





This Thangka depicts the Nine Stages of Calm Abiding (Shamatha), a central meditation practice in Tibetan Buddhism. It illustrates the mind's journey from a wild, uncontrolled state to perfect concentration and tranquility.

You mentioned "9 lifetimes to reach the summit." While the Thangka visually represents a path, the "nine stages" refer to nine mental stages of developing concentration, not necessarily nine physical lifetimes. The journey is an allegory for the progression of a meditator's mind.

Here's how the imagery in the Thangka explains this journey, and why it's a long and arduous process (symbolically "taking 9 lifetimes" or a very long time):

The Stages and Their Challenges (and why it "takes time"):

The Elephant, Monkey, and Blackness:

Elephant: Represents the mind. In the beginning, it's wild, black (due to mental obscurations), and runs wherever it wants, led by the monkey.

Monkey: Represents distraction and mental agitation. It pulls the elephant in all directions.

Blackness: Symbolizes the mind's deep obscurations, such as dullness and forgetfulness.

The Fire: At the bottom, the large flames symbolize the overwhelming effort and struggle required to begin taming the mind.

The Rope and Hook: The meditator (the monk) uses a rope (mindfulness) and a hook (introspection/vigilance) to control the elephant and monkey. Initially, the control is weak.

Gradual Taming (The Path Ascends): As the path ascends, you'll notice:

The Elephant's Color Changes: It gradually becomes whiter, symbolizing the reduction of mental obscurations.

The Monkey's Influence Lessens: The monkey appears less frequently and is eventually "tamed" or disappears.

The Rabbit: A rabbit sometimes appears on the elephant's back, representing subtle dullness or excitement, which are harder to detect but still hinder concentration.

The Monk's Effort: The monk's posture and tools (rope and hook) change, indicating increasing mastery and less overt effort.

Why it's a "Long Journey" (Symbolically "9 Lifetimes"):

Deep-seated Habits: Our minds are accustomed to wandering and being distracted. Overcoming these deeply ingrained habits of mind takes immense and consistent effort.

Subtle Obstacles: As gross distractions are overcome, more subtle obstacles like slight dullness or excitement become apparent. These are harder to detect and eliminate.

The Need for Perseverance: The path illustrates that there are many setbacks and challenges. You might gain some concentration, only to lose it again and have to re-establish it. This back-and-forth is why it feels like a very long journey.

Refinement of Awareness: Each stage requires a greater degree of awareness, introspection, and sustained effort. It's not just about stopping distractions but cultivating a clear, stable, and joyful mind.

Integrating Wisdom (the Flame at the Top): The journey culminates not just in concentration but in the integration of wisdom (often represented by the flame or rainbow at the top). This wisdom arises from a perfectly concentrated mind.

Reaching the Summit:

The Elephant is Pure White: At the top, the elephant is completely white, representing a mind free from all obscurations.

The Monk Rides the Elephant: The monk is no longer pulling or chasing; they are effortlessly riding the elephant, symbolizing complete mastery of the mind.

The Rainbow and Flame: These signify the perfect state of calm abiding and the arising of insight/wisdom that naturally accompanies it.

The Practitioner Rides Back on the Dragon/Rainbow: This symbolizes the ability to return to the world and engage with it skillfully from a place of deep peace and wisdom, even benefiting others.

In traditional Thangka painting, colors are not just decorative; they carry profound symbolic meaning.

Primary Colors (RYB) and Their Symbolic Significance:

Red:

In the Thangka: You see significant amounts of red, particularly in the monk's robes, elements of the landscape (like some rock formations or structures), and the flames at the bottom.

### Symbolism:

Energy, Passion, Activity: The initial large red flames at the bottom clearly symbolize the immense effort and fervent energy required to begin the meditative journey. It's a period of intense struggle and engagement with the mind.

Aggression, Desire: In a negative sense, red can also represent strong emotions like desire, attachment, or even anger, which are precisely what the meditator is trying to overcome. The "wildness" of the early mind stages is tied to these strong, often uncontrolled, impulses.

Transformation: Red can also symbolize transformation or the energy needed to transform negative states into positive ones.

### Yellow:

In the Thangka: Yellow is prominent in the path itself, the landscape (especially the glowing aura around deities or enlightened beings at the top), and the skin tones of many figures.

### Symbolism:

Wisdom, Knowledge, Enlightenment: This is a very strong association for yellow in Buddhist art. The path being yellow can signify that the journey itself is one of accumulating wisdom. The bright yellow/gold at the summit around the Buddhas/enlightened figures strongly emphasizes this.

Earth, Stability, Foundation: Yellow can also relate to the earth element, suggesting a stable foundation for practice. The path, though winding, provides a continuous ground.

Joy, Radiance: As the mind purifies, joy and mental luminosity increase, which yellow can represent.

### Blue:

In the Thangka: You'll find blue in the sky (especially at the top), water elements, and the robes of some figures or the color of certain wrathful deities if they were present (though not prominently here). The darker background in the upper sections might also lean towards deep blue/black.

### Symbolism:

Purity, Serenity, Calmness: Blue is strongly associated with the boundless sky and ocean, symbolizing the vast, pure, and tranquil nature of the enlightened mind. As the meditator progresses, the goal is to achieve this state of profound calm.

Wisdom (Dharmakaya): Deep blue, especially, is often associated with the Dharmakaya, the Body of Truth, which represents the ultimate reality and the wisdom of emptiness. This aligns with the summit, where ultimate understanding is gained.

Incorporeal, Emptiness: The vastness of blue can also hint at the concept of emptiness, where phenomena lack inherent existence.

Secondary Colors (formed from RYB in this universe):

Green (Yellow + Blue):

In the Thangka: Green is extremely dominant in the lush landscapes, trees, and foliage throughout the painting.

Symbolism:

Growth, Vitality, Life: The abundance of green signifies the thriving life force and growth that occurs as the meditator progresses. It represents the flourishing of positive qualities.

Harmony, Balance: The interplay of yellow (wisdom) and blue (purity/calm) creating green can symbolize the developing harmony and balance within the mind.

Activity (Karma): Green can also relate to karma or activity, suggesting the skillful actions that arise from a developing meditative mind.

Orange (Red + Yellow):

In the Thangka: Orange is visible in some parts of the monk's robes, the coloring of the ground, and subtle transitions in the landscape, especially where the path is lighter.

Symbolism:

Transformation, Spiritual Energy: Orange is a color of transition and spiritual practice. Many monastic robes are orange/saffron, representing renunciation and the commitment to the spiritual path. It signifies the ongoing process of transforming defilements into wisdom.

Enlightened Activity: It can also suggest the warmth and activity associated with enlightened beings.

Purple/Violet (Red + Blue):

In the Thangka: Purple is less dominant but might appear in subtle shading or in specific details of robes or flowers.

## Symbolism:

Mystery, Spirituality, Nobility: Purple is often associated with the sublime, the esoteric, and deep spiritual insights. It suggests the profound and often mysterious nature of higher consciousness.

Wisdom and Compassion: It can represent the blending of wisdom (blue) and compassionate action (red).

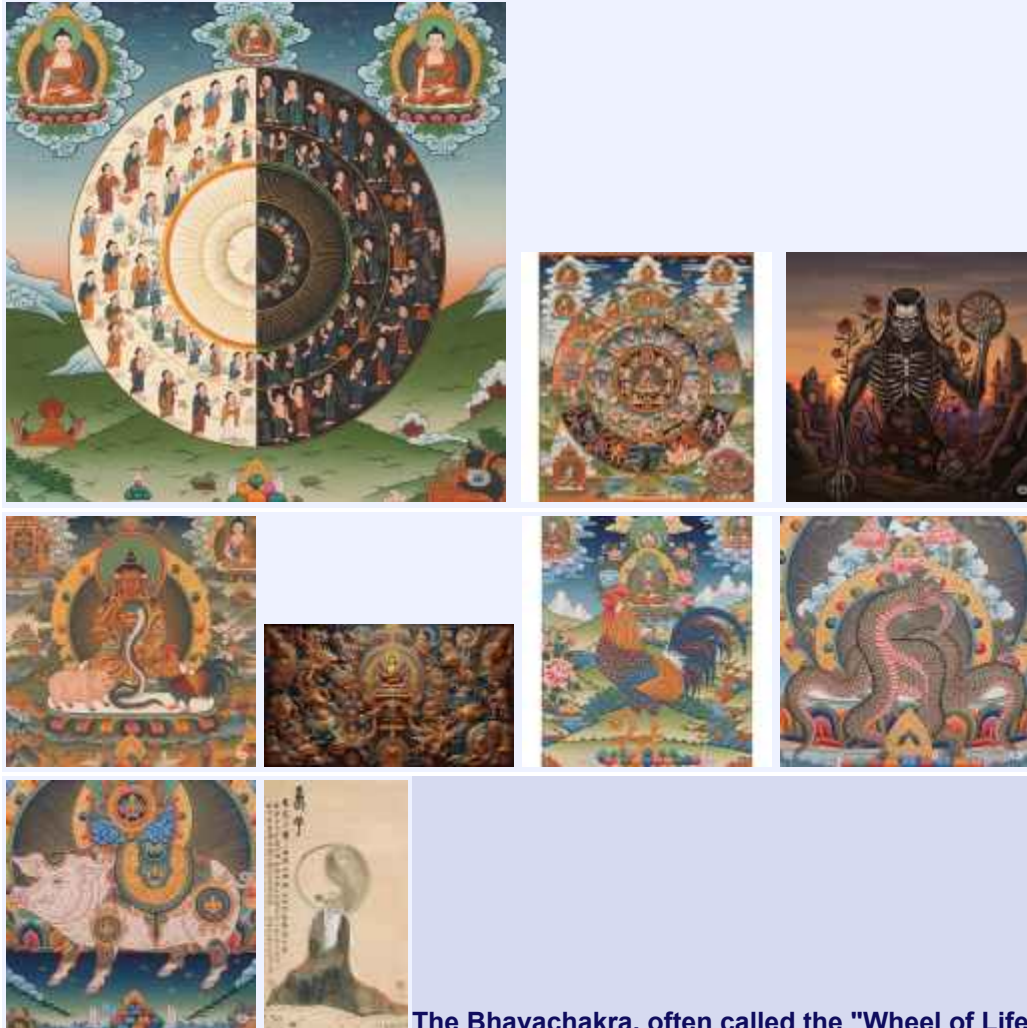
## How Colors Depict the Journey:

Initial Stages (Bottom): Dominated by stronger reds (effort, passion, struggle) and darker greens/browns (the initial "unrefined" state of the mind and environment). The elephant is black.

Middle Stages (Mid-Path): As the elephant becomes whiter, the landscape remains green (growth), and the path itself is yellow (wisdom guiding the way). The monk's robes often remain red or orange, signifying ongoing effort and transformation.

Summit (Top): The colors become brighter, purer, and more luminous. Whites (purity), brilliant yellows/golds (enlightenment, wisdom), and serene blues (calm, vastness) dominate, often with rainbow-like auras symbolizing the ultimate realization. The fire that was once consuming at the bottom transforms into the rainbow body or the flame of wisdom at the top.

**(Lao Tzu) The Thangka Art: This image typically illustrates the "Wheel of Life" (Bhavachakra) or a narrative of the path to enlightenment, often featuring the stages of taming the mind (represented by an elephant and monkey) or the cycle of samsara. If you'd like to know more about this, I can explain the common interpretations and elements found in such Thangkas.**



The Bhavachakra, often called the "Wheel of Life" or "Wheel of Becoming," is a powerful and intricate symbolic representation of Buddhist teachings, especially about samsara (cyclic existence), karma (cause and effect), and the path to liberation from suffering. It's commonly found as a mural outside Tibetan Buddhist temples, acting as a visual guide for practitioners and laypeople.

Here's a breakdown of the story and symbolism within the Bhavachakra:

### 1. The Figure Holding the Wheel: Impermanence (Yama)

The entire wheel is held by a fierce, wrathful figure, often identified as Yama, the Lord of Death, or a demon representing impermanence. This signifies that all beings within samsara, regardless of their realm, are subject to death and the constant cycle of change. Yama's attributes (like a crown of skulls or a third eye) symbolize the impermanence of all things and the wisdom to understand it.

### 2. The Hub: The Three Poisons

At the very center of the wheel are three animals, chasing each other in a circle, symbolizing the Three Poisons (or Three Root Kleshas) that drive the entire cycle of suffering:

**Pig:** Represents ignorance (or delusion). The pig is often depicted as the root, as ignorance is seen as the fundamental cause from which other defilements arise.

**Snake:** Represents aversion (or hatred/anger).

**Rooster/Bird:** Represents attachment (or greed/desire/clinging).

These animals bite each other's tails, showing how these poisons feed into and perpetuate one another.

### 3. The Second Layer: Karma (Cause and Effect)

Surrounding the hub is a ring typically divided into two halves:

**Light Half:** Depicts people ascending, indicating positive actions (good karma) leading to higher, more fortunate rebirths.

**Dark Half:** Shows people descending, illustrating negative actions (bad karma) leading to lower, more suffering-filled rebirths.

This layer visually explains the law of karma – every action, thought, and word has consequences that determine future experiences.

### 4. The Six Realms of Samsara

The largest section of the wheel is divided into six segments, representing the Six Realms of Existence into which beings can be reborn, based on their karma. These can be understood as actual places of rebirth or as psychological states:

**Higher Realms (Fortunate Births):**

**God Realm (Devas):** Beings here experience immense pleasure, luxury, and long lives. However, their enjoyment can make them complacent, leading them to forget the Dharma and eventually fall back into lower realms when their good karma is exhausted.

**Demigod/Jealous God Realm (Asuras):** These beings are powerful and enjoy some pleasures but are plagued by jealousy, envy, and conflict, constantly striving for what the gods have.

**Human Realm:** This is considered the most precious realm because it offers a unique balance of pleasure and suffering. Humans have enough suffering to motivate them to seek liberation, but also enough intelligence and opportunity to practice the Dharma. It's the only realm from which one can truly achieve enlightenment.

**Lower Realms (Unfortunate Births):**

**Animal Realm:** Characterized by ignorance, instinctual behavior, fear, and being preyed upon.

**Hungry Ghost Realm (Pretas):** Beings here suffer from insatiable craving, depicted with large bellies and tiny mouths, symbolizing their inability to satisfy their endless desires (often associated with addiction and obsession).

**Hell Realm (Narakas):** The lowest and most suffering-filled realm, characterized by intense pain, torment, and rage, often depicted with various gruesome punishments. Within each realm, a Buddha or Bodhisattva is often depicted, trying to teach the beings there, showing that even in the most difficult circumstances, the potential for liberation exists.

### 5. The Outer Rim: The Twelve Links of Dependent Origination (Pratītyasamutpāda)



This outermost ring illustrates the Twelve Nidanas, a chain of cause and effect that explains how beings become trapped in samsara. Each link arises from the previous one, showing the cycle of how ignorance leads to suffering and rebirth:

Ignorance (blind person)

Volitional Formations/Karma Formations (potter shaping clay)

Consciousness (monkey)

Name and Form (people in a boat)

Six Sense Bases (house with windows)

Contact (couple embracing)

Feeling/Sensation (person with an arrow in their eye)

Craving/Desire (person drinking alcohol)

Grasping/Clinging (person gathering fruit)

Becoming/Existence (pregnant woman)

Birth (woman giving birth)

Old Age and Death (corpse being carried away) This cycle explains how our actions, driven by ignorance and desire, create the conditions for future births and continued suffering.

## 6. Outside the Wheel: Liberation

Above the wheel, there is usually an image of the Buddha pointing towards a moon or a clear, empty space.

**The Moon:** Symbolizes Nirvana or Liberation from the cycle of samsara. It represents a state of peace, enlightenment, and the cessation of suffering.

**The Buddha Pointing:** This signifies that the Buddha has shown the path to liberation, but it is up to each individual to follow that path and achieve freedom from the wheel. The Bhavachakra, often called the "Wheel of Life" or "Wheel of Becoming," is a powerful and intricate symbolic representation of Buddhist teachings, especially about samsara (cyclic existence), karma (cause and effect), and the path to liberation from suffering. It's commonly found as a mural outside Tibetan Buddhist temples, acting as a visual guide for practitioners and laypeople.

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In essence, the Bhavachakra tells the story of:

Why we suffer: Due to the three poisons (ignorance, attachment, aversion).

How karma works: Our actions lead to specific results and rebirths.

Where we can be reborn: The six realms of existence.

The process of rebirth: The twelve links of dependent origination.