

Siwang - The Ten Kings of the Underworld





Siwang - The Ten Kings of the Underworld

The First King: The Great King of Qin



Sinners will stand before King Taegwang and stooping out of fear and respect. And at the bottom right stands a virtuous woman carrying her donation of a scroll. King Taegwang presides over a soul after its seventh day in the underworld.

Siwang - The Ten Kings of the Underworld

The Second King: The King of the First River



King Chogang presides over a spirit after 14 days in the underworld. In the second court of the underworld, the dead have no hope of escape.

Siwang - The Ten Kings of the Underworld

The Third King: The Imperial King of Song



The Imperial King of Song presides over the dead after 21 days in the underworld.

Siwang - The Ten Kings of the Underworld

The Fourth King: The King of the Five Offices



The name of the fourth king literally means “King of the Five Offices” in English. This king appears before the dead after 28 days in the underworld.

Siwang - The Ten Kings of the Underworld

The Fifth King: King Yama



King Yama appears before the dead after 35 days in the underworld. Another tool of justice employed by King Yama is the Karma Mirror, which displays the sinner and their karma from their previous life.

Siwang - The Ten Kings of the Underworld

The Sixth King: The King of Transformations



King Byeonsong appears before the dead after 42 days in the underworld. Those sent there after death are turned into various animals based upon their karma.

Siwang - The Ten Kings of the Underworld

The Seventh King: The King of Mt. Tai



The King of Tai presides over the passage of the dead at 49 days.

Siwang - The Ten Kings of the Underworld

The Eighth King: The King of Impartiality



King Pyeongdeung's court marks the 100th day journey of the dead.

Siwang - The Ten Kings of the Underworld

The Ninth King: The King of the Capital



The ninth king of the Ten Kings is “Dosi – 도시” in Korean (Dushi wang – 都市), who presides over the one year mark in a soul’s journey through the underworld.

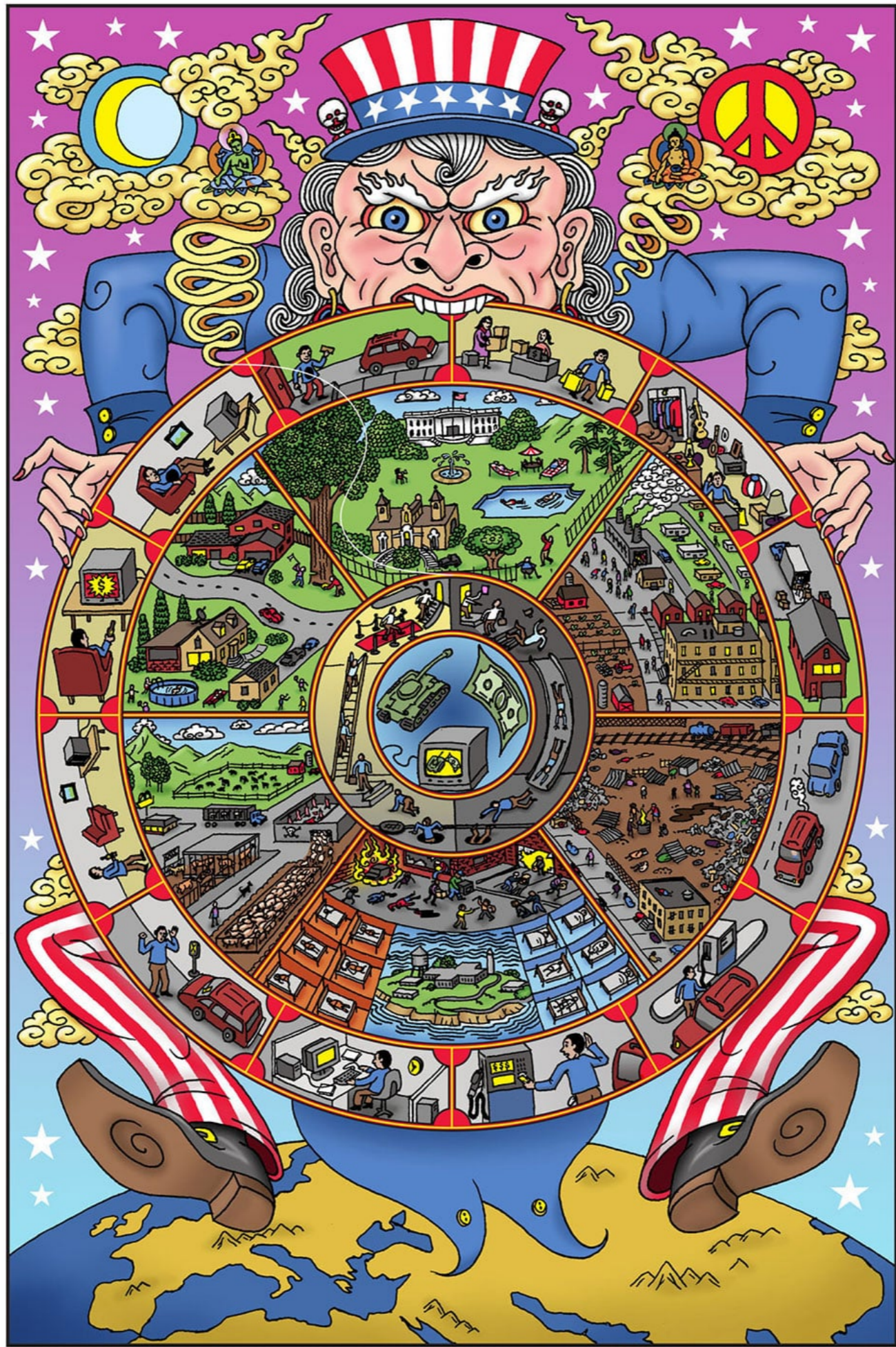
Siwang - The Ten Kings of the Underworld

The Tenth King: The King Who Turns the Wheel of Rebirth in the Five Paths.



“The King Who Turns the Wheel of Rebirth in the Five Paths” in English, who presides over the dead after three years. After this court, the dead are assigned to their next mode of life. The clouded pathway shows the five (sometimes six) paths of rebirth in Buddhism. Other versions of this courtroom portray the paths more clearly using symbols to indicate gods, asuras, humans, animals, hungry ghosts (agwi), and sufferers in hell.

An American
Version of the
Wheel of Life



Asia's Hell Gardens

The Hell Gardens of Asia



The Hell Gardens of Asia



The Hell Gardens of Asia



The Hell Gardens of Asia



The Hell Gardens of Asia



The Hell Gardens of Asia



Compass of Zen Commentary

- The Buddha taught that everything is created by mind alone. So these places are also created by thinking, and exist entirely in our minds right now whenever we are following our thinking minds.
- You experience every one of them in your life. The most important thing is, where do you stay?
- If you cannot control your karma, then when you die, your karma pulls you and you are reborn in one of these states.
- The six ways are made by your karma, and your karma is made entirely by your thinking. If you are attached to your thinking, you have heaven and hell, life and death, happiness and sadness.
- If you keep a complete don't-know mind, and don't make anything, then you are already complete, and the six ways of samara disappear. Then you are free from the Wheel of Suffering.

Compass of Zen Commentary

- This is just a very simple way of explaining karma. We use it to show how our good karma combines with our bad karma to make some clear result in our present and future rebirths.
- It also shows how good karma made in this life may or may not seem to have good results in this life, since it must be affected by the appearance or ripening in this life of karma made in previous rebirths.
- Originally, this scheme does not exist. It is just a teaching device. Also karma does not exist, and the Six Ways of Samsara do not exist. They only come from our thinking and desire.