In these pages, meditation teacher David Nichtern reimagines the ancient Buddhist allegory of the Wheel of Life. Famously painted at the entryway to Buddhist monasteries, the Wheel of Life encapsulates the entirety of the human situation. In the image of the Wheel we find a teaching about how to make sense of life and how to find peace within an uncertain world.

Nichtern writes with clarity and humor, providing simple practical steps for building a mindful, compassionate, and liberating approach to living.

“A wonderful extension of the powerful Dharma teachings of Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche. The transmission of these ancient lineages is intact in David’s hands as he continues to update the traditional Buddhist teachings and make them ever more accessible.”
—RAM DASS, author of Be Here Now

“A guidebook for anyone confused by the Gordian knot of existence. Masterful insight from a master.”
—JAMIE LEE CURTIS, actress and author

David Nichtern is a senior teacher in the Shambhala Buddhist lineage of Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche and Sakyong Mipham Rinpoche. He lives in New York City.
Praise for
Awakening from the Daydream

“A wonderful book—pithy, relevant, and fun to read.”
—Sharon Salzberg, author of Lovingkindness

“The Buddhist wheel of life reveals a tragic human irony—that we humans author the very distress we are seeking to avoid. As a heart-son of Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, David is uniquely equipped to help us explore and unravel this profound truth—his lively wisdom and sharp humor is exactly what we need in these difficult times.”
—Michael Carroll, author of Awake at Work

“Imagine yourself deeply asleep in a dormitory filled with everyone in the whole world. From way down inside your darkness, you hear a voice sweetly calling your name... ‘Hey! My friend, time to get up. Time to get up. Come out and play!’ You slowly open your tired eyes a little and see the smiling face of your friend calling to you. That is this book, calling out to wake us from our dreamy slumber.”
—Krishna Das, kirtan vocalist
“David Nichtern is one of the most effortless and effective teachers I have ever met. He’s funny and smart, which I love, but even better he uses his humor and intelligence to transmit a deeper message that can truly change your life. Get into it!” —Pete Holmes, comedian and host of You Made It Weird

“As a long-time Buddhist practitioner, there are a few people I have turned to over and over to help me make sense of the Dharma, and David Nichtern is one of them. His insights comfort and shock in equal measure, and this book is no exception. If you are looking for an introduction to the Buddhist path that is both gentle and fierce, this is the book for you. Using the iconic Wheel of Life as the gateway, it goes beyond the academic to offer real-life insights into how to transform your suffering into wisdom and joy. I'm so happy this book exists. PS, he is incredibly funny.” —Susan Piver, author of Start Here Now and founder of the Open Heart Project
Awakening from the Daydream
Awakening from the Daydream

REIMAGINING THE BUDDHA'S WHEEL OF LIFE

David Nichtern

With an essay by Chogyam Trungpa
Foreword by Lodro Rinzler

Wisdom
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WHEN YOU ARE a child you sometimes have adults in your life who appear very wise. That was the case for me with David Nichtern. By the time I was born, David was already a senior teacher in the Shambhala Buddhist tradition, having studied at the feet of the great Tibetan Buddhist master Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche for over a decade. (At the time of writing this David has studied Buddhism for more than forty years. I mean, come on. Not many Buddhist teachers in America can say that.)

A family friend, I was lucky to spend time with David beginning at an early age. I remember his grace and charm first, the practicalities of any meditation wisdom he may have shared second. I mention that because sometimes it is the presence of a teacher that inspires us, and my experience has been shared with thousands of people at this point: David’s warm presence invites us to explore the teachings in an insightful and sane manner. When you grow up, if you’re lucky, you sometimes form a peer-based
relationship with those seemingly peaceful adults from your youth and begin to see all their foibles, growing disheartened. You might ask yourself, “If that wise teacher from my youth is actually a jerk, what hope do I have going forward?” Not so with David. He is one of those teachers who not only manifests his decades of meditation practice when on the teaching seat but also behind closed doors, in the rest of his life. When I began teaching meditation myself, David was always supportive, mentoring me behind the scenes and leading by example, specifically around how to make the esoteric accessible. With this, his first book, he has done a beautiful job at just that.

The six realms of existence, karma, and the twelve nidanas are about as esoteric a topic you could choose for a book. To study them is to study the very nature of who we are, how we get confused and stray from our natural state, thus creating our own egoic identity. Following in the footsteps of his teacher, Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, David shows us both the traditional manifestation of these realms, where we are said to be reborn lifetime after lifetime, but also breaks those teachings down into how the essence of those realms manifest in our day-to-day existence.

In the volume that you’ve wisely chosen to pick up, David addresses the way that we fall prey to our own aggression, passion, and delusion. He talks about the six realms of existence, but he also dives into really important questions like “What is karma, anyway?” and “What’s the role of a teacher? Do I need one?” He skillfully offers teachings around how to unhook whatever ego trap you may have fallen into and climb out. Perhaps most importantly, he
provides a slew of practices you can develop on a daily basis that will allow you to transform your heart and mind.

Let me reiterate that last point: in my experience, if you practice the teachings set forth in this book, you will be transformed in the most beautiful ways. You become more present, both for the wonderful parts of your life but also the not-so-wonderful parts too (and that makes them more bearable). You become kinder, both to yourself and also to everyone else you encounter. You live a life based in virtue, with less stress and an open heart. But you have to take David’s advice and do the practices in order for that to happen.

So you possess two things in this volume. If you’re the sort of person who seeks genuine practices for self-reflection, deep peace, and living with an open heart, then you’re in luck. David includes practices at the end of each of these chapters to aide you in that regard. If you’re the sort of person who seeks advice on how to get out of the way of your own ego, see the very nature of karma, and ultimately wake up to the essence of your mind well, (1) I’m impressed, and (2) good news: this book will also aide you in that endeavor.

Whatever your Dharmic motivation may be, this book can show you the way. Through furthering our own understanding of our minds and hearts we are able to wake up in ways big and small, thus causing less harm in this world and perhaps even being able to help it.

This book is not just a meditation manual: it is a deep exploration of the Buddhist path. There is much discussion these days about meditation teachings going mainstream. The future of Buddhism is not a dumbing down or
stripping away of the traditional practices and teachings; it’s a translation of them so that they are made applicable and understandable in today’s context. David continues to serve as an example for us students of the Dharma: the future of Buddhism is made brighter by the proclamation of truth laid bare and the teachings made clear in this delightful book.

Lodro Rinzler
THE WHEEL OF LIFE is a Buddhist allegorical painting dating back to ancient India. The painting describes how our sense of self and our life in this world take shape, portraying how we think, how we act, how we feel, and how we manifest our own personal reality. The Wheel of Life also illustrates how karma works in our lives—how we get trapped in confusing, painful, and repetitive patterns, and how we can liberate ourselves from those patterns.

The essence of the Wheel allegory is that our lives are heavily influenced by the internal dramas that we project onto them. We ourselves create a “daydream” world in which we live most of the time. Just as we experience dreams as if they were reality while dreaming, we experience the daydream of our lives to be real and react to it accordingly: “That person doesn’t like me, so I feel depressed,” or “I’m in love and now everything is going to be perfect.” We are rarely, if ever, aware of how much our own mental habits fabricate and distort our experience.
of life. We do not see the situation clearly. It’s as if we wear special glasses made of all of our thoughts, feelings, impulses, and so on, that color and distort how we see our lives. The good news is that, given that these glasses are of our own making, we can remove them and awaken from our daydream world.

**MY EXPERIENCE WITH THE WHEEL**

I first started studying Buddhism in 1970 when I met Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche. At the time, I was attending the Berklee College of Music in Boston and was also studying yoga at the East/West Yoga Studio on Marlborough Street. I met Trungpa Rinpoche fairly soon after his arrival in the United States when he came to our yoga studio to lead a seminar called “Work, Sex, and Money.”

It seemed funny to me at the time that a high lama from Tibet would be talking about such things, even more so when he showed up in a business suit and talked about the inseparability of spiritual practice and our everyday lives. In those early days, he travelled around the United States, gave a variety of seminars, mentored people individually, and attracted a diverse group of students.

One of the seminars he gave in those early days was on the Wheel of Life, at the Tail of the Tiger (now Karmê Chöling) Meditation Center in Barnet, Vermont. The seminar was given at the town hall recreation center, which had a basketball hoop in it! It was summertime and we would walk back and forth from the meditation center to town to attend the lectures.
I remember how big an impression the Wheel of Life teachings made on me when I first heard them. I was totally blown away by how precisely and completely the portrait of the six realms exactly described the diverse experiences of my daily dramas. Any mood, memory, or expectation could be placed into one of the six settings: blissing out with the warmth and fragrance of summer was to enter the god realm; feeling claustrophobic and burned out by the intensity of the schedule, the practice, and the food was to sojourn in hell; craving the company of one of the lovely young women there or a bittersweet chocolate bar was to fall into the hungry ghost realm right on the spot!

I remember walking down the road to the retreat center and thinking about how intimidating the material was. It was as if Rinpoche were lecturing directly to me. He seemed to know all of my neurotic patterns and knew how to resolve them. He was killing me softly with my own song! I remember thinking that I had nowhere to hide. In the end I felt compelled to renounce it all and become a monk. Of course, I managed to regroup and continue to inhabit the six realms for the next forty years or so, but at that time I could not imagine going on with it. There really seemed to be no point at all in continuing to hang out in these familiar, repetitive patterns now that I recognized them for what they were.

Other practitioners in the past and present have had that kind of recognition and decided to instantly cut all ties to these six realms of samsara. There are famous stories about this kind of radical renunciation throughout the history of Buddhism. The most common version is somebody becoming a monk or nun and dedicating his or her
entire life to practice and study. They abandon all hope of seeking satisfaction in the six realms in a very literal way.

Obviously, joining a monastery would have been a radical step, but it was well beyond my own spiritual capacity and ambition. Fortunately, there is a path for householders like myself, and there are clearly outlined practices for navigating our lives within the six realms, as we work our way, little by little, toward awakening. The original painting of the Wheel was given to a king rather than to a monk, after all. The lay approach to Buddhist practice allows us to see the imprisoning aspect of the six realms, but to recognize the seed of wisdom and transformational possibilities within them as well. Having sat with and returned to the allegory of the Wheel as the basis of my practice for many years, I decided to incorporate the Wheel into my own teachings.

For the past fifteen years or so I have taught workshops based on the Wheel of Life. Given that the crux of the allegory is that we spend the majority of our time living within the fantasies that we ourselves unconsciously project on the world, I called my workshops “Awakening From the Daydream: The Wheel of Life.”

ORIGINS AND MESSAGE OF THE WHEEL

The Wheel of Life uses traditional Buddhist cosmological imagery to convey its allegory. There are six distinct “realms” within the wheel. Each realm represents a particular state of mind that shapes and limits our notions of what is real and what is possible. Our minds and our external situations mirror each other in the process, structuring our basic psychology.
Tradition says that the Buddha directed the creation of the original Wheel painting, which he commissioned as a gift to teach Dharma to an Indian king. When the king who received the painting contemplated it and fully understood its meaning, he attained enlightenment—he brought the suffering caused by unconscious habitual patterns to an end. Since then the Wheel has been painted countless times and has become a standard image displayed at the entryway to Buddhist temples all over Asia. The image has remained popular down through the ages because it makes subtle Buddhist teachings about the working of the mind accessible to the lay masses. The image of the Wheel survives not just because it sustains tradition, but because the message it conveys is powerful and timelessly relevant.

In modern terms we might think of the Wheel as a kind of PowerPoint presentation: it is a concise collection of information-rich points that provide a comprehensive overview of our existential state. Karma, an overarching theme of the Wheel image, means “action” or “work.” Karma describes how our world works, how different realities come into being, and how they change. The agent behind the work of karma is the mind, all the habitual thoughts, perspectives, and impulses that drive our behavior and experience. Karma explains how we became who we were in the past, how we become who we are now, and how we become who we will be in the future. The working of karma is a mostly unconscious process: our habits are shaped by past experiences, which in turn shape our present behavior such that we find ourselves facing familiar situations in the present. The repetition of unproductive patterns, the
cycle of familiar mental and behavioral landscapes, is called samsara.

Sometimes tropical fish in a tank leave a tiny thin trail of poop behind them as they swim around the tank. Once they have completed one cycle around, all of a sudden the poop is right in front of them. This is how karma works. You can almost imagine the fish saying to herself, “Now where did that come from?” In this metaphor, that fish is us, the fish tank is samsara, and the poop is the result of our habitual behavior.

Uninterrupted by fresh input that would break the chain, these karmic cycles go on and on. This idea is not unfamiliar to modern psychology. The Buddha’s essential message was that largely unconscious forces drive our unawakened lives, placing us in unpleasant situations and surroundings over and over again. This is why samsara is depicted as an endlessly turning wheel that only stops rolling when we awaken to the forces that drive it. The allegory of the Wheel reveals potent insight into how we get stuck cycling through psychological and emotional landscapes and tells us how to cultivate positive tendencies that help free us from ingrained karmic patterns.

My goal in this book is to present these ancient teachings in more contemporary language, with imagery more immediately recognizable to modern readers. The illustration of the Wheel used in the book depicts modern people in contemporary settings to convey the psychological tone of each of the six realms. This approach is very much in keeping with how I myself learned about the six realms from my teacher, Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche.
INTRODUCTION

THE SIX REALMS

Many people these days are exploring being mindful, present, and aware in the moment. But where are we when we are not present in the moment? We are lost in the daydream landscapes we have created in our minds. The Wheel of Life breaks our wandering in samsara down into six distinct realms that mirror our own inner psychological and emotional landscape. There is nothing random about the six realms. We are the co-creators of these environments, based on past and present thoughts and actions—based on our karma.

The six realms depicted in the wheel are

1. The God Realm
2. The Jealous God Realm
3. The Human Realm
4. The Animal Realm
5. The Hungry Ghost Realm
6. The Hell Realm

Traditionally Buddhist cultures have treated the Wheel of Life as representative of a real cosmology, wherein the six realms are actual, objective destinies into which one might be born. In this view the six realms represent six different kinds of environment, physical body, and mental state that we might occupy based on karma from past lives. For example, you may be reborn in the sea as a dolphin if you are born in the animal realm, or you may be reborn as a being with a huge belly and a tiny mouth and neck that lives in a barren graveyard setting where you experience...
great loneliness and deprivation if you are born in the hungry ghost realm. This way of looking at the Wheel of Life presupposes belief in reincarnation and multiple planes of physical reality. It will likely be difficult for people who are not from traditionally Buddhist cultures to adopt this view.

On the other hand, we can look at the six realms as a creative and fruitful way of describing the circumstances of our day-to-day realities. From this point of view the realms are seen as psychological landscapes that we migrate through over time; the realms are our internal mood, our attitudes, and habitual patterns projected out onto the world, where we mistake them for reality. We may move through a realm over the course of an hour, a day, a month, a year, and so on, depending on how deeply ingrained the particular mental state that drives the realm may be. If we succumb to depressive thoughts and feel that the world is against us, we may slide into a hell realm. Similarly, if we are dominated by emotions like jealousy and pride, our friends may turn into enemies as we move into the hypercompetitive realm of the jealous gods.

Although personally I have no problem relating to the exoteric or literal understanding of the realms, I would like to focus, in this book, on the realms as an allegory for the power of unchecked mental habits to distort our experience of the world, and will treat them in this way throughout this book. You needn't believe in reincarnation or higher or lower planes of existence to use the teachings presented here. The principal work we will undertake in the coming pages will be to develop a greater understanding of how our own psychology and emotions affect our experiences in life, and using that understanding to change
our thoughts and actions so that we have a happier and more expansive life. We will be talking about what goes on in our day-to-day lives, how it can sometimes work against us, and how we can make it work for us.

ABOUT KARMA

Karma is an essential theme in the Wheel of Life. Understanding karma is as simple as seeing that what we think, say, and do directly affects our experiences in life. The law of karma describes the precise relationship between actions and their consequences. It is always at play in both the short and long term. Karma, like the law of gravity, exists whether we know it or not. It is just so. It is how things naturally occur.

Whether our actions are virtuous or not is not determined by some superior, external, cosmic authority, but by the results that our actions naturally bring. Selfish behavior tends to bring mental turmoil, such as fear of reprisal or guilt, and physical difficulty, such as being shunned or physically attacked. From the Buddhist point of view, we are each responsible for our own situation, whether we care to admit it or not. We are all active participants in the creation of our own karma. We all have the capacity to determine our future paths. This is a very empowering way of looking at our world. In Buddha's time this view was revolutionary and directly opposed the Indian caste system of the times, which suggested that the fate of individuals was mostly fixed by the particularities of the station they were born into.

The Wheel of Life is essentially a portrait of how karma
works. Studying it can help us to better understand how our actions have impacted our lives and to choose better ways of acting to ensure a happier future. By developing a deeper understanding of karma, we can learn to free ourselves from unconscious and repetitive reliance on outdated and unproductive patterns of thought and behavior.

THE ROLE OF MEDITATION

Meditation and contemplation are powerful tools that can help us to clearly see the daydream-like realms that we project and to awaken from that daydream. Meditation is not a monolithic practice; there are many different types of meditation. In general, meditation helps us become more familiar with our intuitive awareness and contemplation helps us focus our thought to develop clarity and insight. As we work through the realms in the chapters to come, I will present meditation techniques that will help us to navigate the particular challenges of the mindsets that drive each realm.

The formal practice of sitting meditation allows us to look directly at our minds’ activity, to recognize how often the power of our thoughts and emotions carry us away from reality. Periodically, in our meditation, and sometimes in daily life, we actually awaken from our daydream mind, and experience a clear moment of being awake and present, free from the filter of thoughts and preconceptions. Experiencing the moment in this way is the mindfulness that so many people write about these days: a simple moment of awareness unfettered by memories of the past and projections about the future. Recognizing this
moment—recognizing and expanding the experience—was and still is the essence of the Buddha’s teachings.

The discovery of this kind of direct awareness is sometimes described as finding a treasure hidden in plain sight or a precious jewel in a garbage dump. The most magical and powerful experience imaginable can be discovered right here in the middle of the mess and turmoil we call our everyday lives.