



#### ABSTRACT:

The Bhavacakra can be seen as a map of psyche, with the cyclical suffering of samsara veiling our true nature, our pure Buddha mind. The existence of samsara is caused by our mind grasping at phenomena by reifying them, making them appear as if existing on their own side before and beyond our awareness of them. Our mind becomes biased by misunderstanding the nature of phenomena, distinguishing them in desirable and undesirable. The three primary poisons of ignorance, aversion and attachment are the polarities of the samsaric dynamo, the engine which make turn both our ruminative activity and the cycle of the existences. In this work we define the three poisons of Buddhadharma as three biases: biased mind, negativity bias and positivity bias. Both Buddhist psychology and neuroscience see most of mental activity as iterative loops. The Buddha found out that mindfulness is a fundamental ingredient to slow down or even completely subside (mentally and existentially) cyclical suffering, and modern neuroscience seems to confirm the effectiveness of this finding. Here we propose to follow Raffone's idea that mindfulness works like a wedge imbed in the mechanics of our suffering mind.

We consider meditation a mental activity able to transform not only our perception of reality but also the physical reality itself, starting from a rewiring of neural synapses, down the stream to actions and projections.

Today mindfulness protocols are content to relieve people from some mental suffering, an aim which is purely hedonic. In its original context mindfulness is instead a fundamental tool for an eudemonic transformation of one's life toward an ultimate state of bliss: this is a scope well beyond immediate relief. While this seems an utopian, religious path, we believe it's worth to be probed, especially for the extraordinary results Buddhist monks show to neurological inquiries in terms of mental balance and wellness.



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**BHAVACAKRA AND MINDFULNESS:  
THE MECHANICS OF MENTAL COMPULSION AND THE WEDGE  
OF AWARENESS**

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## Reader's notes

MBSR: mindfulness-based stress reduction; JKZ: John Kabat-Zinn; TDL: Traktung Düdjom Lingpa  
kl: kindle location (page reference for documents in kindle format)



***“Look at how the illusory city of cyclic existence  
Has no essence,  
And how each individual doesn’t see  
Any cessation to their own suffering.  
Awareness of all phenomena of cyclic existence and enlightenment  
As the supreme nature of reality  
Is the contemplative practice of the space of the nature of reality.”***

*Dzogchen teaching Düdjom Lingpa received from a robin in 1865.  
(From: Düdjom Lingpa 2011 A Clear Mirror. Rangjung Yeshe publications.)*

# Bhavacakra and Mindfulness:

## The Mechanics of Mental Compulsion and the Wedge of Awareness

(An essay in neurocultural anthropology<sup>1</sup>)

### Introduction

This work seeks to offer a “neurocultural” psychological reading of the **bhavacakra** or “Wheel of Becoming” of the Tibetan Buddhist tradition in relation to the particular form of **mindfulness** proposed by John Kabat-Zinn for his mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) protocol (Kabat-Zinn 1994). With the popularization of the term “mindfulness” there’s a growing risks of misrepresenting contemplative practices linked to it. As Fabio Giommi warned: “The risk is of spreading simplistic and reductive versions and modalities that could end up diluting the potential of mindfulness, or even betray and subvert it into its parody and its opposite.” (Giommi 2014, LXXVI).

The bhavacakra is a diagram that was conceived within Mahayana<sup>2</sup> Buddhism and preserved and fully integrate into Vajrayana by Tibetan Buddhism. Its purpose is to represent the existential cycle of life and rebirth, and also to describe mental states and processes: this thesis concentrates on the latter interpretation.

In the MBSR protocol mindfulness is defined as “...the awareness that emerges by paying attention to the unfolding of experience moment by moment a) with intent; b) in the present; and c) in a non-judgmental way.” (Giommi, 2014)

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<sup>1</sup> See neurocultural anthropology, neuroanthropology or cultural neuroscience, for ex. Domínguez D. et al. (2010) Neuroanthropology: a humanistic science for the study of the culture–brain nexus *Social Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience*. 5: 138–47  
<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2894669/>  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cultural\\_neuroscience](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cultural_neuroscience)

<sup>2</sup> The oldest known representation of the Bhavacakra is found in the Ajanta cave, Southern India and it has been painted in the 5th century AD. The absence of some elements like Yama may give us an insight about the integration of Mayana psychology with tantrism and the Vajrayana view.

The premise on which both the MBSR protocol and the psychological reading of the bhavacakra are based was aptly expressed by the Dalai Lama: **“Being malleable, mind is able to change... Samsara is the cycle of existences, nirvana its overcoming... *both are mental states*. Samsara is a deviation from mindful understanding, a distorted vision of reality that subjects the mind to mental afflictions, while nirvana is a state of inner freedom, released from every conceptual and emotional obstacle.”** (Dalai Lama, 1998).

Our approach to the psychology of the bhavacakra could be defined as “neurocultural” in that it will attempt to merge the Tibetan Buddhist vision of the mind, consciousness, awareness, mental afflictions and conditionings, with the latest neuro-scientific research. In certain passages, the scientific literature will be integrated by elements of “participant observation” — an investigative method typical of cultural anthropology (Malinowski 1922, Geertz 1973).

The first part of this thesis will examine the cultural framework of the bhavacakra within the context of Tibetan Buddhism and the framework of mindfulness within the context of neuroscientific studies.

The second part will describe the ancient diagram (which is not a mandala see note further on the text) by following the wheel clockwise from the centre to the periphery, as per Tibetan Buddhist psychology and the interpretations given by the Dalai Lama and other key representatives of the Vajrayana world. We will also focus on specific points of the outer circle, which represents the 12 rings of interdependent coproduction (IC), based on the interpretation offered by the Theory of Attention and Consciousness (TAC), according to which on a neurological level, we can recognise various procedural stages between input and conscious access to that input (Antonino Raffone et al, 2014).

The third part looks at the points in the bhavacakra at which mindfulness can wedge itself into the wheel in order to “jam” its iterative psychological mechanism, taking a cue from an idea expressed during this Master’s program by Prof. Raf-

fone based on the TAC and on the correlation between attentive focus and cognitive access.

The central point of the issue of mindfulness, against the background of the bhavacakra, is that progressive training in awareness of one's own mental dynamics allows the individual to manage life events in a less stressful way, allowing for more thoughtful choices. This awareness therefore manifests itself as a kind of freedom — a fundamental psychological value and goal and one that is familiar to Buddhism.



## Part I

### HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL CONTEXT AND KEY CONCEPTS

#### The Vajrayana

Within the scope of Mindfulness-Based Interventions (MBIs, or the umbrella that conceptually unites all mindfulness protocols) it is widely hoped that “it would be ideal for all instructors to also be Dharma teachers...however it would be useful for those who train mindfulness instructors to be at the same time qualified teachers in a dharmic lineage of mindfulness meditation or a comparable meditation tradition.” (Giommi, 2014: LXXIII) The Buddhist schools that most influenced the MBI world include Theravada, Zen and Vipassana<sup>3</sup>. The bhavacakra belongs instead to the Tibetan tradition, which has a lavishly exotic appearance but whose fundamentals are the same of the other dharmic traditions.

According to the Nyingma tradition (school of the elders) Vajrayana is the third of the three main yantras (great traditions) that exist today. The other two are Mahayana (the great vehicle) and Shravakayana/Theravada (the vehicle of those who li-



<sup>3</sup> We put this definition in quotes because it is quite recent and belongs to the “Westernisation” of a key meditation technique derived from Buddhism but which is not, in the terms in which it is commonly practiced and understood, that specific phase or technique which aims to perfect the Buddhist path of contemplation.

sten)<sup>4</sup>. Vajrayana scholars consider their vehicle an offshoot of these other two, embracing their vision and their principles, while integrating them with the Indian tantric approach to enlightenment.

Once the shravakayana (today still represented by the Theravada schools) and mahayana (the compassionate way of the bodhisattva) fundamental principles have been well integrated in the practitioner lifestyle, Vajrayana offers two extra tools to those who want “sped up” along the path: Deity yoga (with the key stages of generation and perfection) and Dzogchen<sup>5</sup> (the Great Perfection). The first is a progressive path which generally requires a long and gradual excursus of studies and techniques, leading to an integration of rational inquiry and contemplative experiences. The second is a direct path, where the pointing out instructions and pit instructions of a Lama lead the practitioner to find/experience by himself the way to awakening. These two approaches are interconnected systems, they are not mutually exclusive in their vision or in their practice, in fact the great perfection, which can be practiced as a self-standing path to enlightenment, it can also be the final stage of the deity yoga path.

Dzogchen, specifically in the tradition of the great mystic Dūdjom Lingpa, is the Vajrayana approach which has the largest influence on this present work.

The roots of Vajrayana Buddhism, which characterise the Tibetan, Himalayan and Mongol cultures, are deeply entrenched in the tantrism that flourished between the sixth and eighth centuries AD in northwestern India<sup>6</sup>. This was the last bastion

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<sup>4</sup> For ease of understanding we limit ourselves to these three great “living families” of Buddhism. Actually, the nyingmapa conceive a layering of nine different schools, subcategories of the three mentioned above.

<sup>5</sup> “The tantras are the teachings and writings that set out the practices of Vajrayana Buddhism, the stream of Buddhism prevalent in Tibet. The tantric teachings are based on the principle of the transformation of impure vision into pure vision, through working with the body, energy, and mind. Tantric texts usually describe the mandala and meditation practices associated with a particular enlightened being or deity. Although they are called tantras, the Dzogchen tantras are a specific category of the Dzogchen teachings, which are not based on transformation but on self-liberation.” Sogyal Rinpoche (2002: 404).

<sup>6</sup> In this remote region at the foot of the Karakorum, at the Western extreme of the Buddhist world, tantrism flourished in the Buddhadharmā but also in brahmanism with the *advaita* vedānta, a “non-dualist” form of Hinduism. On the other hand in the same period great *mahāmudrā* masters existed in northeastern India, isolated by the jungles and by the eastern Himalayas. These were the last two bastions of Buddhism in India.



of Buddhism in India before it was swept away by Hinduism and Islam, and was driven to find shelter in the high-altitude Himalayan valleys and in Tibet<sup>7</sup> (Olivieri, 2009).

This region, which today is located in northern Pakistan and whose centre is the Swat valley, has always been strategic to control of the southern Silk Road and of the Khyber Pass. This is where the first representations of the Buddha appeared under the Indo-Hellenic influence of the Maurya Empire as well as the Greco-Bactrian and the Indo-Greek kingdoms<sup>8</sup>. The renowned Buddhist University of Taxila, considered older than Nalanda (idem), was located in this region. From there, Buddhist missionaries (including Greek ones) spread outside India beginning during the Ashoka Kingdom to the days preceding the Islamic expansion (McEvelley 2002). At the end of the eighth century AD the erudite yogi Padmasambhava<sup>9</sup> (Born of the Lotus) traveled to Tibet, where he had been summoned by King Tri-song Detzen to spread Buddhism to his powerful central Asian kingdom. The In-

<sup>7</sup> The last traces of Buddhism on Indian territory date back to the 11th century AD.

<sup>8</sup> See for ex. the Maurya King Ashoka (circa 268-232 BC) and the Greek King Milinda/Menander I (165/155–130 AD) in McEvelley 2002: 360-380.

<sup>9</sup> In the image to the side is the statue called “It Looks Like Me”, after the Guru’s exclamation upon first setting eyes on it. The famous photo was taken by a Bhutanese princess before this masterpiece was destroyed by Maoists.



dian mystic brought with him not only a type of tantric Buddhism that was suitable for integration into the fantastic universe of the trans-Himalayan peoples, but also a marked ability to weave into the tantric Indian iconography the demons that he subdued and transformed into protectors of the dharma — demons with which the Tibetan people had been living in conflict and subjugation since (recent) pre-history (Tucci 1933). Guru Padmasambhava also brought Dzogchen, a discipline that was probably not unknown in certain Himalayan regions, since it is a central and profound practice of the Bön religion as well (Norbu, 1989).



Padmasambhava's statue called "It Looks Like Me", after the Guru's exclamation upon first setting eyes on it. This famous photo was taken by a Bhutanese princess before the 8th Century masterpiece was destroyed by Maoists.

One of the reasons for the success of this great Indian teacher, and of the Buddhist masters of Indian origin in general, lies in the flexibility of their teachings:<sup>10</sup> they could be read on many levels, according to the capacities and the cultural traditions of the followers. The bhavachackra, which was far more ancient than the historical figure of Padmasambhava (see image on **page 7**), is an example of this system with "semantic layers". Of the many Tibetan pictorial representations of the dharma, it is among the most reproduced due to its pedagogical value and its conciseness, and because it offers multiple levels of interpretation.

Incidentally, it should be recalled that Vajrayana Buddhism readapted the theory of the "Turns of the Wheel" of the Yogachara<sup>11</sup>, which is an attempt to explain the great variety (and relative contradictoriness) of the teachings attributed to the Buddha from a historical perspective. This theory posits that the Buddha delivered progressively more refined and complex teachings in response to a diversity of intellectual capacities and tendencies. Each turn of the wheel builds a new level of interpretation of the dharma upon the preceding truth. It goes without saying that each school claims it offers the most advanced teaching, which only certain particularly fortunate minds can comprehend. This is also true of the Vajrayana, so

<sup>10</sup> The pedagogical flexibility in adapting the dharma to a wide variety of audiences was also characteristic of the Sakyamuni Buddha (rif).

<sup>11</sup> And moreover in an original way for each school, for example the *gelugpa* record only two turns of the wheel, the *kagyupa* four turns, etc.

much so that certain levels are considered “secret”, not so much because they are hidden but because they would appear to be cryptic or insignificant to minds with karmic tendencies towards other approaches, where they might bring confusion and even danger instead of clarity and liberation (Dalai Lama, 1977; Blumenthal, 2008).

To avoid dispersions within the boundless bibliographical material the Tibetan schools have produced both in terms of translations of the tripitaka and of transcriptions of the tantric texts and of Dzogchen, we will refer mainly to the tradition of the 19th-century mystic Dūdjom Lingpa (1835-1904). Considered to be one of the most accomplished Tibetan masters of all times, he offers a very brief lineage and an extremely succinct and practical approach<sup>12</sup>. Of Dūdjom Lingpa’s teachings, those most relevant to our theme can be found in the beginning section of *Vajra Essence*<sup>13</sup> (Wallace 2016b), which focuses on achieving **meditative peace or śamathā** (tib. *shi-né* literally “abiding in peace”)<sup>14</sup>, which is the necessary premise to a speedy advance through the three methods of the “direct way” of the Dzogchen (*vipaśyanā*, *trekchö* and *thögal*).

Achieving śamathā means reaching peace of mind to the point where we no longer experience distracting mental events. Based on this state of mind, profound intuitions can occur. The Lama, a key figure in progressing through this method, with pointing out and pit instructions we’ll help us becoming aware of the enlightened and non-dual nature of every thing, until we can leap under her/his guidance into the clear light of pristine awareness, free of attachments to our own relative identity. From here to Buddhahood, effort is no longer necessary.

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<sup>12</sup> Dūdjom Lingpa obtained all the dharmic teachings in a visionary way, often directly from Guru Padmasambhava, whose disciple he had been 1,000 years prior in a “mnemonic life experience” of reincarnation typical of Tibetan Buddhism (see attachment 3).

<sup>13</sup> Dūdjom Lingpa (2016) *The Vajra Essence*, in: Wallace BA (tr.) *Dūdjom Lingpa’s Vision of the Great Perfection* trilogy.

<sup>14</sup> “In the West, generally, *samatha* meditation is only relatively recently becoming better understood. Even in some Buddhist countries, a degree of wariness is often apparent around the “magical” side of Buddhist practice associated with the *jhānas*, which can lead to these practices being played down, or even restricted in their teachings. In Thailand, for example, the national promotion of the Burmese *Vipassanā* school from the 1960s onwards, led to the dissolution of many previously *samatha*-oriented meditation centres. However, *samatha* meditation has survived, as it has since the time of the Buddha, as the central heart of Buddhist meditation.” (Dennison, 2014: 2)

In this process, the concept of mindfulness is present from beginning to end: mindfulness of an arbitrary object, for example the breath, and of the river of mental afflictions that overcomes us, mindfulness of mindfulness, mindfulness of the inner peace that naturally manifests itself, mindfulness of one's own enlightened nature and that of the universe of which we are part, mindfulness of one's own Buddhahood (Wallace, 2011).

### **Mindfulness: key concepts applicable to the bhavacakra**

The English term mindfulness is currently used in various languages both in the scientific field and, more popularly, to indicate a specific form of mindfulness defined by Jon Kabat-Zinn based on the Buddhist concept of *sati*<sup>15</sup>, with the goal of reducing stress in cancer patients. According to JKZ, mindfulness is the “active ingredient” in meditation practice: he defines it as the awareness that arises by bringing one's attention to the here and now in a conscious and non-judgmental

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<sup>15</sup> it is possible that his idea of *sati* was influenced by the American interpretation of Vietnamese Zen Buddhism. The nature of this form of Buddhism is rather controversial: according to Nguyen and Barber, for example, Vietnamese monk Thích Nhất Hạnh's form of Buddhism “[has] no affinity with or any foundation in traditional Vietnamese Buddhist practices” (Nguyen CT, Barber AW 1998: 130). However, even if the teachings of the great Zen master had been rooted in his native country, the distinctive trait of Vietnamese Thiên Buddhism (Chen/Zen) is that it is in turn strongly influenced by the Theravada mindset of the bordering Khmer, Burmese, Thai, etc., civilisations as well as by Chinese “Pure Land” Buddhism (Nguyen et al. 2008). This prompts us to reflect on the depth and variety of the dharmic roots of mindfulness, and how much there is potentially to be explored.

way<sup>16</sup> (Kabat-Zinn, 2003: 144)<sup>17</sup>. Sati is an adaptation in the Pali language<sup>18</sup> of *smṛti\**, a Sanskrit word whose etymological root *smara\** means “to recall to the mind, to remember, to bring attention to”. In this sense the translation of *smṛti* as mindfulness can also be taken literally: as declined in the imperative, the English verb “to mind” means “to remember”, so to be mindful can also be taken to mean simply to voluntarily bring one’s attention to a chosen object instead of letting it chase every new mental or physical event. This training of attention underlies *śamathā* meditations. In Buddhism, the ease with which the mind lets itself be distracted is the prime cause of suffering (Sharf 2014). Further on in this paper, we will examine how the act of remembering<sup>19</sup> is an apt interpretation of the repetitive processes that involve the *bhavacakra* and its psychological correlations.

Tibetan Buddhism has two main terms to signify mindfulness: *shepa\**, which refers to *sati\** or ordinary, dual consciousness, and which can be associated with JKZ’s

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<sup>16</sup> In other contexts “non-judgemental” could be translated as “without prejudice”: the first implies the action of one who tends to judge others, i.e. to express an opinion in the grip of prejudice that imposes on oneself and others an assumed and unverified idea, one who pontificates about an object without using critical judgment. When it is honestly critical, judgment on the contrary is an antidote to prejudice, a manifestation of consciousness and mindfulness.

<sup>17</sup> “An operational working definition of mindfulness is: the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgementally to the unfolding of experience moment by moment... It resides at the core of the teachings of the Buddha...” (Kabat-Zinn 2003: 144)

<sup>18</sup> Pali is an “artificial” language that was created expressly by the monastic community to translate and write the Dharma. While the Pali canon is considered to have preceded the Sanskrit Buddhist texts, linguistically it is “...a mix of several Prakrit languages from around the 3rd century BCE, combined together and partially Sanskritized” (Bhikkhu Bodhi, 2005: 10). Prakrit itself descends from Sanskrit, causing what Renou described as “...India’s great linguistic paradox...” (Renou 1956: 84). Sanskrit was and is the language of the scholars, the brahmins, the one in which the Dharma was probably spread in the Indian subcontinent and beyond along with Greek, Aramaic (the two international languages known in India at the time) and local languages (for example those found on the Aśoka columns), centuries before the Pali canon was written down. “Once Sanskrit emerged from the sacerdotal environment...it became the sole medium by which ruling elites expressed their power....Sanskrit probably never functioned as an everyday medium of communication anywhere in the cosmopolis—not in South Asia itself, let alone Southeast Asia.... The work Sanskrit did do...was directed above all toward articulating a form of...politics...as celebration of aesthetic power” (Pollock 2009: 14). See also: Staal 1965 and Houben 2018.

<sup>19</sup> Etymologically Latin languages kept the semantic association of “remembering” with “returning to the heart”: i.e. in Italian “ri-cordare” and Spanish “re-cordar” (re=back to + cardium=heart) and in Italian the substantive “un ricordo” to say “a memory”. In other languages influenced by Latin the concept became a metaphor like in English “to learn by heart” and French “apprendre par coeur”. In English the Latin etymology appears in words like “re-cord”. Coincidentally, in Buddhism the mind is usually indicated as being seated in the heart.

proposed idea of mindfulness; and *rigpa\**, which corresponds to *vidya\** or the ultimate, omniscient and non-dual crystalline consciousness devoid of objects<sup>20</sup>.

In Dzogchen, *sem* (tib.) or *chitta\** (skt.), meaning the ordinary mind, must be trained through *śamathā* and *vipaśyanā* practice in order to transform it into *bodhicitta\**<sup>21</sup>, in the literal sense of “enlightened mind”.

The concentrating element of *śamathā* is integrated by the element of inquiry that derives from *vipaśyanā*: the two methods are a source for the maturation of meta-cognitive awareness. Corcoran, Farb, Anderson and Segal (2009) hypothesised that “...mindfulness training develops emotional regulation by increasing attentive capacities and metacognitive awareness, that is, the ability to experience thoughts and feelings from a de-centred perspective....” (Iani and Didonna 2017: 318)

In summary, mindfulness may have a variety of functions<sup>22</sup> according to one’s traditions and objectives, but all these functions can be boiled down to two:

-mindfulness as a primary instrument to quickly and “effortlessly” alleviate current suffering — as is typical of modern Western mindfulness practice in all its forms, from the therapeutical ones to the pursuit of “wellbeing”;

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<sup>20</sup> Dūdjom Lingpa uses the word *rigpa* to refer to both ordinary and absolute consciousness, because in the *dzogchen* approach the light of awareness is the same, except that in the first case it is veiled by ignorance. In a continuous process of improving *samadhi*, *rigpa* manages to perceive ever more subtle, deep and elusive objects, until it liberates itself completely from every object and therefore from the process of objectification itself in the achievement of a non-dual vision (Wallace 2011).

<sup>21</sup> *Bodhicitta* is the objective and the method of whoever follows the *mahayana* way. It can be understood etymologically as *bodhi*=enlightened, *chitta*=mind. The Tibetans make the distinction between relative and absolute *bodhicitta* (ref.). The first is *nying-jé*, (ཉིང་ཇེ), *karuṇā* (करुणा), compassion, one of the means to awaken the second: *chanchubkyi sem* (བྱང་ཆུབ་ཀྱི་སེམས་), the enlightened mind, which is pure consciousness, *rigpa*, of the true ultimate nature, *Dharmadhatū* (Norbu, 1990: 1).

<sup>22</sup> Mindfulness/*sati* is the tool (the “active principle”, Siegel 2010) used in a plethora of contemplative practices according to different traditions, objectives, etc. For example, to achieve the *Dhyana* and become *Ahrat* (Snyder and Ransmussen, 2011), to awaken the Buddha nature within the meditator (*Mahayana*) according to different approaches (for ex. Soto Zen discipline vs. Koan vs. Vietnamese Zen), but also for tantric mindfulness practices (*Vajrayana*), etc. In any case in Dharma, the aim of mindfulness is never to reduce a temporary discomfort: this is the true line of demarcation between the use of mindfulness in Western and dharmic protocols (Khyentse, 2012).

-mindfulness as one of the inalienable instruments for the absolute cessation of suffering. This is accomplished with effort (for example, by developing the six paramita or perfections\*), and not without suffering: “We must understand dukkha\* (suffering), not try to eliminate it.” (Sumedho: 6)

It is interesting to note that in both cases the immediate goal the meditator must set for him or herself is not a temporary flight from reality or a moment of relaxation, since these two mental states are decidedly “mindless”, but on the contrary to reassert control over one’s attentional capacities, which are usually swept away by the flow of mental afflictions that is the root cause of stress and egoistic tendencies. The Buddhist ethic expresses a judgment of short-term wellbeing that goes beyond this, as Jamyang Khyentse Rinpoche reminds us mercilessly:

**“So, if you are only concerned about feeling good, you are better off by having a full body massage or listening to some uplifting or life-affirming music, than receiving dharma teachings, which were definitely not designed to cheer you up. On the contrary, the Dharma was devised specifically to expose your failings and to make you feel awful.” (2012: 5)**

\*The six perfections: patience, generosity, ethical discipline, energy, concentration, wisdom





*Modern interpretation of the bhavacakra in “socio-existential terms” (Drda, 2011). Very little has been said or written about the ancient Tibetan diagram in the West in more strictly neuropsychological terms (<http://monkeybuddha.blogspot.com/2015/04/mandala-of-american-life.html>).*

## Part II

### THE BHAVACAKRA: GENERAL DESCRIPTION

The bhavacakra consists of four concentric circles: the three poisons are in the centre, followed by the law of karma in its positive and negative directions, and then by the six existential conditions (which, as will be explained below, can also have a strictly psychological explanation) and lastly the 12 rings of interdependent coproduction. In another dimension, free from the cycle of existence, an wrathful creature holds the wheel in its jaws and claws. Also in this space outside the wheel are the Buddha and other images of enlightenment. Some tangkha<sup>23</sup> also picture a semi-transparent thread that connects the virtuous path of the second circle to a bodhisattva outside the wheel<sup>24</sup>.

In his introduction to the Dalai Lama's book "The Wheel of Life", the great tibetologist Jeffrey Hopkins likens the bhavacakra to **"...a map of the world or the periodic table of chemical, but it is a map of an internal process and its external effects."** (2015, 1)

The bhavacakra is a pictographic representation of some of the fundamental principles of Mahayana Buddhism through icons that exemplify both the cycle of becoming and the cycle of the mental states: etymologically, the Sanskrit word *bhava\** means both "becoming" and "mental state" and *cakra\** means "wheel" or "cycle".

If viewed in light of Buddhist psychology, the two apparently distant interpretations of **cycle of becoming** (the samsaric cycle of rebirth) and **cycle of the mental states** (the samsaric cycle of the dualistic vision) are not only compatible but outright interdependent, because they are two sides of the same existential reality that reproduces dukkha, or suffering<sup>25</sup>. The two cycles are constantly self-feeding

<sup>23</sup> That is, the complex Vajrayana ritual paintings wrapped in brocades, which are dense with symbolism and dictated by extremely rigorous canons. The bhavacakra is also represented on mural paintings in most Vajrayana temples.

<sup>24</sup> Or, in some representations, alternately with the Buddhist kingdom of Amitabha, the moon, a passage from the Dharma, Avalokiteshvara, Tara, etc.

<sup>25</sup> The connection between existence and suffering is aptly expressed by Ajahn Sumedho, a monk from the Theravada tradition: "The Pali word dukkha means '(something) incapable of giving satisfaction' or 'incapable of remaining or lasting': therefore changeable, incapable of satisfying us fully or of making us happy. Thus is the world of the senses, just one of Nature's vibrations." (Sumedho: 8) As well: "This is dukkha: to want to grasp something beautiful, because we don't know how to let it go. This is suffering." (Idem: 11)



based on the principle of avidya or ignorance, illusion, lack of awareness, blindness. Avidya is so crucial as the prime cause of suffering that it appears twice on the wheel, at two key points: in the likeness of a pig within the central circle, and in the form of a blind man at the start of the outer circle, the one of pratīyasamutpāda or the chain of 12 automatisms of interdependent coproduction. As well, avidya implicitly permeates both the descending karmic trajectory of the second circle and the six existential (and mental) states of the third circle.

The great Tibetan scholar Tsong-Kha-Pa cites Nagarjuna (who in turn cites the Buddha Sakyamuni) in order to teach his disciples the ultimate definition of ignorance:

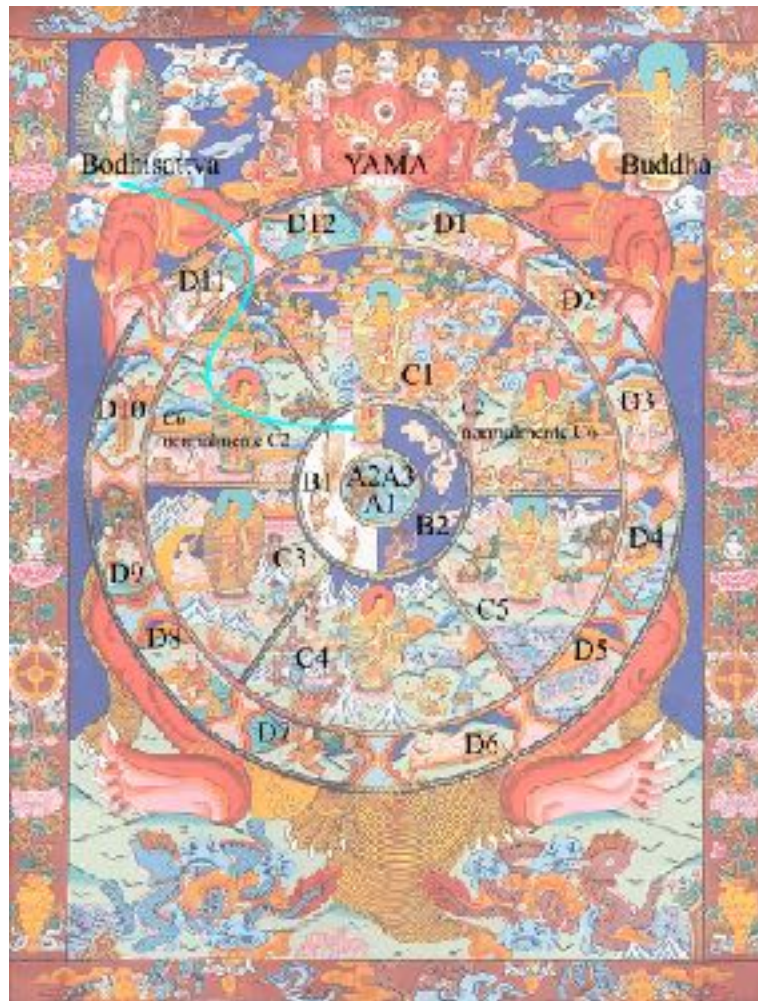
**“The master<sup>26</sup> says that ignorance - is the concept that in reality - things are really produced by causes and conditions. - From here the twelve Factors arise. - Looking at reality - You know that things are Void; - Ignorance does not arise. - This is the cessation of ignorance. - Therefore the twelve Factors do not arise”. (Tsong-Kha-Pa, 2002: kl 2269-2271)<sup>27</sup>.**

This invaluable passage highlights a very elusive aspect of dharma that is well-preserved in the Mahayana interpretation as cultivated by the Tibetans (and crucial for the Dzogchen). On the one hand, knowing and accepting the karmic law of cause and effect is essential for anyone wanting to set out on the path to liberation, because its psycho-educational function is to clear the mind of the consequences of physical and mental actions unleashed by aversion and attachment. On the other hand, and on a deeper level, we must transcend the idea that causality really produces reality. After practicing in ways that are focused among other elements on

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<sup>26</sup> Buddha Sakyamuni

<sup>27</sup> Nagarjuna the Protector also accepts this system of identifying ignorance. For his Seventy Stanzas on Emptiness say: “The Teacher said that ignorance/Is the conception that, in reality,/ Things are produced from causes and conditions. From this, the twelve factors arise. Through seeing reality, you know/That things are empty; ignorance does not arise. This is the cessation of ignorance. Because of this, the twelve factors cease.”



- A1 = pig: *avidya* (Tib. *ma-rigpa*), ignorance, unawareness, biased mind  
 A2 = snake: *raga*, aversion, aggressiveness, negativity bias  
 A3 = rooster: *dvesha*, attachment, lust, greed, positivity bias  
 B1 = positive karma  
 B2 = negative karma  
 C1 = *deva*: gods, sloth, ignorance of pain, hedonistic peace  
 C2 = *asura*: demigods, jealousy, envy, hedonistic ambition  
 C3 = *preta*: insatiable spirits, conflict between imagination and reality, Tantalus, hedonistic frustration  
 C4 = *naraka*: souls in hell, absence of even imaginary pleasure, hedonistic desperation  
 C5 = *tiryagyoni*: animals, every pleasure conceals pain including on a mental level, painful hedonism  
 C6 = *manushya*: humans, constant alternation between pleasure and pain, hedonistic ambivalence  
 D1 = *avidya*: blindness, ignorance, unawareness of *alaya* and of *dharmadathu*  
 D2 = *samskara (vasanah)*: the potter, the karmic imprints  
 D3 = *vijñāna (alayavijñāna)*: the monkey, consciousness of the substrate (*alaya*)  
 D4 = *namarupa (klišhtamanovijñāna)*: men in a boat, name and form, obscuring consciousness  
 D5 = *sadayatana (manovijñāna)*: house with six windows, mind as sixth sense  
 D6 = *spārsha*: the loving couple, contact  
 D7 = *vèdana*: arrow in an eye, sensation  
 D8 = *tr̥sna*: thirst, involvement, iteration of the sensation (negative, neutral or positive)  
 D9 = *upadana*: picking fruit, adoption, grasping, habitual reactions and tendencies  
 D10 = *bhava*: conception, action, becoming, mental state  
 D11 = *jati*: birth, rebirth, consequences of D10 action, karmic effects  
 D12 = *jamarana*: suffering and death, impermanence, reflection, *memento mori*

recognising the law of karma<sup>28</sup>, at a certain point the mind will shed most of its karmic burden and will be able to emancipate itself from the immanence of causality that is typical of samsara and perceive with more and more clarity the ultimate truth of the void — that non-dual space awash in that empathetic and creative energetic charge that characterises nirvana.

Ignorance is an exclusively mental state, and this realisation underlies the Buddhist idea that without first curing one's mind, every other effort at happiness is in vain<sup>29</sup>.

The cyclical nature of the system of karmic reiteration (existential and psychological) is obviously depicted by the great central wheel, which literally lies within the jaws of Yama<sup>30</sup>. This irate and terrifying deity is placed outside the existential cycle and presents an obvious third eye: this is the *prajñācakṣu*, the eye of wisdom, of non-dual, pure and unbiased vision. Our hypothesis is that Yama, who in the “Tibetan Book of the Dead” (“Bardo Thödrol”) judges the dead based on their accumulated karma, represents the capacity for discernment. His feral and aggressive nature could well represent, for example, the mental state of the dying: if they could, they would do anything to block, destroy, put an end to the cycle of suffering in which they are enmeshed. In our view Yama is a visceral form of wisdom, the energy humans can turn to in order to embrace the dharma and the adamantine vision in a gesture of apparent folly, but which is in reality healthy and clear-headed.

As confirmation of the fact that Yama belongs to the sphere of Buddhahood and not to that of samsara we can highlight how in the Tibetan diagram, everything

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<sup>28</sup> For example the meditation on the four “themes that transform the mind”: the preciousness of this life, impermanence, the law of karma and the suffering of samsara (Dilgo, 2011: 19).

<sup>29</sup> For example, the Dzogchen teachings explicitly state that the mind is the “sovereign creator of all phenomena” (Wallace, 2016c: 48) and therefore of suffering itself.

<sup>30</sup> This being is often identified as Mara, a powerful deity that is still enmeshed in attachment and desire and therefore placed within the cycle of samsara. However the traditional interpretation that seems to us most correct is the one that identifies this monster as Yama (Tib: ལཤིན་ཇེ་, Shinje), the deity from the “Tibetan Book of the Dead” (the “Bardo Tödrol Chenmo”) who judges the dead and is thought (especially by the gelugpa, the adepts of the reformists’ school) to be one of the protectors of the Dharma (for example in the form of Yama Dharmaraja). In this sense, see for example Thrangu 2012.

that appears outside the wheel is dharmakaya: pristine awareness immersed in dharmadhatu, the ultimate, purely existential, stable reality, unfiltered by the subject-object dualism. It is a manifestation of rigpa, or adamantine consciousness.

The Buddha figure represents dharmakaya, the clear light which Western literature refers to as Buddhahood: the perfectly enlightened mind that sees things as they really are, without grasping, reification or interpretation.

Often there is also a Bodhisattva<sup>31</sup> — one with direct experience of nirvana but who directs his or her gaze and noble heart<sup>32</sup> towards samsara, reading the wheel for what it is. In the bhavacakra the bodhisattva is pictured both in the dharmadhatu and in the six existential kingdoms (mental states) of samsara. S/he sees the samsaric cycle as the map of a minefield, a world of dualistic traps that living beings could avoid if only they were not blinded by ignorance. To dissipate the fog from the minds of sentient beings<sup>33</sup> s/he returns voluntarily to the cycle in order to show them the way. The narrow path linking the highest point of the second circle to the bodhisattva outside the cycle is precisely the Way of the Bodhisattva that allows us to escape samsara through a just balance between contemplative seclusion and altruistic worldly activities: in both cases they are motivated by the pursuit of enlightenment, not for just for oneself but for all sentient beings (Wallace & Vesa, 1997).

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<sup>31</sup> In the various cases this presence highlights the vital principle that the adamantine vehicle is (and cannot not be) a branch of the Mahayana madhyamika, of which it espouses all the fundamentals.

<sup>32</sup> Noble heart: nying-jé. This is the literal meaning of the Tibetan translation of the Sanskrit word *karuna*, which in the West is usually translated as “compassion”. The Sanskrit word probably has the same etymological root as the Greek word “*koronè*” and the Italian word “*corona*” or “*crown*”. In this sense the idea of *karuna*/*nyinje* approaches the concept of “noble of spirit”, emancipating the concept of compassion from the obligation of intercession by a monotheistic god.

<sup>33</sup> In Tibetan, “human being” is *sem-chen*: “bearer of a mind”.

The iconographic sequences within the wheel of the bhavacakra represent the workings of alaya (or bhavanga<sup>34</sup>), which can be translated as the **substrate**<sup>35</sup> of our consciousness. Becoming aware of this mechanism can be achieved not so much through intellectual interpretation but rather by a fine level of consciousness known in the dharma as alayavijñāna: a kind of intuitive awareness, one that is calm, stable, clear and devoid of distractions — the fundamental individual consciousness, the **substrate consciousness**. In the Dzogchen teachings this subtle and profound level of mindfulness stems from rigorous śamathā<sup>36</sup> training, gradually integrated by an ever deeper level of vipaśyanā. This will result in the union of śamathā (śama=calm, thā=presence\*) and vipaśyanā (viśesa paśyana = special vision\*), the true profound vision, a landing in the substrate of our individual consciousness (Lingpa 2016b).

Stabilizing this very deep level of mindfulness will correspond to the achievements of śamathā and of the first dhyana\*.

Great Dzogchen masters consider this mental state to be treacherous. The psychological condition is blissful, radiant and non-conceptual: inebriated by the fumes of grasping, many contemplatives from all traditions (Buddhist and not) stop here in the belief that they have reached Nirvana or God or other ultimate enlightened state. However this blissful state is merely a springboard: according to Dzogchen

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<sup>34</sup> This is how Wallace comments on the difference between the *Theravaddin* and *Dzogchenpa* visions: “Theravada commentators insist that the bhavanga is an intermittent phase of consciousness, which is interrupted whenever sensory consciousness or other kinds of cognitive activity arise. So it is not an ongoing repository of memories or any other mental imprints. Despite the fact that the bhavanga is described as the naturally pure and radiant state of awareness that exists whether or not the mind is obscured with defilements, this school—perhaps out of a concern that it be seen as a permanent, independent Self—denies that it is an ever-present substrate. I believe Dzogchen contemplatives who have achieved śamathā gain access to this same dimension of consciousness, but they interpret it in a somewhat different way. The substrate consciousness (alayavijñāna), as they call it, consists of a stream of arising and passing moments of consciousness, so it is not permanent; and it is conditioned by various influences, so it is not independent. But they do regard it as a continuous stream of consciousness from which all mundane cognitive processes arise.” (Wallace 2006: 121-122)

<sup>35</sup> “The essential nature of the substrate, which is the underlying basis of all the illusory phenomena of samsara, is ethically neutral - neither good nor bad - and it is a non-thinking empty void, like immaterial space. This is the substrate and it is the essential nature of the mental affliction of illusion.” (Wallace 2016c: 91).

<sup>36</sup> Concentrating methods and results known in Sanskrit as samadhi.

teachings the path to liberation begins here, a sort of base camp reached after a long and arduous trek, but which is not the actual climb to the summit.

Alaya, the base camp of the dualistic mind, must be recognised as the “veil of veils”: through very deep (intuitive) vipaśyanā this last veil is perceived for what it is, i.e. just one’s own individual consciousness. It is only by achieving this extremely profound experiential awareness that the veil can be finally torn and overcome with the appropriate techniques (trekchö and thögal) under the guidance of an expert master (Wallace 2012, kl. 3529-3552).





*“That’s the way things really are, i’ve seized the enemy!  
I’ve caught the thief who steals and deceives with stealth. Aha!  
There is no doubt that it’s this self-grasping indeed;  
This charlatan deceives me by impersonating me!*

*Appear before me, O Yamantaka, my meditation deity!  
Tear it! Tear it! Rip to shreds this very instant—  
The leather sack of karma and the five poisonous afflictions  
That mire me in karma’s samsaric mud.*

*We are drawn to the sufferings of miserable rebirths,  
Yet mindless of pain, we go after its cause.  
Trample him, trample him, dance on the head  
Of this treacherous concept of selfish concern,  
Tear out the heart of this self-centred butcher  
Who slaughters our chance to gain final release!”*

*Excerpt from: Dharmarakṣita (ninth century) “The Wheel of Sharp Weapons” vv. 49-54-55*

## THE BHAVACAKRA: DETAILED DESCRIPTION

### A. FIRST CIRCLE: THE THREE<sup>37</sup> POISONS as the root of all mental afflictions<sup>38</sup>, the three biases



In the bhavacakra the three poisons are represented by the aniconic triad of the pig (ignorance/unawareness/illusion/sloth\*), the snake (aversion/hate/fear\*) and the rooster (attachment/greed/lust\*).

In other words, the pig represents the biased mind, the snake equals a negativity bias and the rooster a positivity bias.

In the Abhidharma (note 40C) the three poisons are described as the inciting cause of all the mental afflictions (klesha) and therefore of suffering (dukkha)<sup>39</sup>. It is no coincidence that this discovery made by the Buddha Sakyamuni should be at the heart of the depiction: what grabs our attention first is not a deity or a Buddha, as in the mandala<sup>40</sup>, but the spectacle of **three-fold human stupidity**: the persistent error of the untrained mind — of consciousness obscured by the illusory hedoni-

<sup>37</sup> In some systems, but never in the *bhavacakra*, there are five mental afflictions: the three poisons plus envy and pride. All the other mental afflictions arise from one of these.

<sup>38</sup> Wallace 2012: kl830

<sup>39</sup> CHECK!!! >>>>>>In Vajrayana symbolism this triad is contrasted by a more abstract depiction named *gankyil* representing (among other things) the three antidotal positive mental factors: *prajna* (wisdom), *dana* (generosity) and *maytri* (benevolence). However on a deeper level they represent the base, the way and the fruit. <<<<<<<< (???rif.)

<sup>40</sup> Mandalas are sacred diagrams that spark processes of visualisation linked to the stages of creation and realisation of the tantric way, in which the meditator identifies with the deity and which culminates in the melting of the representation of the self within the *dharmakaya*. Here on the other hand we have a pedagogical tool that summarises some key Buddhist teachings that are shared by a great many schools. It is an object of meditation, reflection and study, and not strictly an instrument of sacred visualisation.



stic hope<sup>41</sup> (pig) of finding peace once danger has been averted (snake) and the object of desire has been attained (rooster).

### A1. The Pig as the biased mind

The father of all suffering is the omnivorous pig, who is incapable of distinguishing healthy from rotten food. Immersed in the stagnant waters of sloth, the mind **hi-jacks the intuitive need for wellbeing** and separation from pain, the need for serenity and eudemonia towards the puerile **experience of satisfaction** (Freud, 1900)<sup>42</sup> through deceptive hedonistic ways produced by the mind itself. The unconsciously reacting human mind appears to correlate with the so-called limbic brain<sup>43</sup>. It is tensed in a constant effort to represent to itself a future reality based on past reality, losing the awareness of the present moment. (In neurological terms, this process falls under the Default Mode Network, see Raffone, 2018).

In our hypothesis the pig can be interpreted as the mind **biased** by its attempt to reify, to make impermanent or to annihilate all phenomena it perceives.

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<sup>41</sup> Here we make our own Wallace's interpretation of the classic hedonism-eudemony contrast to translate the opposition between ignorance and wisdom in ethical terms. In this paper the use of the two terms is associated with "biased mind" and "awareness" (Wallace, 2007; 2012).

40C *Abhidharma*: instructions for *Dharma*

<sup>42</sup> "...for the child, powerlessness determines the need for the intervention of an external object that can alleviate his or her suffering caused by the persistence of need, and impart an experience of the satisfaction of the need itself... The pressure of unsatisfied need determines... suffering...(it) is deposited in the mnemonic systems and the repetition of the need-satisfaction sequence creates an associative link between the relative mnemonic traces. Consequently every time the suffering at unsatisfied need arises, the mnemonic image complex associated with the experience of satisfaction will be reawakened. In this way, by virtue of this link, it takes on the value of a representation of desire, that is, a finalised representation that indicates an objective, a destination, which is essentially the disappearance of suffering and the appearance of relief and eventually pleasure, through a re-perception of the object and of its specific action." (Coen-Pirani 3-4)

<sup>43</sup>Also defined as "emotional brain", this system is the interface between the "reptilian brain", which is the anatomically deepest part of our brain and which is partly responsible for impulsive reactions, with the cortex, which is the "seat" of the neural correlate of rationality, self-awareness, and of other so-called "higher functions". Modern neuroscience has discovered that the frontiers between the three systems are much more vaguely defined than was previously thought, and sees the brain as a single, integrated system: one example is the Default Mode Network (DMN) posited by Raffone and his team.

## A2. The Snake as the negativity bias

The snake is suspicious, elusive, terrified of any shadow that could signal a predator. It is aggressive, dangerous, poisonous. In our hypothesis the snake represents the negativity bias that predominates our mental activity, as Brannon and Gawroski remind us: **“The tendency for negative information to dominate over positive information has been recognised as one of the most significant phenomena in psychological science....”** (2018: 199). Negative thoughts and feelings therefore occupy a great portion of our mental activity. Perhaps this is what Śāntideva, a 4th century AD Buddhist intellectual, meant in writing: **“Virtue is therefore weak and the pig is always the stronger....”** (2011 kl780). Rather than a depressing moral dogma, the snake appears to represent a cold, hard fact about the human psyche.

## A3. The Rooster as the positivity bias

The rooster is the irresponsible parent of hedonistic craving: when unleashed, it leads to a spiral of dissatisfaction and dependency, an ever increasing frailty rendering us greedy, mean-spirited, lustful and unhappy. Its bias is positive in the sense given to positive feedbacks in a system: they reinforce a behavioural pattern which on the long term will undermine the whole homeostatic system.

## Mechanics of the Three Poisons

The three poisons are constantly interacting with each other: ultimately they are the manifestation of a single psychological process, which is represented by the outer circle of the 12 rings of interdependent coproduction<sup>44</sup>. The outcome of this process is marked by the predominance of one of the three poisons, which will define the next “spin” of the wheel, and so on *ab aeternum*<sup>45</sup>. The poisons are the three different and interdependent cylinders of the engine of samsara (Hopkins, 2015).

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<sup>44</sup> Which could be associated to the TAC - see relevant paragraph in Part III.

<sup>45</sup> Although impermanence is a fundamental pillar of Buddhist psychology, hoping to find a beginning or an end to the subterranean river of *alaya* is an error of perspective. In the final analysis *alaya* is nothing but a distorted vision of *dharmadathu*: **it is this distorted vision which has a beginning and can have an end**, and not the ultimate nature of the void.

The **biased mind** causes a shift to the descending side of the second circle into a spiral of inferior rebirths and inner states tending towards stupidity and ignorance in all its forms, profound suffering and suicidal depression. Correlated to the third circle, the pig, if it is wholly dominant, will inevitably lead to hell (C4). If the pig is present in the form of a patina of careless apathy, it leads to the kingdom of the gods (C1) which in the final analysis is still unfortunate. With respect to the outer circle, the pig is also correlated with the first of the 12 rings (D1), which is also avidya and is represented by a blind man: having learned nothing from impermanence, suffering, old age and death, he gropes about in the darkness<sup>46</sup>.

**Negativity bias** (snake, aversion, A2) also has an impact on the three successive rings. Driven by anxiety, the snake like the pig tends to accelerate the downward fall of the mind towards suffering, hate, and paranoia (B2). The effect of the snake on the third circle is that it makes it impossible to move beyond rebirth into the preta and the animal kingdoms. The snake (A2) can be correlated with the preta (C3) and the animals (C5) in the sense that every effort at satisfaction is thwarted by hedonistic dissatisfaction (C3) or at least by the inevitable relapse into the suffering of being predator and prey (C5). Another correlation can be made with the outer ring, for example the phase of contact (sparśa, D6) and perception (vèdana, D7).

Lastly, **positivity bias** (rooster, attachments, A3) materialises in the fourth circle as trshna (D8), the eighth ring in which a man drinks beer, repeating a fleeting and addictive freudian *experience of satisfaction*. Trshna represents the psychological need to acknowledge out of reality solely that which satisfies our prejudices, that which fits in the potter's vases (the iconographic correlate of the samskara, D2), the dependence on mental grooves that formed in preceding cycles (Dalai Lama, 2015: 42). Like the other two biases, positivity bias accelerates the phenomenon of rebirth into lower forms of life (B2). Attachment means relinquishing one's deep mental faculties, one's insight, which appear as wastes of time as long as the he-

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<sup>46</sup> Sociological note: A poor person's mind is never totally biased because in order to survive s/he sees and seeks an opportunity in the other and is often brought back to the consciousness of suffering and impermanence. Biased mind is more powerful among the rich, who have the luxury of ignoring others as well as alternative truths to their own, of deluding themselves that death is distant and that their possessions are guaranteed *ab aeternum*, ending up entrenched in comfort zones and losing sight of the impermanence of their privileges.

donistic impulses are being satisfied. As well in the third circle, positivity bias leads to rebirth among the asura (C2) or among humans (C6): both conditions in which suffering is temporarily removed by a mental process in order to obtain a small portion of hedonistic pleasure. However the removed suffering tortures us from the subconscious, the dark pit into which it has been relegated.

## B. SECOND CIRCLE: THE LAW OF KARMA AND THE BARDÖ

The binary spin of the second circle can lead to psychological wellbeing or malaise, according to the burden that the three poisons place on our mental behaviour.

Wellbeing (B1) is represented by Dharma practitioners against a light background, some in regular clothes and some in monastic garb, helping each other as they rise gradually to-



wards a buddha, a bodhisattva or a lama. They are all free, and those higher up wait for those below, extend a hand, inspire them. Malaise (B2) is represented by naked and bound humans against a dark background, being dragged downwards by one or more demons.

The fact that the bodhisattva is the hero of the positive spin and the demon that of the negative spin indicates that each of the two paths is rooted in the intention underlying our actions: whether the altruistic or the egotistical benefit. As long as altruism prevails, above and beyond errors and omissions, the mind remains on the virtuous side of the moral scale of karma, and vice versa.

If we read the diagram in terms of mental afflictions and mindfulness, the parallelism with a mind bound by the constraints of reaction or rumination and enslaved by its own distress becomes apparent, as does the possibility of gradually freeing

oneself from those mental disorders by using will and determination to follow the Buddha's example (Dalai Lama, 2015: 42).

If we follow JKZ's premise of mindfulness as the active principle in Buddhist meditation, this same mindfulness can be understood as the energy capable of reversing the path of suffering undertaken by the stressed-out mind.

In this sense this double path can be seen as the juxtaposition between mindful meditation and mindless rumination (Sharf, 2014).

### C. THIRD CIRCLE: THE SIX<sup>47</sup> EXISTENTIAL KINGDOMS AS SIX MENTAL STATES

The six existential kingdoms (mental states) are represented in the third circle. Going counterclockwise, we find the top of the circle occupied by the **gods in their ivory tower**: thanks to karmic merit they live unaware of suffering and of eudemony, **hedonistically enjoying their privileges**. Just beneath them is the kingdom of the envious minor gods (asura), who are perennially engaged in a losing battle with the gods. Below these reign the insatiable spirits (preta), constantly taunted by the sight of delicious banquets only to see them turn to lava and manure. At the bottom lies the kingdom of hell or absolute despair. Rising back up the other side of the circle we find the kingdom of the animals flanked by death and the struggle for survival, and lastly come the **humans**: they are the most fortunate in the world of samsara, because while they can experience pleasure they **are not immune to suffering**, which in turn drives them to question the hedonistic impulse as an antidote to pain.

We defined the first, innermost circle of the bhavacakra as a representation of the three forms of bias, and the second circle as a depiction of the conflict between mindfulness and mindlessness. In the third circle, we can observe the consequences of a life that has been predetermined by the three poisons. Here too we will attempt a reading from the perspective of Buddhist psychology: each kingdom represents a state of mind that stems from the way in which we perceive our proximity to the desired object and our distance from the feared object.

The feared object is suffering, and all beings are motivated at all times by the desire to avoid it. In other words every sentient being experiences the first of the Buddha's Four Noble Truths: 1. suffering exists, but Buddha found a way to face it: 2. suffering has a cause, therefore 3. it can be eliminated and 4. there is a way to do so. Unfortunately, the mind in its fundamental ignorance (A1) launches headlong into a race to escape pain (A2) and pursue pleasure (A3): piloted by the three biases, the mind produces an aversion to suffering which is in turn the fundamental

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<sup>47</sup> Sometimes there are five kingdoms, with the asura sharing the same space as the gods and uselessly attacking their ivory tower, motivated by envy. (Dalai Lama 2015: 41)

cause of suffering, falling into a psychological trap. If pain, particularly physical pain, is an inevitable element of samsara, suffering is only a consequence of fear of pain, whether it be present or imaginary. This avoidable extra suffering is the fuel of the engine of the third circle.



The corollary implicit in the Four Noble Truths is that all beings want happiness, which has a cause and also a method for its attainment. Here we posit that this desire for happiness, obscured by the three poisons, manifests as **the will to a hedonistic existence**. If self-induced suffering is the fuel of the samsaric engine, this pursuit of a pleasurable existence is like oxygen in its carburettor. As long as the mind is subjected to the **mental afflictions** the only imaginable form of happiness is the hedonistic one.

From a psychological point of view, the pursuit of hedonistic satisfaction can be seen as a Sisyphean effort: once attained, each pleasure is followed by a relapse into suffering. To remain within the metaphor, one who lived in a pious and altru-

stic way but under the exclusive cloak of hedonism would be reborn among the gods: for thousands of years he or she will enjoy a kind of hedonistic peace, of continuous pleasure, but indolence would nonetheless drive he or she back down into hell. On the contrary, if one were to lead a wicked, egotistical life in the pursuit of hedonistic pleasure, one would end up in hell for very lengthy periods, in a kind of hedonic desperation, a depressing destiny of self-flagellation<sup>48</sup> (Hopkins, 2015: 5).

In each of the six states of existence there is a bodhisattva, a guide who, if we are capable of recognising it, will open the door to **escape from hedonic slavery to eudemonic freedom** (Wallace 2012).

It is fundamental to highlight here that we consider the **hedonic impetus** of positivity bias as a clumsy attempt to escape suffering. This impetus is therefore also a fruit of negativity bias as suggested by ignorance (the biased mind): for this reason we will consider it as the *basso continuo* linking these six mental states.

If hedonism is the fuel of this cycle, it has six different psychological values based on our distance/proximity from the object of our hedonic effort.

Let us take for example the gods: following a well-deserved success on the job, euphoria and a need for distraction induce us to an equally deserved (and intrinsically not negative) hedonism. However, the pleasure obtained by hedonistic activities can easily become addictive, becoming the goal of our professional efforts and therefore a cause for anxiety. Until one day the hedonistic response to the stress produced by this need for satisfaction is no longer possible and we end up in the most dismal of hells, that of depression and even suicide.

We have summarised the six mental states in six different relationships with the hedonic drive: the gods correlated to *hedonic peace* (pleasure taken for granted), the demigods (Asura) correlated to *hedonic ambition* (pleasure requires effort), the famished spirits (Preta) correlated to *hedonic frustration* (pleasure is a mirage), the damned in hell correlated to *hedonic desperation* (there is zero contact with plea-

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<sup>48</sup> In the end extinguishing negative karma and being reborn into a slightly better life. Nothing is permanent within *samsara*, from the deepest hell to the highest heaven.





sure), animals correlated to *hedonic suffering* (every pleasurable conquest corresponds to the risk of immediate suffering) and finally the humans, correlated to *hedonic consciousness* (the intuition that the path to stable well-being does not pass through hedonism).

### **C1. The gods = illusory hedonistic peace**

The hedonistic paradise is the best mental state samsara has to offer. Having reincarnated into deities, we find ourselves enclosed in an ivory tower, as in the illustration. Far from most mental afflictions, especially negative thoughts and emotions,



the gods hedonistically enjoy the good karma they have generated for themselves. It is the kingdom of pleasure, but also of indolence and sloth. Having lost contact with suffering, the gods forget they are interdependent and impermanent: once they use up all their good karma, at the end of their very long lives they end up falling into the underworld, where they must begin the cycle again from its lowest point (Hopkins, 2015). However, they have two opportunities: one is provided to all and is represented by the bodhisattva in their midst: those who take notice will surely avoid the terrible fall from grace; the other is provided by the ability to recognise the Buddha's teachings to humans and therefore the choice of descending onto Earth and becoming followers of the tathagata, as described for example in the prajnaparamita sutra: the gods Manjushri and Avalokiteshvara attend the teachings of the Sakyamuni Buddha mingling with the disciples and immediately, effortlessly reach the status of bodhisattvas mahasattvas (or great enlightened minds, but not yet Buddhas).

The idea of “hedonistic peace” that we propose here seeks to highlight addiction: the mind quieted thanks to the abundant availability of external events (medications, wealth, eroticism, etc.) is always subject to relapses because it has not worked towards greater awareness, nor is it stimulated to do so. It seems today to match with materialistic and consumeristic ideologies marked by an uncommon pandemic of depression (hellish hopeless C4).

**C2. The envious gods = hedonistic ambition, the constant drive towards pleasures beyond one’s reach**

The jealous lesser gods are in constant conflict with the “higher” gods in the vain attempt to replace them. Psychologically, they represent the hypertrophic ego masking low self-esteem. The lesser gods are frustrated and perennial losers, to the point where they will even fight one another, and it is unlikely they will notice the



bodhisattva who is there to show them a non-hedonistic alternative: they are completely blinded by ambition, by their boundless ego. They are all most certainly destined for a fall into the inferior worlds (Dalai Lama, 2015: 41). This state of mind, a sort of perception of oneself as children of a lesser god, is unfortunately often functional to econocentric social systems, in which competition on one side and nationalistic pride on the other constitute the energy that propels the economy.

**C3. Famished spirits\* = hedonistic frustration; every imagined pleasure immediately manifests as suffering (Tantalus)**



Burning with thirst and hunger and the most basic hedonic needs, the hungry spirits\* have an enormous belly and a very narrow throat that prevents them from swallowing. In the throes of mirages of freshwater springs and food,

when these avid spirits make contact (\*D6) with their objects of desire, these transform into their opposites: lava, stones, pain. The famished spirits represent the paroxysm of dissatisfaction and the pursuit of impossible consumption<sup>49</sup>. This need is a mental compulsion based on the perception that what is good for us is not present in the here and now, but elsewhere. As soon as it is reached, it immediately fails to satisfy. In some ways the famished spirits mirror the gods: while the latter are utterly inebriated by every thing they come in contact with, the first are systematically left wanting and even harmed by that which attracts them. Both repeat their obsessive and desperate pursuit of hedonic contact. On a psychological level, the mental state of the famished spirit corresponds to a mind dependent on that which is most harmful to it, on the fetish object on which it projects every hope of wellbeing, as in the relationship between financial poverty facing fancy advertising, etc.

**C4. \*The damned among demons = hedonistic desperation or the total absence of pleasure, even merely imaginary pleasure**



In hell, minds that have lost every trace of mindfulness twist in the grip of suffering without respite. Their experience of pain in every moment is reinforced by the terrible mental suffering of knowing that the next instant will be just as bad. They don't have the time to bring their attention to anything other than the next desperate moment. This is the condition of extreme depression, of hopeless pessimism,

of the need to put an end to this suffering at all costs, even at the cost of greater suffering. Why call it hedonistic despair? Because more than anyone, those who are in hell long for wellbeing, but as long as that wellbeing is hedonistic there is no possibility not only of obtaining it, but of even remotely hoping for its attainment. It is unlikely that their attention will be able to shift to the bodhisattva in their midst who shows the only alternative, that of mindfulness, of "being with"

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<sup>49</sup> It would be worthwhile to review the American mandala parody from p. 19 in these terms.

pain without projecting it onto the future, without creating further suffering — the way of eudemony. However even this tragic fate has an end: the law of impermanence also applies in the underworld, and the opportunity will inevitably arise of being reborn into a slightly less unfavourable condition. Those ending up in this terrible existential state paradoxically include the gods. Having spent eons in a hedonistic paradise they lose contact with the reality of suffering: when it inevitably manifests in their lives it will drive them to the desperate extremes of depression, madness and suicidal manias.

**C5. \*Animals = suffering hedonism, each pleasure is accompanied by pain**



In terms of Buddhist psychology, animal nature is associated with the so-called “reptilian mind” of fight or flight or the limbic brain functions, and can be a correlate of the human brain. It is not a coincidence that animals are the beings closest to humans, and like the

gods they have two escape routes: listening to the bodhisattva, but on a par with the preta and the hungry spirits\* the animals are too involved in their existential condition to realise its presence; or, like the gods\*, to listen to the Buddha teaching in the human world. This way is practicable, so much so that the Sakyamuni Buddha’s first disciples were deer in the forest. Significantly, this myth is always portrayed on the roofs of Tibetan gompas<sup>50</sup>.

In psychological terms, animals represent the attitude of constant suspicion and hedonistic risk, which can appear as paranoia. There is a constant fear of a mortal danger lying between us and the pleasures we long for. We magnify the problem until it becomes mesmerising, in a spiral of ignorance that impedes us from fully enjoying our life, making us dependent on circumstances or extremely suspicious of anyone with a wider, more reflexive and more critical vision (Hopkins, 2015).

<sup>50</sup>monasteries, literally “places of meditation”.



**C6. \*Humans = hedonistic ambivalence, or the constant alternation between pleasure and suffering**

In samsaric terms, the human condition is inferior to that of the gods\* and the hungry spirits\* and the last of three relatively positive conditions. From the dharmic point of view it is considered the most fortunate, because it stimulates us to reflect on the impermanence of both hedonistic pleasure and of suffering, as well as on existential interdependence. Unlike the gods and their perennially pleasurable world we are faced with suffering on a regular basis; unlike the animals and their constant state of alert we regularly access moments of serenity<sup>51</sup>. This is the



most fertile ground for bodhisattvas: it is here that they can awaken the true Buddha nature that is in all beings (Dalai Lama, 2015: 42). This is where the Buddha is noticed and admired when s/he comes to deliver the teachings. It is human to share rather than to divide,

it is human to fail to share. In the most dramatic moments of birth, illness, old age and especially death, all humans have moments of insight, an intuitive perception of a nature other the hedonic and illusory one.

The psyche oscillating between hedonism and disappointment, whether in oneself or reflected in others, is that which has the most critical capacities and empathetic faculties. It is the mind correlated to the so-called “mirror neurons” that allows us to see ourselves in others. This is where the meditative wedge can be practiced with maximum success: it is in this ambivalent human condition that we can most easily become conscious of the limits of hedonism — a condition in which good and evil, pleasure and pain, serenity and suffering blend seamlessly into one other. It is due to these human characteristics, which could almost be defined as a

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<sup>51</sup> Animals here are spoken of metaphorically, of course.

“conditional humanism”<sup>52</sup>, that the mind seeks a different path from what appeared as the only two possibilities: fight or flight. The way of liberation indicated by the Sakyamuni Buddha and his disciples is within us, internal and introspective. Some humans find it within, like the pratriekabuddha<sup>53</sup>, or they find it through other paths: non-Buddhist religions and philosophies, as well as the arts and the sciences. At quite different levels both JKZ and visionary Tibetan yogin Traktung Dūdjom Lingpa, as well as protocols such as Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction and Dzogchen meditation techniques, address this innate path, this inner light.

In the awareness of an alternative way, whose access lies in the mysterious forest of the psyche, we embark on an exploration of the last circle, that of interdependent coproduction.

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<sup>52</sup> Humanism today is intended as an ethic that is totally based on the human condition, without divine saviours or paths to liberation that are alternative to worldly efforts. This vision does not consider the possibility that the human psyche carries with it a potential for transcendence, therefore that it can liberate itself from existential conditionings. Following the logic of Dharma psychology, the humanistic ethic is limited in that it is conditioned by *samsara* as much as the human existence it intends to care for: by becoming conscious of this fact, human beings can add to the humanistic ethic, which at the end of the day is a materialistic one, a universal and transcendental ethic that, in the final analysis, will free them definitively from existential conditionings.

<sup>53</sup> Those who discover the Dharma on their own and reach realisations beginning with themselves.



#### **D. OUTER CIRCLE: THE 12 RINGS OF INTERDEPENDENT COPRODUCTION**

As represented in the bhavacakra, the 12 rings\* can be read on an existential level, as 12 inter-causal phases of the cycle of rebirth, or on a psychological level, as 12 phases making up the mental acts with which sentient beings delude themselves. This delusion consists in the belief they possess an ego that is independent of other phenomena (the subject) capable of maintaining a dualistic and wilful control over reality (the object). The refined description of this mechanism is one of the mainstays of Buddhist psychology, which sees cognitive processes as the reification of mental phenomena. Reification of phenomena is the ultimate cause of all suffering.



The starting point of this cycle is between the jaws of Yama, hooked to his left canine, and represents ignorance, a-vidya\* or better yet unawareness, which is represented at the centre of the wheel in the shape of a pig. Unconsciousness of what? Within our Dzogchen perspective, it is unawareness of both alaya and dharmadathu.

Wallace's interpretation of alaya, the fundamental basis of every dualistic being, derives from the Dzogchen teachings of Dūdjom Lingpa:

**Ground of being\* (is) The basis of the entire saṃsāra and nirvāṇa. Its unconscious aspect is the substrate (alaya)\*, and its enlightened aspect is dharmakāya\*.”** (Wallace, 2016c: 325).

This typically Vajrayana definition, which is even more typically Dzogchen, opens us up to the bhavacakra's highest function, that of liberation from both samsara and nirvana.

The substrate remains unconscious so long as our consciousness\* does not penetrate it by practicing shinè (śamathā) and lakhtong (vipaśyanā)<sup>54</sup>. Once we become aware of the subconscious we can transcend the dualistic vision (meditator-meditation object) by practicing trekchö (cutting through) and lakhtong (leaping beyond). In this way we achieve a pristine awareness\* of the union between the limitless space of the Ground of Being (dharmadhatu) with itself. This recognition of one's own enacted potential is enlightenment.

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<sup>54</sup> Reaching śamatha/samadhi corresponds to primodhyana, a place/state of beatitude of the mind which can too easily be confused with enlightenment — the last obstacle of the yogin.

## D1. Avidyā, the unawareness of alaya<sup>55</sup> and dharmadathu<sup>56</sup>



In the classical Pali interpretation, ignorance is to lack the knowledge of the fundamentals of Dharma<sup>57</sup>. However in this Vajrayana painting, ignorance is depicted as a blind old woman who can't find her way on her own (in some cases, she relies on the guidance of an inexperienced youth). This image represents not

so much not knowing certain teachings but the absolute and total lack of the faculty of sight, of visual conscience and therefore the capacity to recognise that which is visible (and consequently, the ability to find an expert guide).<sup>58</sup> This image refers to Tibetan Buddhism's most essential interpretation of ignorance: *ma-rig-pa*, non-awareness, and more precisely the lack of awareness of the Ground of Being, or *dharmadhatu*. In the Dzogchen vision there are two levels of awareness of this ground: at a rougher level there is a dualistic awareness (*alayavijñāna*)\*, in which the *śamathā* and *vipaśyanā* meditator achieves freedom from the velcro effect of mental afflictions (*klesha*) and recognises his or her own *alaya* or indivi-

<sup>55</sup> Wallace (2017) explains that *alaya* corresponds to the theravaddin *bhavanga*: the difference is that in the Mahayana, *alaya* is an object of contemplation along with *alayavijñāna* (the consciousness of this base) and *prana* (the fundamental energy of the base), while in the Theravada there is no contemplation of any aspects beyond *bhavanga*.

<sup>56</sup> The absolute space of phenomena. For more details, see Wallace 2016c: 222.

<sup>57</sup> <https://fpmt.org/mandala/online-features/personalizing-the-twelve-links-of-dependent-origination/#a2> "Dharmakirti insists instead that it is a very specific wrong apprehension, namely the view that there is a substantial, self-sufficient "me" that exists over and above the aggregates of body and mind, similar to there being some kind of substantial entity called "New York" that exists over and above the buildings and people. Chandrakirti adds that it is not only this view of self, but the view of all phenomena possessing some intrinsic, findable nature in this way. The Theravada tradition takes a practical approach, identifying "first-stage ignorance" as misapprehension of the four noble truths: any view of reality that does not recognise craving as the cause of suffering will lead to actions that perpetuate suffering." Thanissaro Bhikkhu explains, "'Ignorance' in the context of dependent co-arising doesn't mean a general delusion or lack of information. It means not viewing experience in terms of the four noble truths. Any other framework for viewing experience, no matter how sophisticated, would qualify as ignorance." (Thanissaro 2012: 54).

<sup>58</sup> Very briefly we recall that in Buddhism there are six senses: the five classic ones plus the mind, in that it is an "organ" capable of perceiving, seeing and being involved in purely psychological phenomena, for ex. in dreams, daydreams or in creative activities.

dual basis\* in a way that is objective and “detached”<sup>59</sup>, but still subtly dualistic. From this advantageous position it is possible to perceive and then achieve a more profound and ultimate level, consisting of a crystalline, non-dual and supreme awareness (dharmakaya, rigpa)\* of full consciousness of the Ground of Being (dharmadhatu, dharmatha, tathagatagarbha)\*: this is the realisation of one’s own Buddha nature.

***Ah!***  
***As a magical display,***  
***The union of unborn emptiness***  
***And the infinite phenomena***  
***Of interdependent origination...***  
***Is the Lama, the Lion of the Śakyas...***  
***Who bestows complete liberation***  
***From both samsara and nirvana...***  
***The glory of supreme bliss.***

Mipham Rinpoche, 1900. The Treasury of Blessings: A Practice of  
 Buddha Śākyamuni. In Book of Prayers. Padmakara ed.

In the Tibetan vision, profound ignorance is not only mistaken understanding but total lack of understanding, i.e. the unwitting use we make of our mind, our consciousness, brain, and body, in every moment. This lack of awareness delegates the choice of every physical or mental action to the mind, and to behavioural automatisms described in the fourth to the twelfth ring. As we have seen in the circle of the three poisons, ignorance is inevitably accompanied by attachment and aversion: this fourth external circle is the analytical description of the samsaric mental processes, showing what happens in our existence and/or mind once the three poisons activate karma. Thrangu Rinpoche, one of the most important living Lama Nyingmapa, explains in reference to D1 that “the first [is the] ring at the root of ignorance [and] signifies that by ignoring the true nature of phenomena we project things that don’t exist.” (Thrangu, 2013: kl 75) He continues: “We delude ourselves about the existence of a self; this ignorance produces the confusion that generates samsara...all our ways of relating to things are generated by ignorance,

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<sup>59</sup> It is important to note that Tsong-kha-pa suggests not introducing alaya to the intellectually and ethically unprepared, because once before alaya they might identify with it, reify it in the belief of having found the Self. The reification of alaya is the mistaken perception that the ego possesses an intrinsic existence, independent of other phenomena. (Tsong-kha-pa 1993: 135 and 137)

therefore by removing ignorance we remove the cause of all suffering.” (idem: kl 85) It is clear that the Vajrayana interpretation of Dharma is radical and “proactive”. In Dzogchen in particular, suffering ends only by eliminating unawareness of the Ground of Being, but this salvation does not depend on a long process of purification through precepts, rites and renunciations, which are just useful means, but rather on reaching direct consciousness of a truth that is already present in the nature of every sentient being, which could with a single leap (thögal) recognise its own radiance. This leap can take place mediately or immediately, depending on the weight of the veils each has accumulated in his or her individual consciousness (alaya). It is these very veils that render us blind, like the sightless character in the icon who gropes about in the darkness of alaya. If s/he could permanently open his or her eyes, free him or herself from avidya and realise śamathā through samadhi practices, his or her consciousness would become aware\* of the quality of the substrate\*; through an ever more discerning analysis of the phenomena\* s/he would open a passage\* through the substrate\* and could leap\* into the clear light of rigpa\* and end up recognising this same universe, which is samsaric to the blind, as nirvana. In the final analysis the complete Dzogchen path taught by Padmasambhava consists of a “simple” but radical change of perspective (see for ex. Wallace, 2016a).

The fact that humans inevitably suffer, as theorised by the Buddha in the Four Noble Truths, is represented by the dead man being carried by a mourning relative in D12\*. Iconographically, suffering and death come before unawareness (D1, avidya) in order to stress the systematic and irresponsible forgetting of the fact that suffering is the consequence (D12) of one’s own actions (D11) and the reason for samsaric rebirth as opposed to enlightenment (Thrangu, 2013: kl301).

Unconsciousness opens a new psychological cycle and this is where, between one cycle and the next and between the jaws of the Lord of Death, the Dzogchen and the Vajrayana in general could wedge themselves. The samadhic gaze of Yama’s third eye represents the meditator’s wise vision, capable of perceiving the true nature of phenomena. Meditating on Yama’s third eye takes us directly to the “Tibetan Book of the Dead” (“Bardö Thödrol”, Norbu: 2003), which talks about

death<sup>60</sup> as an opportunity to escape samsara — an opportunity we could easily seize...if only we opened the eye of wisdom, with a bit of effort and good karma, including before the end of this life.

In conclusion, avidya is a state of absence of awareness: because of it, alaya<sup>61</sup> is precluded to us, but thanks to meditation not wholly inaccessible.

## D2. Saṃskāra\*, or the karmic imprints that unconsciously influence our choices



The image here is of a potter making a series of vases and recipients. Saṃskāra is normally translated as “volitional formations”, “karmic creations”, “karmic imprints” or “karmic energies” (Wallace, 2012) in the sense of psychic impressions that determine our fruitless desire to exist within samsara. On a psychological level the image of the potter recalls previous actions that have marked and modelled the flow of our consciousness\*. Anxiously projected into the future, they reduce our perception of the present to a series of pre-established forms (the pots).

The venerable Thannissaro Bhikku<sup>62</sup> translates\* samskara in this way: “From the prerequisite of ignorance, fabrications descend.” This takes us to the pre-conscious faculty of producing forms, categories, facsimiles that label, catalogue, contain, and limit our perceptions of reality. Pots and potter therefore represent the faculty of prefabricating categories, the reductionist attempt to limit the infinite complexity of phenomena into manageable containers. In reference to the self, samskara

<sup>60</sup> And the 49-day interval before a rebirth.

<sup>61</sup> The ground consciousness, which is the deposit, the hard disk storing each individual’s karmic imprints, unconscious memories.

<sup>62</sup> <https://www.accesstoinight.org/tipitaka/sn/sn12/sn12.002.than.html>

represents the will to exist as that of being enslaved by appearances<sup>63</sup>, of manifesting according to pre-programmed canons that come from the substrate\* and obscure the true nature of phenomena\* to our crystalline consciousness\*. Maybe it was in order to avoid being stuck within the limitations of these volitional formations that the Buddha declined to formulate an objective theory of the universe (Kalupahana, 1992).

If the substrate\* were a deposit, the samskaras (D2) would be the correlates of the deposited objects, the vases prefabricated in previous cycles, then buried and forgotten beneath the heavy veil of unawareness (\*D1). Karmic imprints are the forms, the marks left by the past: if alaya were a hard disk, they would be the binary files imprinted on it.

Karmic imprints are intrinsically “ethically neutral” and are not necessarily negative: alaya is the repository not only of misdeeds but also of positive actions. Thran-gu Rinpoche explains that the conditioning effect of karmic imprints is intrinsically useful in that it makes the same action easier to execute the next time around (2013: kl169). This is in line with the idea that the only real problem is unawareness (\*D1) of the Ground of Being, and therefore those who have realised śama-thā and are free of the velcro of the samskara, and *a fortiori* the vidyadhara, i.e. the one who has achieved vidya, can at least on the psychological level live through the remaining 11 rings in their neutral function, without producing negative karma.

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<sup>63</sup> Despite the risk of going off topic or competency, I cannot but glance at Nietzsche's philosophy: for him, nothing exists but everything appears. The will to power therefore cannot be will to exist, the illusion of fools, but rather a will to self-affirmation, a response to the need to appear. The idea of existence is therefore a distorted and superficial (samsaric) vision, but it does not deny phenomena, which spring from the “will to power” (instead of rigpa/vidya/dharmakaya, the crystal-clear consciousness).

### D3. Vijñana, or consciousness of the substrate\* (Wallace: ground consciousness)

Of the eight forms of consciousness described in the Yogachara<sup>64</sup> (see annex 4) the last three, according to a personal communication by Alan Wallace (2018b), correspond to D3 (eighth consciousness\*), D4 (seventh consciousness\*) and D5\* (sixth consciousness\*). Wallace<sup>65</sup>, who masterfully intersected the subtle analysis of the Yogachara by Tsong-kha-pa, the founder of the gelug school (Tsong-kha-pa, 1993) with the teachings of Dūdjom Lingpa<sup>66</sup>, offers a very interesting vision of this very delicate and arcane phase of the 12 rings.

The icon that corresponds to the alaya-vijñana depicts a restless monkey who is busy exploring, and who has not yet focused its attention on any particular object. According to Thrangu Rinpoche, monkeys represent an agitated state incapable of focusing for long, and we would add, capable of being trained through śamathā practice.



Alaya-vijñana is the awareness of the substrate or Ground, that directly contemplates the deposit and all its pots without labelling, separations or categories. According to Wallace (2017) alaya-vijñana and alaya remain symmetrical and stable until the velcro effect of karmic imprints disrupts this symmetry. When this happens the kleśa (kliśtamana) “manifest themselves outside the pots”. In other words, the karmic imprints lose their calm energetic state and begin to influence consciousness (vijñana).

The cause of this instability lies in unawareness (D1\*). When consciousness loses awareness of alaya, it falls easy prey to the velcro energy of the samskara (D2) that inevitably disturb the quiet flow of consciousness, splitting it into nama and rupa

<sup>64</sup> And specifically in the Ārya-saṃdhi-nirmocana-sūtra or the Noble Sutra of the Explanation of the Profound Secrets and in Asanga’s comments.

<sup>65</sup> Currently a Dzogchenpa undergoes long training in the Vajrayana gelugpa reformed school, which places great emphasis on logical and philosophical rigor. It was founded by Tsong-Kha-Pa and is headed by the Dalai Lama, who was his personal mentor for many years.

<sup>66</sup> Wallace also makes use of his knowledge of physics, the sutra, the tantra and other Dzogchen lineages.



(D4). It is enough for a karmic imprint to catch the attention of consciousness<sup>67\*</sup> for it to move from a state of quietude to one of agitation. In this “mindless” process the basic energy manifests as the three poisons, transforming *alayavijñana* (D3) into *klishtamanovishnana* (D4).

#### **D4. Namarupa\* or name and form, mind and body (Wallace: afflictive mentation)**

The icon depicts an oarsman and a merchant forced to share a small boat on a river. In Tibet, river crossings are thought to be the most dangerous part of a journey: in the highlands, small and fragile leather rafts are used to navigate the freezing rapids of extremely wide rivers. Falling overboard means death



(by freezing or by being devoured by a naga or serpent spirit). The passenger's life depends completely on the boatman, whose survival in this thankless and dangerous trade in turn depends on the generosity of the passenger. Both look anxiously back to the shore they are leaving and forwards to the shore they are approaching: they avoid considering their present context, which manifests as a powerful and unstable flow devoid of intrinsic points of reference.

Alan Wallace (2018a) claims that the appearance of the “karmic velcro”<sup>\*</sup> causes the separation between *alaya* and *vijñana*. *Alayavijñana* (D3) transforms into *klishtamanovijñana* (D4). Consciousness is attracted and captured by the “karmic velcro”<sup>\*</sup> which “covers” the vases (D2, *samskara*). From a condition of stillness and symmetry between *alaya* and *vijñana*, consciousness becomes turbulent and the equilibrium is altered. Moving from one form<sup>\*</sup> to another, consciousness reacts with attraction (A3), repulsion (A2) or disinterest (A1), labelling<sup>\*</sup> the various objects that emerge from *alaya*. At this point *vijñana* has lost sight of (i) the relative

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<sup>67</sup> Fully aware consciousness (*alayavijñana*) lies in a state of peace and impersonal interpenetration with *alaya*.

and personal context (alaya); (ii) consciousness of this context (D3\*); and (iii) its energetic potential\*<sup>68</sup>.



Going back to the icon, the river represents alaya in a state of turbulence and the merchant represents the klesha (klishtamana) asking the boatman (vijñana) to bring his attention (the boat) elsewhere. However, in this way they distance themselves from the originating serenity of the shore of departure (alayavijñana). If the reward offered by the rich merchant is tempting enough and/or the punishment frightening enough, the two get on board and face the river of life in a forced cohabitation. On a subconscious level, a dependent relationship has been formed between kleshas and consciousness. By now the three poisons have taken control of the mind.

### D5. Sadayātana\* (Wallace: mentation)

When the ground consciousness (alayavijñana, D3) is captured by the velcro of



klishtamanas (\*D4), that is, it is afflicted by reactions to objects contained in the alaya (samskara, the potter's vases, D2), it places itself in a "judgmental" position (the three poisons, A1-A2-A3)<sup>69</sup>. Now the person has been "resetted", conditioned to face life and his/her contacts (D6) with the world on this new dualistic basis, which is for the most part automatic and unaware. In the Yogachara's eightfold system of primary consciousnesses the eighth, alayavijñana, is obliterated by the seventh, klish-tamanovijñana, reducing consciousness to an unaware and automatic activity

(manovijñana, the sixth) similar to the other five forms of consciousness linked to

<sup>68</sup> In the Dzogchen context, the function of śamathā meditation is to restore to consciousness this "primordial calm", to bring the attention back to alaya in its triple aspect of base, consciousness and energy.

<sup>69</sup> Kabat-Zinn intends his non-judgemental mindfulness in this sense, and not in an ethical one: an assessment devoid of the three "I like/dislike/ignore" labels.

the five senses, which perceive reality (which now appears to be external) in terms of “I like/dislike/am indifferent to”: the three poisons or three biases (A1, A2 and A3) act as filters to the six forms of consciousness.

Here the six senses are represented as a house (separation between internal and external world, subject and object) with six small windows. Consciousness is reduced to being one of these six tiny apertures through which (in this case, mental) information can pass.

Within the context of the six forms of consciousness, the manovijñana function includes that of distinguishing among sensory inputs (for example, which to “re-route” to the acoustic consciousness and which to the visual consciousness).

Sadayatana therefore refers not only to mental consciousness but also to the other five forms of sensory consciousness.



We cannot but posit the hypothesis of a parallel between the idea of consciousness as an opening, a passage between subject and object, and the *bi* ritual “rings” of Chinese culture: objects of meditation and of becoming conscious of the absence of intrinsic reality.

## D6. Sparśa, or the contact between the six senses and objects by means of consciousness<sup>70</sup>

The six senses are open to their objects by means of their respective forms of consciousness. At this point contact with the external world takes place: on one side a self, on the other a non-self. The game of mirrors has imposed itself and lays down the rules that spin the wheel on both mental and existential levels, with constant actions and reactions with respect to the external and internal worlds, both in this life and, in a Buddhist context, in past and future lives.

Sexual intercourse represents (in a typically Tibetan way that is effective and uninhibited) the total sensory openness towards an external object (and the possibility of reciprocity, if the object is a sentient being).



It is interesting to note that at the foot of the bed is a black bird, which appears in various other pictograms in the external ring of the bhavacakra: presumably it is a buzzard that already sniffs the scent of carrion, a sort of *memento mori* aimed at the meditator with respect to actions that could easily drag one into unawareness — a reminder that will inevitably mature in D12 and the sky burial ritual.

## D7. Vèdana or pleasant, unpleasant and neutral sensations; attribution of the three internal poisons to external objects

Vèdana are the reactive pleasant, unpleasant and neutral sensations<sup>71</sup> that consciousness superimposes on “external” objects under the karmic influence of D2.

<sup>70</sup> This is the definition given in Trangu 2013: kl255, which matches Wallace’s interpretation that they are feelings and not sensations.

<sup>71</sup> Duhkha, sukha and upeksha correlate with the three poisons.

The icon shows a running man with an arrow piercing one of his eyes, indicating how acute, penetrating and conditioning are the sensations we attribute to objects, as though they were the ones producing them and not our mind.

While the pain of an arrow through one's eye can be considered "objective", all the Tibetan schools (especially the Dzogchen - Nyingma school) speak of "one taste" in reference to rigpa, the non-dual, pure and non-judgmental vision. Every thing has only one taste, there is no distinction between unpleasant or not. Even an arrow through the eye is a factor with mental causes and effects<sup>72</sup>, which produce attraction or aversion. In this seventh icon, feeling is in a raw state (Thrangyong, 2013: kl266) and has an impact on karmic traces, therefore there is the possibility that if the sensation has a particularly "strong" impact, it could reinforce the need to react to the specific contact that caused it<sup>73</sup>. The re-action is a re-iteration that launches the eighth mechanism of the 12 links clock.



This link is suitable to modern mindfulness practices, here they can find an easily recognisable "weak link" on which to work. By borrowing techniques from Buddhism<sup>74</sup> it is possible to insert a wedge of mindfulness between the object and the "magnetism" it seems to produce, thus slowing down the rumination/mind wandering process.

<sup>72</sup> For the madhyamaka school this does not deny the possible existence of an external or an internal world, contrary to the cittamatra or "mind only" school.

<sup>73</sup> In the case of a negative sensation the iteration will be one of repulsion, so more a phobia than a fixation.

<sup>74</sup> , i.e. using a practical object of meditation as an anchor (for example, the breath) in order not to be swept away by the energetic current created by the chain of 12 rings



### **D8. Trshna (thirst), or the mind's involvement with objects through the threefold mechanism of clinging, rejection and indifference**

Without a profound awareness of our actions, we would, for example, react to pleasure by seeking to repeat the contact we liked so much<sup>75</sup>.



Not coincidentally, the icon represents a man being served by a beautiful woman. Hopkins (2013: 12) interprets this image as the indulgent desire to give oneself pleasure and escape pain.

Thrangu Rinpoche's proposal is to interpret *trshna* as “involvement” rather than “grasping”<sup>76</sup>. Involvement is a general category that can be broken

down into clinging, rejecting and indifference (Thrangu, 2013: kl282). Here clinging evokes the velcro effect with which the *klištamana* (D8) glue *vijñana* (consciousness, D3) to *samskara* (karmic traces, D2), restarting the chain of interdependent coproduction of the 12 rings.

In mindfulness-based addiction therapies (for ex. Brewer 2012, see third part of this paper) the process of habit formation and reinforcement resembles the connection between this ring (D8) and the following one (D9): perhaps a transition of sorts in which a kind of association might occur between the experienced object and D2, the “mental objects” memorised in the *alaya* — a bridge between two different sections of the 12-ring chain. We will develop this theme further in the two paragraphs to follow.

<sup>75</sup> Or re-fleeing from what frightened us, regardless of pondering the actual unpleasantness of the object of attention.

<sup>76</sup> On the other hand, other authors, such as Hopkins, use “attachment” in D8 and “grasping” in D9 (2015: 21).

### D9. Upadàna or adoption, grasping, habitual reactions and tendencies, decisions



The icon here is especially meaningful. A woman picks fruit from a tree and hands it to a monkey, who places it in a container. The monkey recalls vijñana, consciousness, turned now to the exterior (D5), now to the interior (D3) in search of mnemonic associations between the karmic traces (D2) and the “clues” provided by the object that has been contacted (D6): after repeating this loop various times, the monkey decides to take action.

For Thrangu Rinpoche, involvement (D8) is followed by adoption (D9) of the object: “we decide to acquire the object or to avoid it, if it is unpleasant. At this stage, the process is still a mental one.” (Thrangu, 2013: 286) So, a moment of consciousness, of decision — a mental action. The six senses have reacted to the object and to its image in the alaya, and now decide that the next step (D10) will be to appropriate it, get rid of it or ignore it, according to which of the three poisons is dominant in the elements corresponding to the object found in D2.

Sister Khema and Bhante Vimalaramsi claim that “because of the unrealised condition of this ring, it is in effect a rare moment in which most of us stop, pause, and offer ourselves the space to see what happens in this precise instant-situation, without the interference of ideas, opinions, comparisons, or other judgments.” (2010: 4) According to the two monks from the Thai tradition (theravada), this is the ring where the chain can be “broken” through mindfulness meditation.

In some ways, this reading of upadàna “dharmically” explains how here too it is possible to insert a meditative wedge: at every spin of the wheel there is a phase of forgetting (D1, avidya) in which all the karmic traces are present (D2) but in which the mind still does not engage in projections<sup>77</sup>. This is followed by the rise

<sup>77</sup> Here an analogy spontaneously arises to the old technology of electronic videography, in which a frame without images (i-frame) was inserted, containing the metadata of the group of images allowing the processors (which were quite slow at the time) to elaborate the images in real time, indicating in each frame only the variations with respect to the data in the i-frame.



of vijñāna, alayavijñāna (D3), the ground consciousness that advanced levels of śamathā and vipaśyanā try to stabilise. Until the klišhtamana (D4) dynamic is activated, the system is in a state of repose, the klesha are “asleep”. According to the Buddhist canon, like all things the klesha “contained in the D2 vases” are impermanent: if they are observed but not fed, they wear off. Therefore it is legitimate to presume that consciously giving up on repeating a contact between object and imprint could reduce the velcro effect of the object of fixation due to a lack of energetic recharge, which reiteration normally guarantees to the klesha. The following processes are ever less subtle, more and more obvious and experientially inevitable, culminating in D12: jaramarana, suffering and death. Going back, the accessible forms of consciousness only remain perceptible to an ordinary state of mind until vedana (D7), when, like an arrow through the eye, a specific object strikes us more than others.

Continuing to adapt Brewer’s scheme to the bhavacakra, it would seem that before moving on to D11 or the material manifestation of the act, there is a loop that “checks” the qualities of the object within the ground memory. This loop closely resembles a process of rumination: “Anxiety, panic and gloom are all characterised by cognitive fusion, that is, a quality of mental experience that is predominantly aware, factually accurate and requiring urgent action....Phenomenologically, this is perceived as being ‘lost in thought’, a river of thoughts with a quality that is adhesive [see in D8 Thrangu, clinging, n.d.a.], sticky, affording little freedom of choice in terms of how to respond. Mindfulness can be seen as an alternative behaviour...” (Shonin, 2016: 105).

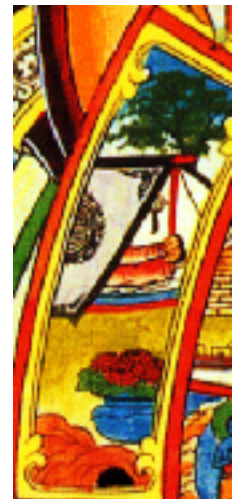
## D10. Bhava or conception, action, becoming



The icon represents a pregnant woman, the completed act: the fertile seed will inevitably lead to a birth. The name of this ring, bhava, recalls both the concept of “becoming” and that of “habitual tendencies”, which are already powerfully present in B9 and are here fulfilled, and clearly resonates with two key concepts of this thesis: bhavacakra and bhavanga (the Theravada term for mahayanic alaya, the D2 deposit).

Action is the moment in which we try to stop something in the swirl of bhavacakra. In a state of full awareness, as in the case of the bodhisattvas, this moment is a manifestation of compassion: the act stemming from the enlightened mind (bodhicitta) whose fruits purify the bhavanga from the klesha; on the contrary in a samsaric state, every action will reinforce the klesha because it is guided by the automatic pilot of the three poisons. The mindfulness meditator is therefore on the right path: while still lacking full control over this complex cyclical process, s/he can wedge a moment of awareness between thought and action in the instants that separate the D6-D7-D8-D9-D10<sup>78</sup> rings, avoiding the risks of rumination, anxiety, gloom, or knee-jerk reactions.

Sometimes in D10 the icon represents a couple copulating or spending the night together<sup>79</sup>, significantly recalling the amorous couple in D6, or contact. However while D6 is a mental contact, one of consciousness, in D10 this is an external manifestation. The iconographic connection between these two rings leads us to hypothesise that the 12 rings can spin various times before materialising in an external action, so D10, D11 and D12 would remain as speculative, “what if” actions in order to correlate the contacted object as quickly and as precisely as possible with the karmic traces (D2), until consciousness deci-



<sup>78</sup> In the Dzogchen, the practice of śamathā and vipaśyanā would end up “wedging” consciousness at the alaya level, between the D3-D2-D4-D5 rings.

<sup>79</sup> In other cases, this icon depicts a person who is thinking, or awaiting the consequences of their actions.

des (D9) to voluntarily lock onto the object, materialising the D10 action and its consequences in D11 and D12.

On both the psychological and the existential level, the completed act will have inevitable consequences that are completely out of our control, and which cannot but be accepted as our karma, the energy that spins the wheel of existence. So the interface between B9 and B10 is the last chance to interrupt the automatism, if only for a moment.

### **D11. Jati or birth, rebirth, the consequences of action, karmic effects**



The icon depicts a woman giving birth to a child. In existential terms this represents rebirth into samsara, conditioned by ignorance. In terms of mental states, (re)birth represents the inevitable psychological consequence of action, its karmic ripening. While in and of itself it is the most tangible form of the consequences of unawareness, jati is also the possibility of escaping the madness of samsara.

ra.

Whatever path is chosen (that of the solitary pratyekabuddha, that of the shravakayana, the hearer and so on up to the path of the Great Perfection) they all have an inevitable prerequisite: becoming conscious of one's condition, or mindfulness. Remaining on a purely psychological level, the rebirth of a behaviour and of a cognitive process can be, at least within certain limits, redirected in a more beneficial way: the act has been completed, its consequences have inevitably come to pass, but with awareness they can be taken as a warning and a lesson for the next cycle. This specifically means a suspension, no matter how minute, of the automatic loops through which an attentive gaze that is detached from and kind towards the very nature of our anxieties and desires, an acknowledgment of the possibility of functioning in a non-automatic way (Dalai Lama, 2015).

## D12. Jaramarana or impermanence, suffering and death

A son carries his father's body on his shoulders. He will undress him, then cut up his body with a sharpened knife so the vultures can devour him to the last piece. This ritual known as a "sky burial" in an urtrö\* or charnel ground will take place on an iso-



lated ridge exposed to the elements. There is no spiritually more elevated moment in the lives of common Tibetans. Abandoning one's own father with such detachment could appear to be disrespectful of life and of the ties that bind.

However in Tibetan, Mongolian and Himalayan cultures, the body is simply not the father, and does not represent him. Even the most ignorant of Tibetans knows that the mental flow s/he called "father" has now probably become somebody's "child" in another life, another place...or maybe a bodhisattva, a vidyadhara<sup>80</sup>. Getting rid of the body means getting rid of a misplaced attachment while also helping the father to not be distracted by the temptation to return to his past life,



to not let himself be influenced by it within the continuum of alaya between one life and the next.

In Buddhism, life is not limited to this life. The flow of consciousness is not reduced to cerebral events that extinguish themselves when the neurological machines no

longer receive their signals. Furthermore, in Tibetan Buddhism, death itself is not just a flash between one life and the next, but a journey that can last up to 49

<sup>80</sup> The honorary title of Dzogchen means "one who has consciousness of vidya". Not to be confused by the use of the same term in other traditions.

days. It is only when an experienced Lama declares that the flow of consciousness of the dearly departed has been reincarnated (or perhaps liberated) that the son will be able to take the remains to the charnel ground. Death — the sign of life's impermanence and inconsistency — is where the aggregates or the five skandas<sup>81</sup> disintegrate.

Waiting for him at the sky burial site will be not only the vultures, but also a discrete observer. When the son of the dead leaves the site, which at night is infested by the most terrifying spirits, the observer will manifest for what he is: a yogi practicing chöd, or “cutting” through the ego following the teachings



of renown 11th-century yogini Machig Labdrön. In a semi-controlled hypnotic hallucination, the yogi visualises offering his dismembered body to the monstrous beings that manifest in the night before his eyes, until his ego is dissolved and his attachment to a consistent self is blotted out.

Regardless of this extreme form of liberation, which is certainly not for everyone, there are other very efficient forms of yoga that are also based on the process of dissolution of the aggregates at the time of death. Indeed the dissolution of the skanda, according to the nyingma vision (but also to a great degree in the other Vajrayana schools, including the non-buddhist bön school) also takes place when we sleep, and when we dream the entire cycle of the 12 rings repeats mentally while the body is catatonic.

Sleep yoga is one of the various advanced tantric practices belonging to the famous “6 yogas of Naropa” (which are also used by Dzogchen practitioners). It unfolds in two phases and with two motivations: on one side it expands mindfulness from the wake state to both REM and N-REM sleep improving the practice both in

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<sup>81</sup> Rūpa (D4) body, vedanā (D7) sensation, saṃskāra (D2) subconscious imprints, vijñāna (D3) consciousness, and lastly saṃjñā, the process of discerning, which under the scheme we are examining, we might suppose to consist of virtual cycles of the 12 rings mentioned in D10. This would apply both in bardö and in sleep, when the body is dead or catatonic.



quantity and quality; on the other side the ultimate motivation is one's preparation for death. According to the vision of the Buddha (literally "the awakened one") the two processes of death and sleep are the same: it's an obliteration of consciousness, albeit enormously more intense when dying.



Death and unawareness, D12 and D1, lie in the jaws of Yama: the Lord of the Underworld seems to want to break the chain precisely between these two rings. For the Vajrayana, the life of the practitioner is a preparation for death and its liberating potential. Life must be lived as long and as fully as possible in order to face the terrifying Yama

without fear. If anything, he is an energetic teacher who wishes to find us prepared on the day of our final exam. Yama does not mete out punishment or reward. Suffering is self-inflicted by our own ignorance, and every merit is a conquest of whatever wisdom we may attain. Yama is Buddha and Buddha shows us the way but does not undertake it on our behalf, nor does he carry us on his shoulders.

This highly responsibility-generating but also liberating vision of the individual probably constitutes the most profound influence the Dharma is exerting, often indirectly, on the West and on the materialistic model that has dominated the world for the past two centuries or so.

### Part III

#### THE WEDGE OF MINDFULNESS IN THE BHAVACAKRA

Mindfulness meditation is a top-down process in which the highest cognitive functions manage to influence the most “archaic” parts of the brain, i.e. those most bound by fight or flight reactions, etc. This process is also known as self-induced brain plasticity (Beauregard et al., 2001)<sup>82</sup>. What in turn influences the highest cognitive functions is often considered the object of philosophical speculation. Within the context of this paper, which analyses the system of interpretation of the mind proposed by Vajrayana Buddhism, we assume that this higher function lies in the notion of rigpa\* or non-dual awareness.

As we’ve already seen in the previous two parts of this paper, there is a direct path between avidya (unawareness) and vidya (pristine awareness) (Lipman, 1989: 12) leading from ordinary, dual and samsaric consciousness (manovijñana) to awareness of alaya (alayavijñana, substrate consciousness). According to Tibetan Buddhism, once we gain awareness of the alaya it is possible to access the ultimate, impersonal and non-dual space of reality (dharmadathu)\* in a state of supreme, pristine awareness: vidya/rigpa/dharmakaya.

From the Dzogchen point of view, mindfulness practices draw their beneficial resources from this universal consciousness (rigpa) of the non-dual space (dharmadathu) in which its energetic fluctuations (prana) manifest themselves. In Dharmic terms therefore the nature of the energy that makes the top-down process of mindfulness possible and experimentally verifiable is rigpa (vidya). An example of this top-down, metaphysical-to-physical, process is the synaptic rewiring that occurs following even modest meditation practices<sup>83</sup>.

From the description of the bhavacakra it seems clear that the four concentric circles are deeply interconnected, a bit like the mechanisms of a watch, and it is therefore plausible to imagine that by “jamming” any one of its elements, the entire

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<sup>82</sup> According to Namkhai Norbu the Buddhist schools that propose direct ways are the Vajrayana and the Zen one (Norbu 1989).

<sup>83</sup> Interestingly, contemporary physics posits that a potentially infinite basic energy exists in empty space (see Appendix 1, Zero Point Energy).





*“Homage to the gods and demons of this desolate place  
 Where I’m now, I the lucky one  
 To which you magically appear.  
 O gods and demons of samsaric existence,  
 All without exception:  
 May you gather like clouds in the sky,  
 Come down like rain in space  
 And swirl like a storm on earth.  
 I offer my body to you gathered here”*

(excerpted and translated by:  
*“Chöd Sadhana: The Condensed Daily Practice  
 of Offering the Body”*  
 from the XIV<sup>o</sup> Karmapa, Thekchok Dorje)

mechanism will stop.

Following the indications given to meditators during MBSR sessions we attended<sup>84</sup>, one of the first steps is to notice the automatic nature of the physical and mental processes we are constantly and unconsciously undergoing. Following a well-tested protocol, the beginning meditator is told to focus on objects such as a grape or a big toe, which eventually take on an “epiphanic” power. Paradoxically it is in the insignificant nature of the object that this power resides: an “almost-vacuum” that lets the subtle and powerful mechanism of psychological iterations surface, at least on an intuitive level.

By making an effort<sup>85</sup> to place our attention on something “unimportant”, bringing it back every time we are distracted by mental or physical events that are alien to the practice, we begin to free ourselves from the automatisms that evolution has entrusted to the most basic elements of our brain (Fox et al., 2014: 63; Creswell et al., 2007: 562). These automatisms almost always escape our consciousness, usurping our capacity to perceive, reflect, decide, act.

By way of example, in the next three paragraphs we will briefly touch upon a possible correlation between Working Memory (WM), Theory of Attention and Consciousness (TAC) and the bhavacakra, placing the Tibetan diagram in relation to two kinds of neurological loops — addiction and rumination — over which mindfulness has an observable effect.

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<sup>84</sup> In this context, as mentioned above, we dusted off our anthropology training and assumed as valid a methodology called “participant observation” (Malinowski 1922).

<sup>85</sup> An element of effort, no matter how gentle, is also present in a delicate process such as the one implemented in the MBSR protocol.

## **Working Memory (WM) and Theory of Attention and Consciousness (TAC)<sup>86</sup>**

We would like to briefly mention WM because, as we saw in the second part, some elements of the bhavacakra, and in particular the external circle representing the 12 rings of Interdependent Coproduction, when read in psychological terms<sup>87</sup> describes how external phenomena relate to internal forms during the process of contact, and how this produces addiction and rumination.

WM is a neurological correlate of a deposit of memory similar to samskara (D2) that underpins human thought. It is a “dynamic locus” based on the loops that activate between the left (phonological) and the right (visual-spatial) temporoparietal regions, probably “managed” by neural clusters in the frontal lobes. The correlates of the verbal and the visual-spatial information “reside” temporarily (for a few seconds) in the WM so they can be placed in context and acquire meaning, refreshing previous correlates of mnemonic traces. The most “arcane” component of WM is the Central Executive (CE), which supervises both the verbal and the visual-spatial process. Among various hypotheses, the CE is divided between control automatisms that refer to automatic schemes and references, and the capacity to contravene said control automatisms through attention focus, divide and switch in a process of connection between short- and long-term memory (Baddeley, 2003). The concepts expressed in this theory appear compatible or worthy of exploration in relation to those expressed by the bhavacakra scheme and what it represents within dharmic psychology — one need only think of the neural loops and the cycles of the 12 rings, of the idea of memory as a dynamic locus with respect to samskara (D2) or the concept of sati, which means mindfulness but also implies the idea of memory, etc.

The TAC seeks to harness the relationship between consciousness correlated to the so-called global workspace (Baars and Franklin, 2003) and attention (which in the essay we refer to, is of the visual kind), which posits the existence of a visual attentional workspace controlled by executive routers, and that there also exists in the brain, upstream of the GW, a “dynamic locus” where the correlates of infor-

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<sup>86</sup> Here our references will be Baddeley 2003 and Raffone et al. 2014a.

<sup>87</sup> We use this term here to describe the extremely swift dynamics that WM refers to.

mation that is not accessible on a conscious level of representation are active (Raffone et al., 2014a): how not to associate this idea with *alaya*, *bhavanga*, the *samskara*, the vases, the karmic imprints discussed in D2 and the various forms (D3-D4-D5) that consciousness takes in relation to these?

Both theories (and implicitly also related ones such as GW, etc.) fall outside the merit and the capacities of this thesis, but certainly the concepts they express, however summarily, are stimuli that lead us to hope for more in-depth research.

## **Rumination and the meditative wedge**

We dedicated the second part of this thesis to a description of the symbolism of the bhavacakra in a psychological key. Now we will attempt to read it in correlation to mindfulness practice with respect to the processes of rumination, which are typically stressful.

Perennially caught up in things that are “too important” to let go of, we easily fall prey to hyper-reactivity or rumination and therefore stress. This is precisely the effect of the three poisons of the bhavacakra: the ignorance of the pig, the negative reaction of the snake and the positive reaction of the rooster (A1-A2-A3) produce a ruminative loop on the mental level (B2) that, if it becomes chronic, produces stress (Raffone et al. 2014b).

In reference to the second circle there is an alternative to rumination, which is meditation (B1), and in our case, mindfulness meditation. According to the mental imbalance towards one of the two meditation-rumination poles, we enter into one of the six mental states of the third circle (C1 -> C6). Within the vision of the bhavacakra, a state of extreme rumination (mindlessness) can lead to an extremely negative or infernal perception of life (C4), while recovering attention (mindfulness) allows us to contain rumination and stress, and even offers us a pleasant and positive perception of reality (C1 and C6).

A conscious and direct access to the internal circle of the three poisons is highly improbable (at least for those who lack a lengthy and deep career dedicated to this type of meditation practice) due to its subconscious and elusive nature, but the “therapeutic” hypothesis of mindfulness is that, within the bhavacakra scheme, we can indirectly access the heart of the cycle of the mental states through the fourth circle (D).

As we saw in the second part of this thesis, the fourth circle is a pictorial representation of the chain of 12 rings of Interdependent Coproduction which can be read on both an existential level (reincarnation, etc.) and a psychological one: the external wheel describes the 12 psychological micro-events that lead from ignorance and unawareness, which we defined above as biased mind (see A1 vs. D1) to psycho-physical reactions. These in turn are permeated by either negativity or po-

sitivity bias. It is between the links of this chain, and more specifically between the sensory contact (D6) that has just occurred and the effective action (D10) that is about to be undertaken, that it is possible to insert the wedge of mindfulness thanks to meditation, as suggested by Raffone (2018b).

Do the events and mental states represented in the bhavacakra have correlates in neuroscience? Trying to remain in the strictest possible “physiological” context, we take up the invitation of Tang, Holzel, and Posner (2015: 3) to recognise that certain meditative states can be reached through appropriate training and that such states are related to measurable cerebral states. Given the breadth of research undertaken in this direction in recent years (see for ex. Giommi, 2014) we will limit ourselves here to the meta-analysis carried out by Sperduti, Martinelli and Piolino, which highlights the three areas of the brain that are repeatedly activated by mindfulness meditation. These are the **caudate**, which, along with the putamen, plays a role in **attentional disengagement** from irrelevant information — this function can be carried out and stabilised through meditation; the **entorhinal cortex (parahippocampus)**, which is believed to **control the mental flow** of thought and probably **to stop the mind from wandering**; and the **medial prefrontal cortex**, which is thought to **support the consciousness of the self** and is reinforced during meditation (Sperduti et al., 2012: 269). These three “neuro-activating” functions of meditation are especially legible if placed in relation to the map of the bhavacakra.



## The wedge of attentional disengagement

The neurological activation of the caudate in terms of attentional disengagement from irrelevant information, when it is based on mindfulness meditation, would seem to correspond to those aspects of mindfulness of MBSR that are linked to Focused Attention (FA) practices. These in turn correspond to the Buddhist śamathā meditation\*, in which the practitioner is asked to train by staying concentrated on an object (for example, the breath) without letting him/herself be distracted by other mental or physical events. When such events arise, the meditator is asked to become aware of them and then return to the breath. The capacity for preselection corresponds to the use of meditation to interrupt the cycles of the bhavacakra. Especially at first, mental events manifest so densely as to seem like a truly uncontrolled mental flow. During samadhi meditation, the practitioner will constantly bring the attention, which is dragged by the mental current, back to the pre-established object, much like a swimmer moving against the current. Gradually the density of the mental flow will diminish, not only alleviating the stress of rumination but also allowing the meditator to consciously notice the quality of the objects. According to recent studies, very few meditation sessions suffice to obtain positive results (Zeidan et al., 2010: 597). As well, various studies have shown variations in both the volume and the density of the caudate in MBSR and MBI practitioners (Kuehn et al., 2015: 1555). We can therefore suppose that in time, the capacity to disengage becomes both structural and stable (Fox et al., 2014: 57; Taren et al., 2013<sup>88</sup>; Ferrarelli et al., see note 71). The International Shamatha Project and the Center for Contemplative Research have recently been set up under the leadership of B. Alan Wallace in collaboration with various Italian universities and neuroscience research centres<sup>89</sup>, with the aim of studying the effects of traditional concentration practices (Sperduti et al., 2012).

## Controlling the mental flow: the wedge becomes part of the process

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<sup>88</sup> Taren AA, Creswell JD, Gianaros PJ (2013) Dispositional Mindfulness Co-Varies with Smaller Amygdala and Caudate Volumes in Community Adults “Building on this work, we hypothesized that higher levels of dispositional mindfulness would be associated with decreased grey matter volume in the amygdala...exploratory analyses revealed that higher dispositional mindfulness is also associated with decreased grey matter volume in the left caudate... Such volumetric differences may help explain why mindful individuals have reduced stress reactivity....”

<sup>89</sup> <http://www.śamathā.org/>

The neural activation of the entorhinal cortex in correlation with mindfulness meditation is associated with the capacity to control the mental flow. Once attention has been stabilised, the samadhi practice allows for a more subtle level of meditation in which the practitioner, while still anchored to the object of attention (for example, the breath), widens his or her awareness to the events that spontaneously emerge from the body-mind system, without letting him or herself be dragged away by them. In terms of the bhavacakra, we begin to see flashes of alaya and its samskaras, which are otherwise hidden by the biases or the three poisons. At this level of mindfulness, logically, rumination and mind wandering diminish, as does the velcro effect. This is in line with the received śamathā teachings and with experiences reported during practice, including in the course of this master, by the totality of participants. To use a typical Buddhist metaphor, the events that arise around the anchor of attention pass and dissolve like clouds in a clear sky. On the direct path of Dzogchen we are still within the framework of śamathā practices: at the higher levels, these culminate in a mindfulness devoid of object, which is considered the privileged place in which to fully engage vipassana, free of the risk of distractions, and to gain insights with great clarity (Sperduti et al., 2012).

## Reinforcing the self

Although Buddhism in general preaches anatman, the non-self, the path of meditation necessarily lies through a more fine-tuned recognition of the self. The medial prefrontal cortex, which is the correlate of self-consciousness, is particularly reactive to mindfulness. Gaining awareness of what takes place in one's mind reinforces on the one hand the perception of improved control over it, and on the other, the "detached" recognition of the various events. As a result these shed the "velcro effect" that placed identity at the mercy of experiential oscillations, keeping it in a constant state of fragility and seeking. While at the MBI level this is considered a positive and healthy result, in the Dharma, as mentioned above, it is not a desired effect. By fully realising śamathā one can achieve a perfectly cleansed access to alaya, one's individual ground consciousness, albeit still in a dualistic mode. However, dwelling in alaya too long could bring about an identification with it, a super-reification of the self<sup>90</sup>. It is the guru's responsibility to bring the disciple back onto the right path of the overcoming of alaya on the way to dharmadathu. The danger is that Oriental yoga and meditation practices could reinforce egoistic states, and this is well-known among psychologists (Sperduti et al., 2012).

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<sup>90</sup> In almost all cases, the non-Buddhist meditation schools and currents, both ancient (for ex. Hindu) and modern (for ex. simplified Vipassana) as well as the various New Age and Western schools believe that recognising alaya is nirvana, while for Dzogchen and all the Vajrayana and bön schools this recognition is just the starting point on the path to liberation.

### **Addictive loop and meditative wedge**

In the paragraphs dedicated to the 12 rings of Interdependent Coproduction we mentioned the possibility of looking at this chain as a series of virtual loops that, previous to physical action, unconsciously relate karmic impressions to external objects of attention: the first are in the alaya and they are the samskara (the vases, D2), the second are the objects of the attention of the six senses (D5) and appear only at the moment of contact (lovemaking, D6).

By reducing the principle of addiction synthesised by Brewer, Elwafi and Davis (2012) as a dependency on specific kinds of information, *trnsa* (D8), the frenzy that leads the act of attention to focus on one object over another (that is, to reiterate this attention on the object within fractions of a second to the exclusion of the rest) is a subconscious process of re-acquisition of already known information, and therefore one devoid of added informational value: this informational redundancy, which the authors define as an addictive loop, functions in some ways as a reinforcement of a pre-existent neurological activation, reintroducing it in an identical form. The mind is reassured by the pleasure-action relationship: in “healthy” conditions this identical nature would seem to suggest an association between identity and reinforcement of the self: the self individuates by defining itself as an informational reality that is numb to the infinity of new information that is constantly being perceived, welcoming instead only information coherent with those that already make it up, that is, assessing incoherent information and rejecting whatever is judged to be superfluous based on the preceding informational process.

In this sense the unconscious activity of this loop is not intrinsically dysfunctional. As a fruit of evolution (Brewer et al., 2012: 2), it presumably allows the self to re-establish itself as a structured informational unit and avoid the risk of dismemberment when stimulated by a range of information that is too broad and dispersive. Obviously under certain conditions this function can also cause rumination.

The most basic mindfulness practice would seem to exploit this virtual loop by removing it from particularly engaging “velcro events” and directing it towards

more subtle events that are less weighted with clues, less “significant”. A classic example is meditation on the breath, in which the attention is diligently brought back to tactile and/or proprioceptive sensations, removing it from the physical and mental distractions that we would normally perceive as the most urgent and most significant, and in so doing we reposition the loop around them (for example, around the breath). This allows the mind to rest on their “insignificance” instead of stressing in the pursuit of the object of craving.

Through mindfulness meditation we achieve consciousness of the way that *trṣṇā* kidnaps our mind: we open up to the possibility of reducing the powerful interference that the repeated iteration between object and karmic traces exerts on the perception we have of our need for that object.

In the case of nicotine, Brewer maintains that on an evolutionary level the addiction is rooted in a process that reinforces associative memories between affective states (both positive and negative) and the act of smoking. This associative learning leads to an increase of the motivational salience of the clues linked to smoking, favouring the rise of an addictive loop which can become automatic and habitual through mere repetition, leading us to behaviours that are largely outside conscious control (2012: 1-2).

With this in mind we find extremely interesting Brewer’s idea that the “evolutionary function” of the neurological counterpart of *trṣṇā-bhava* is to reinforce “self-identity around the object of the senses” (ibid: 3), and that at the same time this model of reaction does not refer to the object directly but to its perceptive representation (ibid: 4). In terms of the bhavacakra, this refers to D2, D3, D4 and D5 where: D2 is memory as “scanned” by (D3) consciousness, which associates (D4) the experienced object (or rather its “sensory clues”) with the memorised object, then returns to address the “exterior” (D5, etc.) for further positive feedback.

Going back to the addictive effect of the loops found in neuroscience and to the circularity of the mental processes noted by Buddhist psychology, we can conclude this last section with a brief summary: it is possible to wedge an active form of consciousness or *vijñāna* (D3) in the intervals between the D6-D7-D8-D9-D10 rings. This active consciousness not only chooses the object it will focus on re-

ardless of karmic imprints (D2), but constantly brings attention back to it, even learning to recognise other objects without being enraptured by them, gradually reducing the influence that the karmic imprints have on the life of the meditator. This wedge of active consciousness is mindfulness in the sense of that mindfulness that Kabat-Zinn identifies with “the consciousness that emerges by paying attention to the unfolding of experience moment by moment: a) with intention; b) in the present; c) in a non-judgmental way.” (Giommi 2014: 1).



## Conclusions

To begin researching the bhavacakra is like opening Pandora's box. The vastness of the themes it touches upon is such that we barely scratched the surface here. In a partial manner and within certain arbitrary limits, we restricted our attention to some themes that are pertinent to this thesis, which place neuroscience in relation to meditative practice, with particular attention to the theories of Buddhist psychology and the MBSR protocol.

The first aspect is the psychological angle of the bhavacakra: the most obvious albeit not clichéd reading is the existential one in terms of the cycle of rebirths, but obviously the interest in this context is aimed at a more subtle interpretation in terms of the "cycle of mental states" made by Tibetan Buddhism. The second aspect is the function of mindfulness in the bhavacakra. The third aspect concerns the biased mind: somewhat arbitrarily, we chose to discuss the three poisons in terms of bias, following Western psychology and interesting points that arose during the course of the Master's program and particularly, Prof. Raffone's classes. In this way we combined the traditional definitions with those of biased mind, negative bias and positive bias. The fourth aspect, also inspired by Prof. Raffone's teachings, concerns the "meditative wedge": rather than attempting to unravel the tangled mass of the myriad techniques that could be based on the principles of the bhavacakra, we tried to verify whether the idea of the meditative wedge could effectively reveal the psychological mechanisms of the bhavacakra and their antidotes at the same time. This is perhaps where we encountered the most positive surprises. Lastly we examined the idea of loops, applying it to the outermost circle of the bhavacakra. We came up with two cyclical models, a virtual one and one that manifests as concrete action and its inevitable consequences. The latter — addiction and rumination — has been the subject of recent neuroscientific research. Here too we limited ourselves with respect to the extremely wide range of themes that it would be interesting to address, but the pertinence of the psychological concept of the loop within the context of the bhavacakra is doubtless stimulating. In terms of results, this thesis proposes issues more than it resolves them, but appears to have found in the bhavacakra a possible model for future and more in-

depth analyses of the relationships between Buddhist and Western psychology. The posited correspondences between samsaric cycles and psychological loops, poisons and biases, mindfulness mechanisms and liberation from the wheel of mental states, appear to have unearthed reassuring “leads” and stimuli for further in-depth investigation.

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## Appendix 1: IT FROM BIT

What is the nature of the objects that the brain reacts to? Assuming that -1- the brain is not isolated within the skull but in contact with events transmitted by the senses, that -2- these events include ones that are of a strictly mental nature<sup>91</sup> and that -3- following (as others did, for ex. Morrison H. 2018) the Buddhist thesis that the mind can be conceived of as a sensory organ, that is, one capable of perceiving mental events like objects that are observable by consciousness, it is possible to speculate that all the physical and mental objects the brain attends to have a common nature and, in reference to the “it from bit” theory of quantum physicist John Archibald Wheeler (1990), that **this ultimate nature they share is information**. While this statement may at first glance appear to be in line with the cognitivist model, and even with computational theories such as Putnam and Fodor’s Computational Theory of Mind and McCulloch and Pitts’ Computational Theory of Cognition, this association should be avoided: the reductionism of both these theories would make the cycle of mental states represented by the bhavacakra both rigid and unstoppable — which would be absolutely false from the point of view of Buddhist psychology, and of the psychological reading of the bhavacakra in particular. In this respect we echo Giommi’s warning about the risks of materialist ideologies that have become scientific postulates: “The fundamental concept according to which the brain is a machine that elaborates information and responds selectively to environmental characteristics remains the dominant core of contemporary neuroscience. To this concept is added a reductionist option according to which the mind is ‘nothing but’, in some sense that is to be better defined through scientific progress, a product, a function of the brain.” (Giommi 2014: LXVI). Giommi expressed his judgment by echoing the words of Varela: “Very often the origins and the assumptions of this line of thought are not even questioned” and of Chalmers, who “ironically defined this widespread attitude as ‘I-have-no-clue materialism’” (Giommi 2014 LXVII). Probably the definition of “matter in

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<sup>91</sup> A titolo puramente indicativo rimandiamo al fatto che durante il sonno il corpo ed i sensi sono dissociati dalla coscienza ma malgrado ciò la mente è attiva, persino nel sonno NREM (v. per es. Ferrarelli et al 2013. Experienced Mindfulness Meditators Exhibit Higher Parietal-Occipital EEG Gamma Activity during NREM Sleep) o che nel REM la mente percepisce eventi come nella veglia, per esempio un “corpo” e delle “sensazioni fisiche” immaginarie (v per es. Hobson, J. A., & Friston, K. J. 2012. Waking and dreaming consciousness: neurobiological and functional considerations. *Progress in Neurobiology*, 98(1), 82–98.).

transit” between the mind and the universe should be gleaned between the lines of quantum physics and in the “koans” of the great meditators, without the need to reduce information, human beings and their consciousness to “Turing’s Machine” (Horst S. 2005).

### **The absolute vacuity, a Buddhist paradox and a paradox of physics: ZERO POINT ENERGY**

B. Alan Wallace highlighted a parallel between the “Zero Point Energy” physics theory of the vacuum and the idea of the void in Dzogchen texts: “Quantum physics asserts that while a region of space may be devoid of ordinary matter, this void is neither empty nor featureless. Rather, it has a complex structure that can in no way be eliminated. The theory also posits that the vacuum contains residual energy which persists even when all matter and thermic radiation are eliminated from a volume of space on an experimental basis” (Wallace, 1996: 31). “Real systems are in this sense ‘agitated vacuums’ — as the surface waves on a pond are agitations of the water in the pond....the properties of a physical vacuum define the possible agitations — the possible systems that could emerge from it.... The vacuum itself is devoid of form, but it can assume specific forms. In so doing it becomes a physical reality, a ‘real world’” (Genz 1999: 26).

Without focusing on anything, without falling into any extreme,  
 An experience of spaciousness arises.  
 Its empty nature is dharmakaya.  
 In the essential nature of that void  
 Is the transparent and radiant manifest nature of the mind.  
 Devoid of any expressible, substantial feature,  
 Its spacious and unobstructed self-enlightenment,  
 Which is naturally clear, is sambhogakaya.

(Vipashiyana practice, in Yangtang Rinpoche, 2016)

## Appendix 2: The influence of Dzogchen from the perspective of this thesis

Dzogchen is a contraction of dzogpa chenpo, which means Great Perfection. It is a body of teachings received by Garab Dorje within the Buddhadharma and taken to Tibet by Padmasambhava. They are considered to be the pinnacle of the Vajrayana, especially in the Nyingma tradition and in the non-Buddhist Bön tradition. In the Kagyu schools, an analogue with minor variations is the Mahamudra (Great Seal). The Sanskrit name for these teachings is Ati Yoga. In the Nyingma school it constitutes the ninth yana; the first eight are philosophical systems based on ordinary consciousness, while this one distinguishes between *sem* (ordinary mind) and *rigpa* (pure consciousness or innate and fundamental mind of the clear light) and is based directly on *rigpa*. The principle underlying this unique approach is shared by all the schools of Tibetan Buddhism, and consists in the fact that while *rigpa* universally permeates the reality we perceive, we are incapable of noticing it because we are obscured. Since we are incapable of dwelling in pure consciousness, our perception of this state will be reduced to a fleeting moment, one constantly overshadowed by our conceptual elaborations. Unlike the other schools, rather than employing “useful methods” to achieve *vidya/rigpa*, the Dzogchen aims directly at “working” with this ultimate form of consciousness (Dalai Lama, 2003 42-43). Based on the “karmic” level of the students, the teachings are divided into those aimed at “simultaneous” students, who reach liberation via an immediate transmission, the middling ones, who require three weeks of intense practice in isolation, and those with inferior faculties, who require as much commitment as is necessary for each (Wallace 2016c). In this thesis, venturing along the different cycles of the bhavacakra, our Dharmic reference was the Dudjöm Lingpa’s teachings about the fundamental practice of *śamathā*: “Taking the Way of the Impure Mind”<sup>92</sup>. Into these teachings, we integrated other texts by important, mostly contemporary masters such as HH the Dalai Lama, Namkhai Norbu Rinpoche, Dudjom Rinpoche, and Thrangu Rinpoche, and the work of Western scholars (B. Alan Wallace, Rob Preece, Giacomella Orofino, etc.): these are the references we interfaced with direct experience and scientific literature.

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<sup>92</sup> In the “Dudjom Lingpa’s Vision of the Great Perfection” trilogy, translated by B. A. Wallace.

### Appendix 3: Brief biography of Traktung Dūdjom Lingpa (1835–1904)

The life of this saint reached us thanks to his visionary autobiography, which was translated into English under the title “A Clear Mirror”. It begins with the yogin<sup>93</sup> witnessing a dialogue between Guru Padmasambhava<sup>94</sup> and his wife Yeshe Tsögyal<sup>95</sup>, who had lived one thousand years prior. At the end Guru Padmasambhava turns to Dūdjom and urges him to reincarnate in an irate form for the benefit of all beings. Dūdjom Lingpa obeys without hesitation, observes his nomadic shepherd parents having sex in a yak wool tent, and becomes his mother’s child.



At the age of three, for the first time TDL flies away from the nomads’ tent with a dakini,<sup>96</sup> who shows him other worlds. From then on, undisturbed by his parents, he will meet both many dakini or enlightened beings as well as Padmasambhava and Yeshe Tsögyal numerous times. They pass on to him various Dharmic teachings, which then turn out to be faithful to the canon. In honour of his name,<sup>97</sup> in the course of his life he will engage a series of demons in victorious battle. He

<sup>93</sup> In the Vajrayana, there is the monastic life as well as the yogic life of the nomadic ascetics. The two for that matter are not exclusive: having reached a certain level in their practice, many monks and nuns abandon their saffron robes and the great collective ceremonies to don the white robes with red hems and disappear into the depths of nature, often accompanied by a consort.

<sup>94</sup> See the introduction to this thesis.

<sup>95</sup> She is considered to be as evolved as her consort, Padmasambhava. She also is a Buddha, in feminine form.

<sup>96</sup> In Tib. Khandro or “sky dancer”: The *dakini* are manifested pure aspects of the mind in a female form, evoking the movement of energy through space. In this context, the sky or space indicate shunyata, the void or the inconsistency of all phenomena, which at the same time is the potential of every possible manifestation.

<sup>97</sup> lit. “Tamer of Demons”



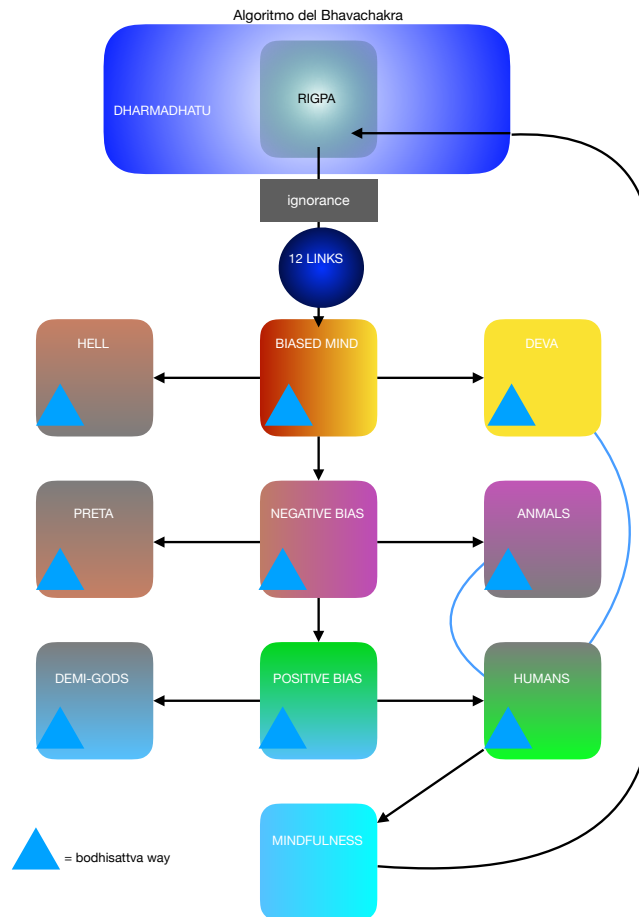
will become famous for this and for his great erudition “attained without masters in the flesh”.

Compared to other Tibetan masters who authored hundreds of volumes, TDL wrote a reduced number of treatises about the Great Perfection, all of them held in the highest regard by all the Tibetan schools. Many of his disciples reached lofty heights on the path to liberation, women and men from all walks of life as well as his numerous sons, daughters and wives. When they asked him not to abandon them, TDL gave precise indications as to when and as whom he would reincarnate. The child was found in a remote village in southeastern Tibet, and proved he could remember his previous life, recognising his elderly friends and displaying “obvious” metaphysical powers. After absorbing an impressive load of teachings, following the Communist invasion of Tibet the young Dūdjom Rinpoche was forced to flee to India as a refugee. He traveled and taught extensively in the West under the name of Dudjom Rinpoche, until his death in 1976.

**Allegato 5: BASIC STRUTURE OF BHAVACAKRA (BETA VERSION)**



## Allegato 6: BHAVACAKRA ALGORITHM (BETA VERSION)

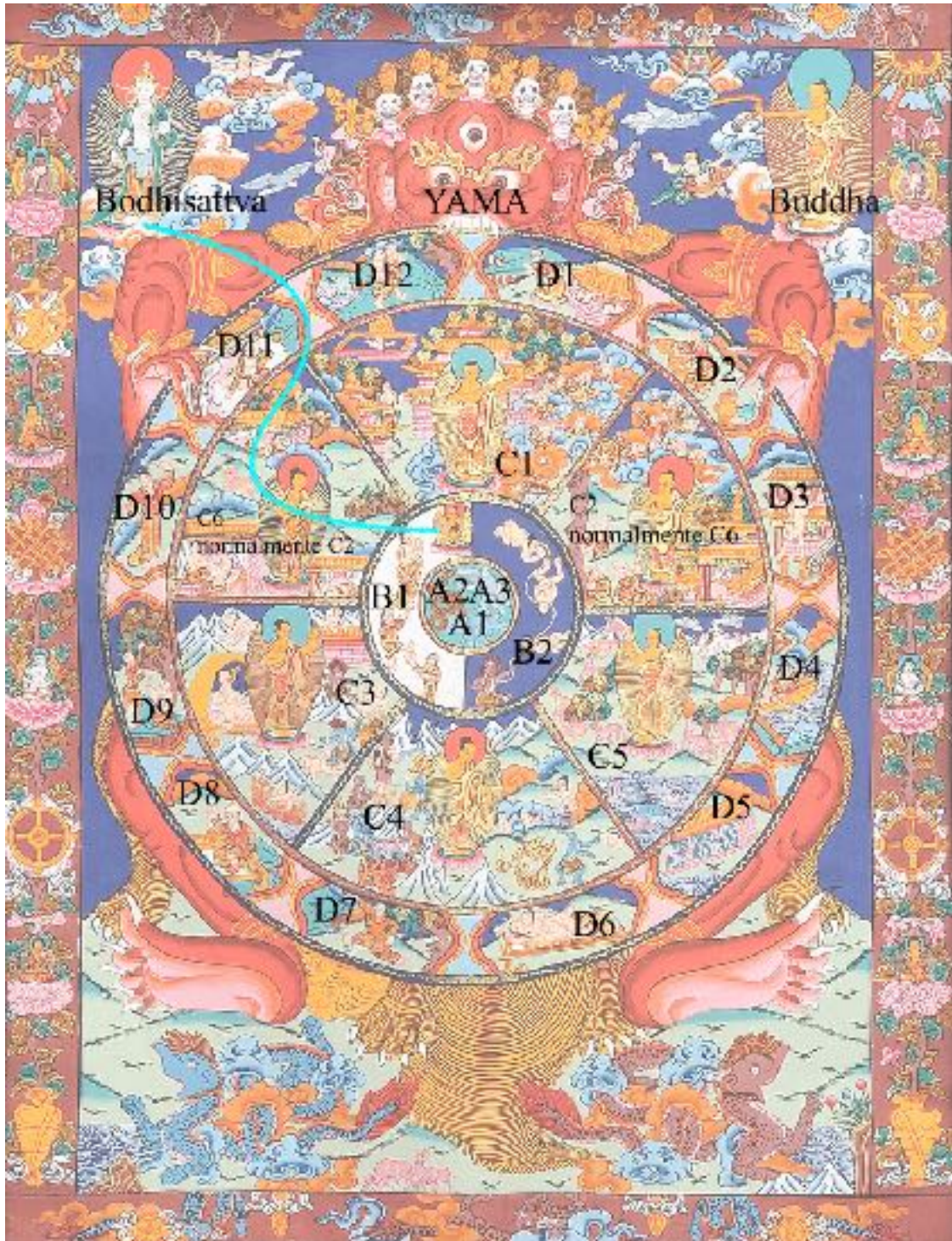


Le affezioni mentali sono un travisamento del dharmadathu di cui si è persa vista oscurato dall'ignoranza. L'ignoranza domina i 12 anelli della Cl. e gli stati mentali si manifestano in tre forme di bias interconnesse tra loro e gerarchicamente ordinate. Ognuna di esse è l'ingrediente principale di due dei sei stati mentali. L'inferno mentale, che ha di base un bias disorientato ha come vie d'uscita il bodhisattva o la possibilità di veder sorgere in sé un bias orientato, quello negativo della sopravvivenza e quindi ottenere una rinascita come preta o asura, più in basso non può cadere. La mente animalesca ha come speranza di mantenersi dipendente dal positivity bias, ma oltre a questa ha altre due opportunità: quella del bodhisattva, condivisa con gli altri o quella di affacciarsi nel mondo degli umani dove un Buddha offre lezioni di Dharma. In questo caso ha accesso alla mindfulness, come gli umani e come i deva che hanno intrapreso lo stesso percorso, e quindi a rigpa, che riunisce la "luce figlia" alla "luce madre" la natura di Buddha individuale a quella universale.



Allegato 7:

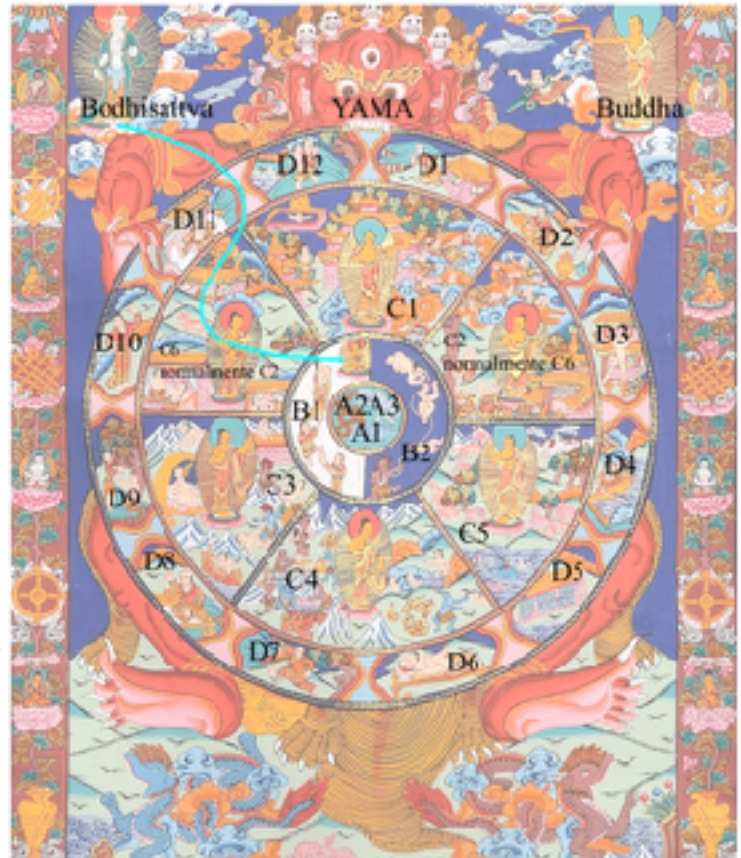
ALPHANUMERIC REFERENCES FOR THE BHAVACAKRA TO THIS PAPER





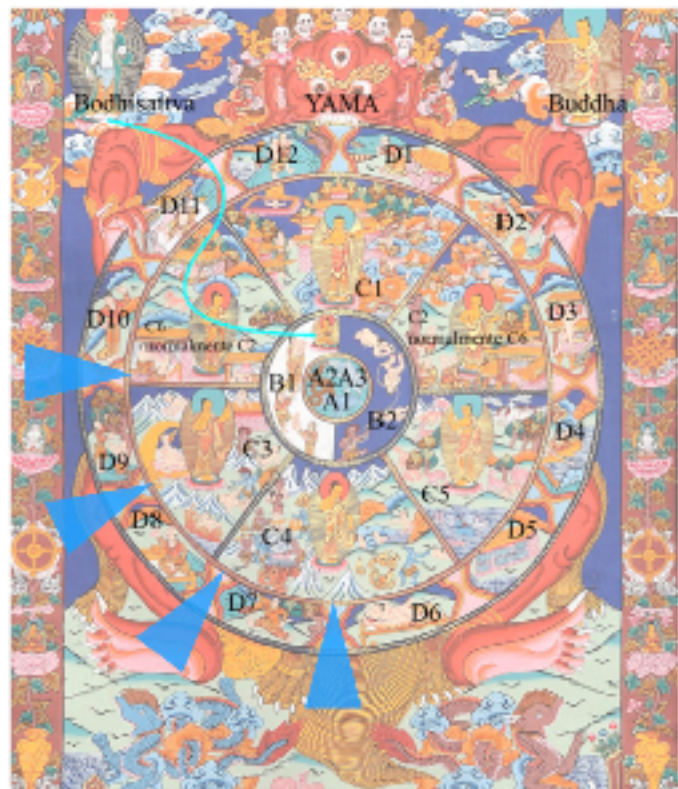
# i 12 anelli

- D1 Avidya: ignoranza, incoscienza
- D2 Samskara: impronte, vasi, "protomemorie"
- D3 Vijnana: alayavijnana coscienza dell'alaya
- D4 Nama-rupa: klistamanovijnana, kleśa
- D5 Sadayātana: coscienza (6° senso)
- D6 Sparśa: contatto
- D7 Vedāna: percezione
- D8 Trīśna: sete, craving
- D9 Upadāna: decisioni di agire
- D10 Bhava: risultato dell'azione, stato mentale
- D11 Jati: conseguenza dell'azione
- D12 Jaramāraṇa: malattia e morte, impermanenza.



## il loop della coscienza

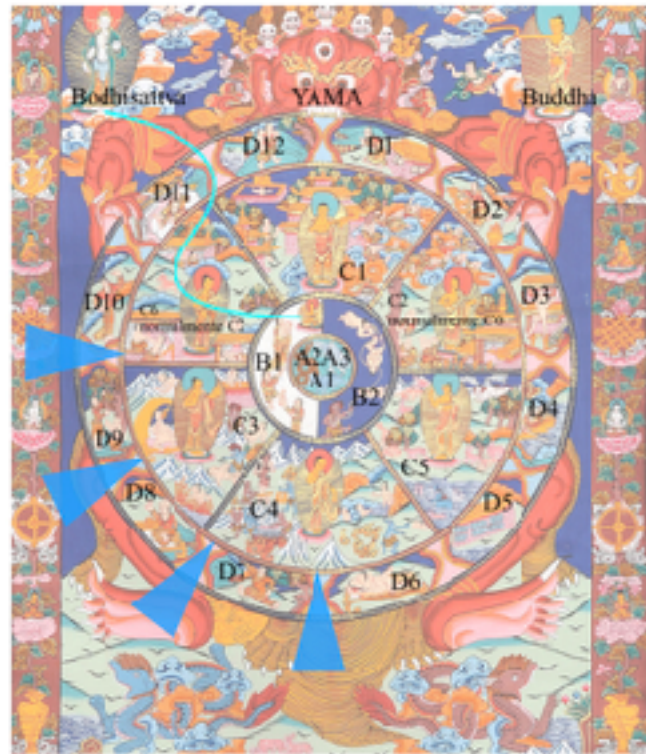
- L'incuneamento è possibile perché i 12 anelli girano **virtualmente** (l'azione è solo ipotetica) finché oggetto e samskara (D2) "connettono". Solo a quel punto si concretizza l'azione tra D9 e D10.
- La connessione tra oggetto e samskara avviene tramite vijnana che è rivolta sia a D2 (alayavijnana, D3) che a D6-D7 (manovijnana, D5) che operano attraverso il processo di labeling della klistamanovijnana (D4).
- D10 si riflette a sua volta sul D2, rafforzandolo o indebolendolo, ipotecendo un futuro contatto con quell'oggetto ad un "pre-giudizio".





## il cuneo della Mindfulness

- La mindfulness (SATI) può incunearsi in 4 punti.
- tra la scelta di agire (D9) e l'azione compiuta (D10) = Rinuncia (per es. trattengo lo slancio a muovermi)
- tra il craving (D8) e la scelta di agire (D9) = Continenza, Moderazione (rinuncio a muovermi anche se ne ho voglia)
- tra la percezione (D7) e il craving (D8) = Non coinvolgimento (vorrei muovermi, ma voglio ancor di più star fermo)
- tra il contatto (D6) e la percezione (D7) = Consapevolezza (dolore è passeggero)



## alayavijnana ...e oltre

- Vijnana, la coscienza, in uno stato di profonda quiete meditativa (shamatha - shinè) è alayavijnana. La simmetria è perfetta. Malgrado lo stato sia ancora duale la ruota è ferma la visione è luminosa.
- Da questo stato simmetrico e stabile è possibile fare un'indagine razionale ed intuitiva (vipashyana - lakhtong) del known-knowing-knower.
- La risposta è un'apertura (un cambio di prospettiva) al dharmakaya, rigpa, la grande perfezione...

