

What answers might be given by Buddhists and other people to questions about life and suffering? (8 – 12 years)

Key words and concepts

- **Kamma / karma:** Action. Intentional actions that affect one's circumstances in this and future lives.
- **Bhavachakra:** the 'Wheel of Becoming' or 'Wheel of Life'.
- **Yama:** 'The Lord of Death' or 'Demon of Impermanence'. Yama is often pictured as the monster holding the Wheel of Life, symbolising the fact that suffering and death comes to all living beings. He is also known as a protector of Buddhism and Buddhists against evil.
- **Buddha:** the 'Awakened' or 'Enlightened' One. Many Buddhists believe there have been many Buddhas through history, but that the Buddha of our age is the enlightened person Siddhattha Gotama (Pali) / Siddhartha Gautama (Sanskrit), who lived in what is now Nepal around 2,500 years ago.
- **Dhamma / dharma:** Universal law; ultimate truth. The teachings of the Buddha.

Some of these terms are also **key concepts**. Here is some further background to some of these to help you prepare for the teaching and learning activities:

- **Kamma / karma:** The Buddha taught that effects depends on volition. This marks the Buddhist treatment of kamma as different from the Hindu understanding of karma.
- **Dhamma / dharma:** In this banquet, pupils investigate Buddhist ideas about life, truth and suffering. In particular they focus on the symbolism within the Bhavachakra as a way of finding out what Buddhists believe about the 'bad attitudes' that can lead away from true happiness and towards increased suffering.
- **Wheel of life:** Also known as the 'Wheel of Becoming'. Presented here in diagrammatic form, showing the Buddha preaching / teaching in each of six realms of existence. The Buddha is working to save beings and to help them towards enlightenment whatever state they find themselves in.

Learning activities

This sequence of learning activities is built around the *Bhavachakra* – the Buddhist 'Wheel of Life', found in Appendix 1.

- Explain that pupils are going to investigate how the Buddha is believed to change the lives of people, animals and spirit beings, wherever they find themselves. This will help their investigation of what people believe about life and suffering.
- Remind them that the Buddha was a great teacher who lived around 2,500 years ago, and that his followers are called Buddhists. They believe that the Buddha, through his own great efforts, found out the best way to live. Explain that Buddhists believe that every action has a consequence for good or ill and that in the diagram you are going to show them this is symbolised in different ways. Every form of

being, wherever it is, is subject to this law of cause and effect, known as karma. So – human beings and animals cannot avoid cause and effect, and even if you think there are worlds beyond this one – like heaven and hell – karma still works.

- Put the Bhavachakra image (Appendix 1) up on a whiteboard and take them round the diagram, especially the six worlds of existence, showing how there is suffering everywhere, but that in each world the Buddha is there to help. Explain that it is possible to take this account of six worlds literally, i.e., that beings may be reborn in different worlds, but that it may also apply to our lives here and now in terms of the way people behave. Ask pupils what it might mean to behave 'like an animal' or a 'hungry ghost', for example.
- On the board, put six 'bad attitudes' that might be linked to each state of being: Jealousy, Selfishness, Willful ignorance, Pride, Greed and Planning To Do Evil. Can pupils think of examples where each of these might lead to bad consequences? List some of these on the board. Ask pupils to imagine interviewing people who had done these bad actions. What questions would they ask and what answers / excuses do you think they would receive? Compare answers across the class.
- Provide pupils with a printed version of the Wheel of Life. Ask pupils to work in pairs to recall aspects of the Wheel, labelling the different sections with key points about what Buddhists believe is being illustrated/symbolized.
- Encourage pupils to discuss the details of the picture in their pairs and then to share ideas on the most interesting or puzzling aspects. Prompt their thinking by asking how they can tell that one figure in each of the six 'worlds of existence' is the Buddha [He is the largest figure; he has a halo; he carries something to help the beings in that realm]; whether they can think of other religions that picture special people in this way [e.g., Christian Saints, Jesus, Sikh Gurus, etc]; whether they can work out what kind of beings are living in each of the six parts of the main picture, and so on.
- Now ask pupils to note what the Buddha is carrying in each world. Ask pupils to imagine that a being in each world has a chance to ask the Buddha ONE question. Pupils can work out their ideas in small groups, write them down, then compare across the class. Keep a note of the questions for the final activity (below).
- Point out the monster [Yama] holding the whole wheel in its mouth and ask: Why does a monster hold the wheel of life? [Because, Buddhists believe, all of life is in the grip of suffering and death.]
- Explain that you would now like them to work out how the Buddha might be helping the creatures in each world. Divide the class into six groups.
- Recap the six realms shown in the Wheel of Life and their meaning:

Realm of the gods or 'devas': devas enjoy pleasure and relaxation, however those who live in this realm become used to luxury and cannot achieve Enlightenment.

Realm of the demi-gods: beings in this realm are powerful but angry.

Human Realm: although some human lives are hard, because a human can learn and understand, this realm holds the potential of Enlightenment.

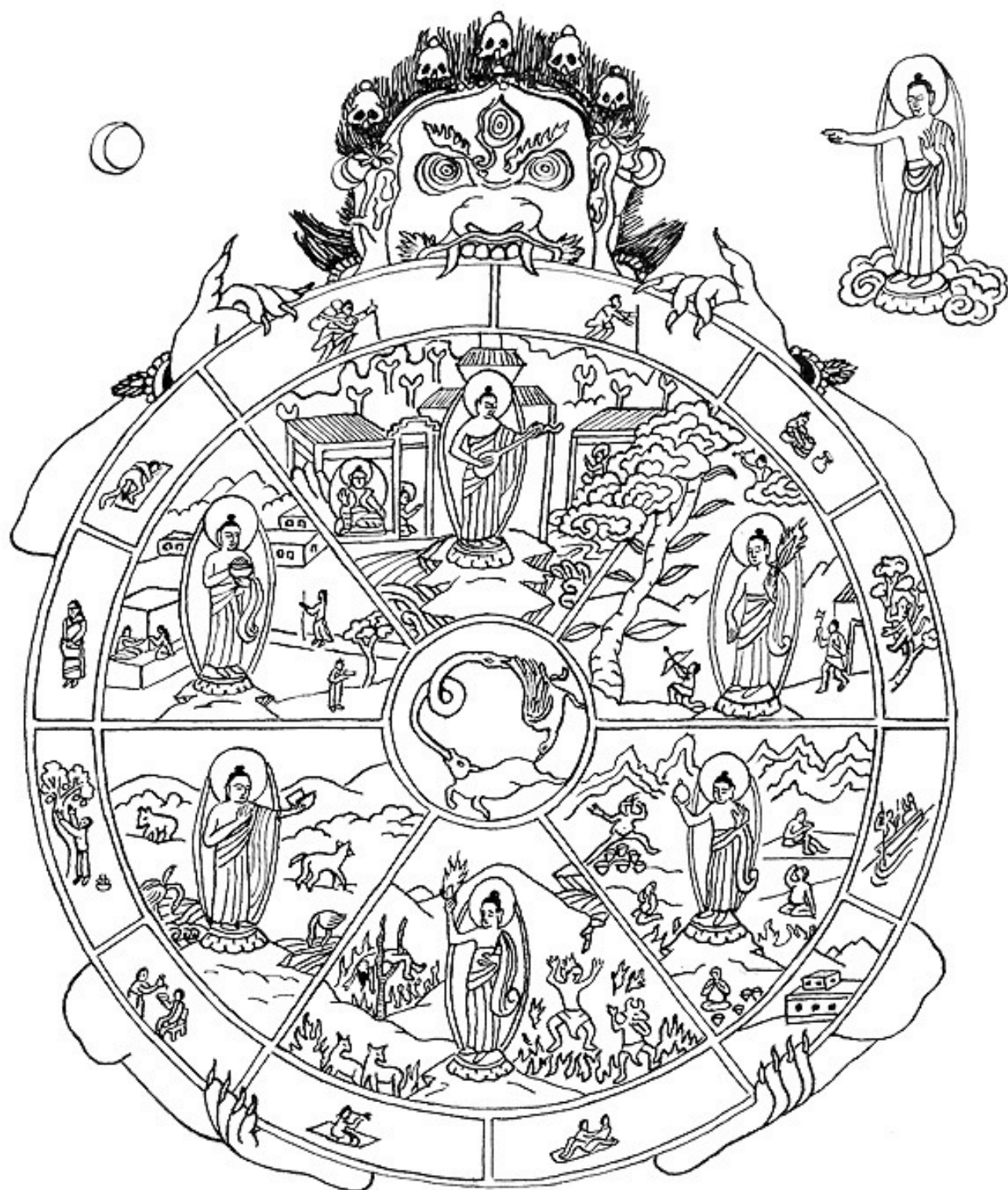
Animal Realm: animals are driven by survival, hunger and competition; their existence is impulsive, they cannot attain wisdom or insight.

Realm of the Hungry Ghosts: these beings are never satisfied and always hungry; they live in a perpetual state of craving that is never sated.

Hell Realm: greed, anger and hatred characterises the hell realm where those inside suffer in various ways

- Print out an image of each realm for each group, including information about the realm. Groups think of what it must be like to live in this state of mind- such as a hungry ghost or an angry demi-god. They create a modern example to describe this state of mind and explain to the class.
- Talk as a class how the Buddha might help beings in all the realms, or people in all of these states of mind. Refer to the Buddha's gifts:
 - The lute
 - Flaming sword
 - Alms bowl
 - Book
 - Jar of nectar
 - Flaming torch
- In groups pupils discuss the symbolism of one of these gifts and how it would help people in a specific realm or state of mind. Listen to answers.
- Explain that Buddhists believe that the Buddha's teaching can help everyone to stop suffering, wherever they are [by stopping self-centred desires]. Many Buddhists use paintings of the Wheel of Life to meditate on. They might look at each section and carefully consider what it means for them. Other Buddhists prefer not to use such paintings for meditation, but instead to meditate on a single thought or point. Ask pupils to say which method they think might help a Buddhist to lead a happier life and to give some reasons.
- Remind pupils of the questions they wrote for the Buddha and ask them to choose three of the best. Ask them to work out in their groups what answers they think the Buddha might give to these questions, bearing in mind the 'gifts' that he is carrying in the Wheel of Life pictures. What answers would *pupils* give if they were being asked those questions?

Appendix 1



*An interpretation of the Wheel of Life © 2012 Jim Robinson.
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