



# International Journal of Engineering, Science and Humanities

An international peer reviewed, refereed, open-access journal  
Impact Factor 4.8 [www.ijesh.com](http://www.ijesh.com) ISSN: 2250-3552

## **Buddhist Art and the Dharmachakra: Representations of Peace, Compassion, and Enlightenment**

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### **Abstract**

This study explores the symbolic and artistic significance of the Dharmachakra (Wheel of Dharma) within Buddhist art, examining its role as a profound representation of peace, compassion, and enlightenment. As one of the earliest and most enduring symbols of Buddhism, the Dharmachakra embodies the Buddha's teachings, with its eight spokes symbolizing the Noble Eightfold Path, its hub denoting moral discipline, and its rim representing mindfulness and meditative concentration. From the historic "Turning of the Wheel of Dharma" at Sarnath to its depictions in Ashokan pillars, stupas, Thangka paintings, and temple architecture across Asia, the Dharmachakra has served as a universal icon of spiritual awakening. Beyond its artistic expression, the symbol communicates the ideals of ethical harmony, compassion for all beings, and the pursuit of liberation. Through this lens, the paper highlights how Buddhist art transforms philosophical concepts into visual forms that inspire reflection, inner peace, and the collective journey toward enlightenment.

**Keywords:** Dharmachakra, Buddhist Art, Peace, Compassion, Enlightenment

### **Introduction**

Buddhist art, in its profound symbolism and aesthetic depth, has long served as a medium to communicate the timeless teachings of the Buddha, and among its most significant motifs stands the Dharmachakra, or Wheel of Dharma, embodying peace, compassion, and enlightenment. The Dharmachakra, with its eight spokes symbolizing the Noble Eightfold Path, its hub representing moral discipline, and its rim signifying concentration and mindfulness, serves not merely as an artistic emblem but as a philosophical compass guiding practitioner toward liberation. Historically, its prominence can be traced to the Buddha's first sermon at Sarnath, often referred to as the "Turning of the Wheel of Dharma," which marked the beginning of the dissemination of his teachings; this momentous event finds expression in early Indian art through carvings, stupas, and Ashokan pillars, where the wheel is placed alongside lions, deer, and lotus motifs, visually narrating the spread of Dharma. The Dharmachakra's representation in diverse artistic forms—from stone reliefs at Sanchi and Bharhut, to intricate Thangka paintings in Tibet, and temple architecture across Southeast Asia—highlights its enduring universality and adaptability across cultural contexts. Its resonance is further amplified through the Dharmachakra Mudra, the symbolic hand gesture of the Buddha forming a circle at chest level, epitomizing the act of teaching and the eternal cycle of wisdom. Beyond mere representation, the wheel embodies



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profound values: its circularity evokes cosmic harmony and the continuity of spiritual practice; its spokes radiate the ideals of ethical living, compassion, and meditative awareness; and its presence across Buddhist iconography reinforces the vision of enlightenment as a journey accessible to all beings. Thus, the Dharmachakra in Buddhist art is not only a sacred symbol but also a living reminder of humanity's quest for inner peace, compassionate action, and transcendental wisdom, illustrating how visual culture becomes a bridge between metaphysical truths and human experience, making abstract philosophies tangible, approachable, and eternally relevant.

## Symbolism and Meaning of the Dharmachakra

- **The Wheel of Dharma and Its Philosophical Essence**

The Dharmachakra, or Wheel of Dharma, occupies a central place in Buddhist art and philosophy, serving as both a visual symbol and a spiritual metaphor for the Buddha's teachings and the path toward enlightenment. Literally translated as the "Wheel of Law," it encapsulates the cyclical and continuous journey of wisdom, ethical conduct, and meditative insight that propels a practitioner toward liberation from suffering. The very idea of the wheel embodies movement, progress, and continuity, mirroring the Buddha's act of "turning the wheel of Dharma" during his first sermon at Sarnath, which marked the commencement of his mission to guide humanity along the Middle Path. Beyond its historical roots, the Dharmachakra's layered symbolism reflects profound aspects of Buddhist doctrine, and its components—the spokes, hub, and rim—collectively construct a visual schema of spiritual practice. At its most basic level, the wheel serves as a universal reminder that Dharma is not static but dynamic, revolving endlessly to sustain moral order, intellectual clarity, and compassionate living.

The eight spokes of the Dharmachakra are perhaps its most defining and widely recognized feature, each corresponding to one element of the Noble Eightfold Path—Right View, Right Intention, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration. These principles form the practical framework of Buddhism, offering ethical guidance, mental discipline, and wisdom for the cessation of suffering. In this sense, the spokes do not merely decorate the wheel; they act as directional guides, orienting the practitioner toward balanced living and the cultivation of inner awareness. Just as a wheel cannot function without its spokes, spiritual progress is incomplete without the integration of all eight aspects, underscoring the holistic nature of the Buddhist path. The equal spacing of the spokes further symbolizes harmony, balance, and impartiality, qualities that align with the Buddhist commitment to compassion and equanimity in all situations.

## Historical and Cultural Context

- **The Dharmachakra in Early Buddhist Heritage**



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The historical and cultural context of the Dharmachakra reveals its profound role as both a religious emblem and a socio-political symbol, reflecting the evolution of Buddhist thought and its spread across ancient India and beyond. Its origin is deeply tied to the Buddha's First Sermon at Sarnath, often referred to as the "Turning of the Wheel of Dharma" (*Dharmachakra Pravartana*), which marked the beginning of Buddhism as a living tradition. In this seminal moment, the Buddha articulated the Four Noble Truths and introduced the Noble Eightfold Path, thereby setting the wheel of spiritual teaching in motion. Artistic depictions of this event commonly feature the Dharmachakra flanked by a pair of deer, symbolizing the Deer Park at Sarnath where the sermon occurred, and sometimes accompanied by reverent figures, reinforcing the sanctity of the moment when wisdom was first shared with humanity. As Buddhism expanded, this imagery became a foundational icon in Buddhist art, underscoring the universality of Dharma's message. The prominence of the Dharmachakra was further elevated during the reign of Emperor Ashoka (3rd century BCE), whose patronage of Buddhism transformed the symbol into an instrument of moral and political communication. Ashoka's lion-topped pillars, crowned with the Dharmachakra, not only signified the spread of Buddhist teachings but also projected the emperor's role as a protector and propagator of Dharma. The most famous of these, the Ashokan pillar at Sarnath, features four majestic lions back-to-back, surmounted by a wheel, symbolizing both sovereignty and the universal authority of the Buddha's message. This fusion of imperial imagery with spiritual symbolism reflects how the Dharmachakra transcended its purely religious meaning to become a representation of just governance, peace, and compassion. Ashoka's inscriptions, advocating for moral conduct, tolerance, and non-violence, reinforced the Dharmachakra as a guiding emblem for ethical rule. Its enduring influence is evident in the fact that the wheel remains central to India's national emblem and flag today, linking ancient spiritual ideals with modern identity.

The integration of the Dharmachakra into architectural art further illustrates its widespread cultural significance. At the Sanchi Stupa, one of the oldest surviving Buddhist monuments, intricate relief carvings depict the wheel alongside deer, worshippers, and other sacred symbols, narrating the story of the Buddha's first sermon in visual form. These reliefs served as a didactic medium for devotees who may not have been literate, allowing the Dharma to be transmitted through visual storytelling. Similarly, the recurring appearance of the Dharmachakra in gateways, railings, and stupas emphasized its central role in Buddhist ritual and pilgrimage, reminding practitioners of the eternal turning of the Dharma. Such architectural contexts illustrate how art and symbolism were woven into the lived experiences of Buddhist communities, shaping religious devotion and collective memory. In early Indian art of the Mauryan era, the Dharmachakra also appeared prominently atop lion pedestals and pillars, embodying a marriage of political power and spiritual truth. The lions, representing courage and



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vigilance, combined with the wheel, created a powerful metaphor for the righteous spread of Dharma across the world. This blending of regal authority with Buddhist values reflects a cultural synthesis where the wheel symbolized both temporal governance and spiritual liberation. Over time, as Buddhism spread across Asia, the Dharmachakra retained its role as a unifying emblem, appearing in temples, manuscripts, and ritual objects, but its earliest Indian contexts remain the most powerful testaments to its layered significance. Thus, the Dharmachakra's historical and cultural journey highlights its enduring role as a bridge between religious philosophy, political ideology, and artistic expression, symbolizing the Buddha's timeless vision of peace, compassion, and enlightened governance.

## Artistic Depictions Across Media

- **Buddhist Art, Architecture, and Thangka Traditions**

The artistic depictions of the Dharmachakra across Buddhist media demonstrate both its universality and its adaptability, reflecting how diverse cultural and artistic traditions translated the Buddha's teachings into visual forms that could inspire devotion, reflection, and collective identity. In Buddhist art and architecture, the Dharmachakra appears in countless styles, ranging from the minimalist carvings of early stupas to the elaborate temple motifs of later periods. On gateways and railings of sites such as Sanchi and Bharhut, the wheel is represented with remarkable simplicity—often a plain circular form accompanied by deer and worshippers—emphasizing its symbolic rather than ornamental role. As Buddhism spread across Asia, however, the Dharmachakra's representations evolved, becoming more intricate and decorative, sometimes adorned with lotus petals, flanked by celestial beings, or integrated into grand temple facades. In Southeast Asia and East Asia, the wheel frequently appears as an architectural ornament on shrines, pagodas, and monastic structures, symbolizing the ever-turning truth of the Dharma within the sacred space of communal worship. Equally significant are the depictions of the Dharmachakra in Thangka paintings, which not only preserve the symbol but embed it within a broader cosmological and devotional framework. Thangkas featuring bodhisattvas such as Manjushri, the embodiment of wisdom, and Avalokiteshvara/Chenrezig, the personification of compassion, often include the Dharmachakra as a central or supporting motif, linking the qualities of wisdom and compassion directly to the Buddha's teachings. In these visual narratives, the wheel serves as a reminder that the pursuit of knowledge and the practice of compassion must go hand in hand for true spiritual awakening.

The Dharmachakra is prominently integrated into Mandala Thangkas, where it functions as a focal point representing the Dharma at the center of the universe. Here, the wheel symbolizes cosmic order, balance, and the guiding truth that radiates outward to all beings. In the Wheel of Life (Bhavachakra) artworks, the Dharmachakra sometimes appears in the hands of Yama, the Lord of Death, holding the cyclical realms of existence, reinforcing its association with samsara,



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karma, and the necessity of liberation. This complex symbolic placement highlights the wheel's dual role: it is both a reminder of cyclical suffering and a beacon pointing toward the path of release. Together, these artistic depictions—whether carved in stone, painted on cloth, or integrated into monumental architecture—underscore the Dharmachakra's enduring resonance as a bridge between philosophy and visual culture. Its versatility across styles and regions reflects Buddhism's ability to adapt without losing its core message: that peace, compassion, and enlightenment are attainable through the ever-turning path of Dharma. Thus, the Dharmachakra in artistic media is not merely an ornamental symbol but a sacred device through which generations of practitioners have engaged with the Buddha's teachings, finding in its form both inspiration and direction for their spiritual journey.

## **Mudra**

The Dharmachakra Mudra, often referred to as the “Wheel of Law gesture,” is one of the most significant and revered hand positions in Buddhist iconography, embodying the very essence of the Buddha's role as a teacher and spiritual guide. In this gesture, the Buddha is depicted with both hands held at chest level, the thumbs and index fingers of each hand forming a circle that symbolizes the turning of the Dharma wheel, while the remaining fingers extend outward to suggest the dissemination of wisdom. This circular formation reflects the cyclical nature of the teachings, the interdependence of all aspects of the Noble Eightfold Path, and the infinite continuity of the Dharma itself. The placement of the gesture near the chest—close to the heart—further emphasizes that the transmission of wisdom is not purely intellectual but deeply rooted in compassion and inner realization. The Dharmachakra Mudra is most closely associated with the Buddha's First Sermon at Sarnath, where he set the Dharma into motion by teaching the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path. Sculptures and paintings across Buddhist traditions often capture this moment with the Buddha seated in meditation posture, hands performing the mudra, surrounded by disciples and celestial beings in reverence. This gesture thus becomes not just a symbolic act but a visual reminder of the Buddha's role as the enlightened teacher who illuminated the path for others.

When represented in sculptures, murals, and sacred art, the Dharmachakra Mudra reinforces the central Buddhist ideals of peace, compassion, and enlightenment. The serene expression of the Buddha combined with the hand gesture conveys tranquility and harmony, inviting practitioners into a state of inner calm. The compassionate aspect is communicated through the open-handed form, symbolizing the sharing of wisdom with all beings without distinction. Finally, enlightenment is embodied in the perfect balance of the circular gesture, representing unity, completeness, and the ultimate realization of truth. By enshrining this mudra in art, Buddhist cultures sought to create not merely decorative images but living symbols of teaching and guidance—icons that could inspire devotees in their meditative practice and daily lives. Thus, the





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Dharmachakra Mudra stands as a powerful fusion of philosophy and form, transforming a moment of teaching into an eternal visual representation of the Dharma. It serves as a timeless reminder that the wheel of wisdom continues to turn, encouraging humanity to embody peace, live with compassion, and seek the light of enlightenment.

## **Embodiment of Peace, Compassion & Enlightenment**

The Dharmachakra, whether represented as a sacred wheel in Buddhist art or enacted through the Dharmachakra Mudra, stands as a profound embodiment of peace, compassion, and enlightenment—qualities that lie at the very heart of Buddhist philosophy and practice. As a visual and symbolic form, the wheel conveys a sense of serenity and balance, reminding practitioners of the ethical harmony that arises when one follows the Noble Eightfold Path. The calm symmetry of the spokes, the grounding stability of the hub, and the unbroken continuity of the rim collectively symbolize inner peace, showing that true tranquility emerges when wisdom, discipline, and mindfulness are integrated into daily life. This peace is not passive but deeply active, guiding individuals toward compassionate engagement with the world. The Dharmachakra also radiates compassion, as it represents the Buddha's choice to share his realization rather than retreat into personal liberation; in turning the wheel of Dharma, he opened the path of awakening to all beings, embodying selflessness and universal love. Each artistic and ritual depiction of the wheel reaffirms this compassionate commitment, inviting devotees to cultivate kindness, empathy, and ethical responsibility in their interactions. Beyond its ethical and emotional resonance, the Dharmachakra symbolizes enlightenment itself—the awareness that frees one from ignorance and the cycle of suffering. When enacted as the Dharmachakra Mudra, with the hands forming a circle near the heart, it communicates not only the act of teaching but also the unending continuity of wisdom and liberation. In this sense, the wheel and gesture together embody the transformative path of awakening, illustrating the journey from suffering to freedom, from confusion to clarity, and from isolation to universal compassion. Thus, the Dharmachakra becomes more than an icon; it is a living metaphor for the spiritual ideals of Buddhism, encapsulating the Buddha's vision of a peaceful, compassionate, and enlightened existence available to all who choose to walk the path of Dharma.

## **Conclusion**

The study of Buddhist art and the Dharmachakra reveals how a single symbol can encapsulate the profound spiritual ideals of peace, compassion, and enlightenment while simultaneously serving as a timeless bridge between philosophy, culture, and visual expression. From its earliest appearance at Sarnath, marking the Buddha's first sermon and the "Turning of the Wheel of Dharma," to its majestic presence on Emperor Ashoka's pillars and the intricate carvings of stupas like Sanchi, the Dharmachakra has functioned as both a sacred emblem and a cultural communicator of ethical harmony. Its form—comprising the hub of moral discipline, the spokes



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of the Noble Eightfold Path, and the rim of mindfulness—translates abstract doctrine into an accessible visual map of spiritual practice, guiding practitioners toward inner balance and universal compassion. In artistic traditions such as Thangka paintings and mandalas, the Dharmachakra acquires an even more expansive role, connecting wisdom, compassion, and cosmic order, while in sculptural depictions of the Dharmachakra Mudra, it conveys the Buddha's act of teaching as an eternal moment of awakening. Across all these representations, the wheel remains a living metaphor of transformation, reminding humanity that enlightenment is not a static state but a dynamic, ongoing process. More than an artifact of religious art, the Dharmachakra embodies the Buddha's vision of a world guided by ethical conduct, mindful awareness, and compassionate action, encouraging individuals to live in harmony with themselves and others. Its endurance across time and geography demonstrates its universality, as the ideals it represents transcend cultural and historical boundaries to remain relevant for seekers of peace and wisdom today. Ultimately, the Dharmachakra in Buddhist art illustrates how symbols can both preserve and enliven spiritual truths, offering a perpetual source of inspiration for the pursuit of liberation and the realization of a compassionate and enlightened life.

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