



The realm at the top of the wheel is heaven. This is the realm of merit mentioned earlier; we feel it day to day or moment to moment as the consequence of wholesome karma. This is a realm of blissful pleasure, which is depicted by showing the inhabitants engaged in aesthetic pursuits. They enjoy art and music and

everything beautiful. We find ourselves in this realm in daily life as the merit of good karma is received, either from this life or from previous lives. This explains why some people seem to have everything go their way without any good reason. But one can also find rebirth in a realm of merit after death if clinging to wholesome karma has not been overcome. This is what the Spade Sage recognized and why he felt uneasy, for just as the goodwill of others is exhaustible, so the merit that sustains one's existence in heaven will run out. As this merit runs out, things no longer go our way. We can no longer rest on our laurels, and instead we find people resent us for not living up to their expectations. Now things which may not be our fault are held against us. As people slide out of the realm of merit, they often fail to recognize what is happening, and think that the merit is naturally their due. Believing in a permanent self that belongs in a permanent heaven, they resent terribly the loss of their pleasurable existence, and become adamant in demanding their rights. They have slipped from heaven into the realm of the Asuras, or power seekers. This is the section just to the right of heaven. In this realm, the Asuras understand only force. They are shown engaged in huge battles with each other, fighting for the right to pick the fruit of the Kalpataru wishing tree. This tree has its roots in the land of the Asuras, but reaches into heaven where it bears its fruit. This represents the merit which is out of reach of the Asuras, and which they try to take by force. Notice the Asura trying to chop the tree down. That so accurately portrays the anger people express when they feel they are not receiving their due.

As the memory of heaven recedes from consciousness, the point of the battle is forgotten. Sinking into lethargy, we come now to the realm of animals. If not heaven, then simple physicality and bestial pleasure will do. Everything from predators like wolves, to carrion eaters and the bovine are represented, the form depending upon one's predisposition. The tendency to compensate for dissatisfaction with indulgence of the physical appetites is represented by this realm. It is only a short step now to the very bottom of the cycle, the realm of hell. This is where the full fury of our negative karma is felt. Every conceivable torture is depicted, showing the extremes of suffering that are sometimes necessary before we recognize the First Noble Truth. The degrees of suffering possible are far greater than the most stubborn refusal to recognize responsibility for one's own state. Eventually, even the toughest nut will soften and realize that

he too needs something to help him climb out of his misery. This recognition marks the beginning of the search for Truth, and with it we reach the turning point to the upward path.

Now we come to the realm of the Pretas, or hungry ghosts. These are desperate, grasping creatures who want the Truth but refuse to accept the teaching. They are shown as gaunt beings with skinny arms and legs, small heads, and tiny restricted throats. However, they have the huge bloated bellies associated with extreme forms of malnutrition. They try desperately to eat and drink, but water turns to fire and food becomes pus the moment it touches their mouths. Hungry Ghosts are beings who are aware that they need something, but they do not yet realize that what they really want is to become one with the Buddha Nature. So instead they try to substitute other things for this basic need. Mothers who desperately try to hang onto their children long after they are grown, and men who cannot accumulate enough money or prestige represent Hungry Ghost mentality. They are like people with a phantom itch who can find no relief. They are similar to Asuras in one way, but instead of being strident, demanding and struggling for their just reward, they are lost and searching; they are hungry but don't know where to turn.

All a Hungry Ghost needs to do is accept himself as he is and he becomes fully human, which is the next realm in the chain. This is the realm of potential. It is a higher realm than that of heaven, for it is here that the greatest opportunity to learn about the Truth exists. In this realm is shown all the aspects of daily life, including a normal household, birth and death, criminal behavior, commerce, and the life of a monk. It is here that the workings of karma and the turning of the Wheel of Life can be understood most easily, so the merit of being born human is considered very great. The opportunity to realize Nirvana, to see Yama's mirror as empty, and halt the endless becoming of birth and death in the six realms is considered very precious.

Although the opportunity to find the Truth is greatest in the human world, it is possible to find it in any realm. Because of this there is a Buddha figure shown within a circular insert in each segment of the wheel, holding an object through which he offers teaching to those residing within that realm. In each case the object

from "Zen Roots"

by Kyogen Carlson