

Weaving Buddhist Philosophy into Fantasy: The Spiritual Architecture of Robert Jordan's *The Wheel of Time*

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Robert Jordan, also known as James Oliver Rigley Jr., is an American writer who created an epic fantasy world in his series of novels, The Wheel of Time (1990-2013), spanning 14 volumes. The Jordanian world is a rich tapestry of concepts from Hinduism, Buddhism, Arthurian legends, and Norse and Irish mythology. The narrative of The Wheel of Time series intricately weaves together a complex tapestry of themes that echo crucial Buddhist concepts, such as Samsara, Karma, Anatta, Anicca, Dukkha, Middle Way, etc. This study delves into how these Buddhist tenets shape the series' portrayal of fate, personal responsibility, and the quest for enlightenment through a comprehensive and in-depth analysis of pivotal events and character arcs. Focused on the first three books of The Wheel of Time, namely The Eye of the World, The Great Hunt and The Dragon Reborn, this study uncovers the prevalence of Buddhist teachings within the series, illustrating their significant contribution to the moral and philosophical framework of the world built by Robert Jordan. By highlighting the parallels between Jordan's epic fantasy and Buddhist philosophy, this study underscores how Eastern thought has been adapted and reinterpreted in Western literature and how modern storytelling has influenced a broader cultural and philosophical exchange.

Keywords: Buddhist philosophy, Impermanence, Middle Way, Suffering, Four Noble Truths

The Wheel of Time turns, and Ages come and Pass, leaving memories that become legends.

-Jordan, The Eye of the World

Introduction

Robert Jordan's *The Wheel of Time*, published in 14 volumes, is a high fantasy novel of epic dimension that has left an indelible mark on popular culture. It has not only become a part of popular culture. However, it has also spawned a prequel novel, two companion books, and several adaptations into genres such as OTT series, comics, games, and music.

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Renewed interest in the series of novels grew with the release of a television series developed by Rafe Judkins for Amazon Prime Video in 2021 and 2022 (“The Wheel of Time”). Inspired by J. R. R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*, Jordan has intricately woven a universe with grand characters and monumental events. In the true nature of sci-fi and fantasy novels, he has “imagined reality that is radically different in its nature and functioning from the world of our ordinary experience”¹. In this case, the setting is the Third Age of an imaginary fantasy world roughly the size of the Earth, called the Westlands but with different continents, seas and mountain terrains.

In this fantasy world, human existence is determined by the Wheel of Time, which spins the pattern of the Ages. The wheel has the power to influence the destiny of men and women. This wheel is rotated by a grand magical force, One Power. Only women can wield this power rightly (also known as channelling) and possess extraordinary magical powers. In this Jordanian epic, the heroes are the Aes Sedai, a matriarchal order comprising female channellers and “their action involves extraordinary deeds” to serve and protect humanity from the malevolent, the Dark One.² The narrative in the first book begins in ‘medias res’,³ at a crucial time of action, which is the feature of an epic. The circular nature of time in Jordan’s universe is introduced in the first paragraph when he states, “The Wheel of Time turns, and Ages come and pass... There are neither beginnings nor endings to the turning of the Wheel of Time. But it was a beginning”⁴. This circularity will be dealt with again later in the discussion on Eastern philosophy.

The timelessness of Robert Jordan’s series is rooted in the fact that he has not built a grand universe; instead, he has created a multiverse with myths from both European and Asian mythology and elements drawn from both Western and Eastern philosophy. The Jordanian world is built on interlocking concepts from Hinduism, Buddhism, Arthurian legends, Norse and Irish mythology. *The Wheel of Time* is a rich, multilayered world blending elements from history, mythology, politics and magic. It has diverse cultures and complex political systems with profound philosophical underpinnings.

The present study is focused on the first two books of *The Wheel of Time* (on which the OTT series is based), viz., *The Eye of the World*⁵ and *The Great Hunt*⁶ explores the various influences of Eastern philosophies, notably Buddhism, on the worldview. The intricate narrative of *The Wheel of Time* weaves together a complex tapestry of themes that resonate with key Buddhist concepts, such as Kalachakra (wheel of time), Reincarnation

and Samsara (the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth), Karma (the moral law of cause and effect), Anatta (the illusion of the self), Impermanence (Anicca), the Middle Way (the path of moderation), the four Noble Truths, the Eight-Fold Path, Non-Violence (Ahimsa), Maya (Illusion), Mindfulness/ meditation and the quest for Enlightenment.

Kalachakra, Samsara and Reincarnation

In Vajrayana Buddhism's cosmology, the whole world is guided by the collective efforts or karma of the sentient beings, which creates a kind of psychophysical energy or the 'vayu'⁷, (the vital wind). The vayu moulds and dissolves the atomic particles that constitute the inanimate things in the world⁸. The opening lines of the first book describe the whole atmosphere being windy, and its significance can be gauged when Jordan writes, "In one Age, called the Third Age by some, an Age yet to come, an Age long past, a wind rose in the Mountains of Mist. The wind was not the beginning. There are neither beginnings nor endings to the turning of the Wheel of Time"⁹. The word Kalachakra is polysemic as it has several meanings in Vajrayana Buddhism (also called Tantric Buddhism), which spread in Tibet, Nepal, East Asia, parts of Southeast Asia and Mongolia. The most common meaning is the 'wheel of time' itself. In Jordan's universe, time is represented by a wheel with seven spokes representing the seven ages of human beings, and the wheel keeps rotating. No one knows how many times this wheel rotates. This concept of representation of human life is also presented in Hindu philosophy, where 'kaal' or 'samay' plays a significant role. This concept of Kalachakra is infused with the Western concept of the seven ages of humankind. This imaginary universe becomes multidimensional as the lives of people are strung on a thread, and "the designs these threads create when intertwined (through the turning of the wheel and the events of people's lives) form every possible reality—past, present, and future"¹⁰ (Weller). The wheel motif emerges from this Kalachakra tradition in Buddhism, where the wheel symbolises the infinite cycle of existence, mortality, and reincarnation, as seen in Buddha's teaching of Samsara. Characters in the novel *The Wheel of Time* are reborn in different ages.

The prophecy surrounding the Dragon Reborn underscores the theme of reincarnation. The Dragon Reborn is destined to be born continually to fight the Dark One. In Buddhist tradition, this cyclic rebirth process continues until one achieves enlightenment. Rand's journey in the series is deeply tied to reincarnation. He is revealed to be the Dragon Reborn, the latest incarnation of an influential figure destined to confront the Dark One. Throughout Book I, *The Eye of the World*, Rand grapples with the

implications of this identity, including memories and abilities from past lives.

The awakening of memories and abilities from past lives is marked as reincarnation when Rand al'Thor confronts the Forsaken and the Dark One's minions, unconsciously channels the One Power, and realises his potential as the Dragon Reborn. The cyclical nature of existence is foregrounded, with Rand being the latest in a long line of incarnations. In the second book, *The Great Hunt*, Rand experiences visions and memories of the past. In the third book of the series, *The Dragon Reborn*, Rand is found to be the latest incarnation of Lews Therin Telamon, the Dragon from the Age of Legends. Throughout the story, characters like Rand, Mat, and Perrin experience prophetic dreams and visions. These experiences often provide glimpses into their past lives or hint at their future roles, further emphasising the theme of samsara. Lews Therin's memories and burdens influence Rand, highlighting the continuity of the soul and the impact of past lives on the present. The soul is always on the onward journey to different lives. Ishmael, who appears as Ba'alzamon, represents the eternal antagonist in the time cycle. His continued opposition to the Dragon Reborn and the Dark One's influence reflects the recurring nature of the struggle between light and shadow. The Battle at the Stone of Tear is the battle against the Forsaken and the forces of the Shadow that shows the recurring struggle against the Dark One. It reinforces the cyclic nature of Samsara, where the fight between good and evil continues in all the ages past and the ages to come.

Channelling and Karma

In Vajrayana or Tantric Buddhism, where the concept of Kalachakra pervades, the mind is considered the focal point of the whole being. According to Bryant, "It is the stream of consciousness which connects the individual to his or her past and future. This can be observed within the actions of this life alone or, according to the principle of reincarnation, in the action of past and future lives"¹¹. A subtle mind can impart knowledge and wisdom in the form of "mind transmission", which is "a direct transfer of consciousness that can pass from a deity to a human or from one human to another"¹². This is how Buddha taught his disciples. This concept of mind transmission is known as "channelling" in Jordan's world in *The Wheel of Time* series. Specific individuals can access and manipulate the One Power through channelling, a mystic force that drives the universe. The male channelers are called Saidin, and the female ones are called Saidar—both are complementary pairs of the One Power. Drawing upon the immense magical power of channelling, few Saidins or Saidars who

possess the talent or 'spark' can heal, create fire, manipulate weather and alter the fabric of reality. Channelling involves 'weaving' threads of the One Power to create specific effects, called 'Weaves'. One of the significant roles of Aes Sedai is to control the use of this One Power. Characters such as Rand al'Thor, Egwene al'Vere, and Nynaeve al'Meara are powerful channelers who play pivotal roles in unfolding the series' epic narrative.

The Buddhist concept of karma refers to the law of moral causation, where one's actions influence future experiences. The consequences of actions, both good and bad, play a significant role in the narrative. The choices made by characters such as Moiraine Sedai, Lan, and even the friends reflect the idea that actions have far-reaching consequences. The journey to the Eye of the World can be seen as a karmic event influenced by the characters' past actions and choices. In the first book, the initial attack by Trollocs and Myrddraal on Emond's Field sets the stage for the entire series. This event can be seen as a consequence of the Dark One's desire to find and control the Dragon Reborn. Min Farshaw's visions around Rand, Mat, and Perrin suggest the weight of their destinies and the karmic outcomes they will face, reflecting the karmic ripple effects of the Dark One's search for power. The journey to the cursed city of Shadar Logoth is a powerful instance of karma. The desolation of the city and the wrath of Mashadar are consequences of the inhabitants' excessive zeal in rooting out darkness, leading to their destruction. This event warns of the karmic consequences of allowing hatred and paranoia to consume one's actions. Perrin's discovery of his ability to communicate with wolves and his subsequent struggle with his identity reflect karmic themes. His hesitation to embrace his abilities and the choices he makes in using them show how actions and internal conflicts can shape one's destiny and experiences.

In the second book, *The Great Hunt*, Ingtar's confession to having secretly served the Dark One at a crucial point and his realisation makes him seek redemption by sacrificing himself and allowing Rand and the others to escape. Ingtar's decision reflects the Buddhist concept of karma, where his past actions have led him to this point; however, his choice to sacrifice himself as an atonement for his past wrongs is a form of spiritual redemption. In the third book, *The Dragon Reborn*, Rand's ability to draw the Sword That Is Not a Sword (Callandor) from the Stone of Tear, and his subsequent victory over the Shadow's forces reflect the positive karma accumulated through his previous actions and decisions. The Forsaken's actions, driven by their malevolent intentions and alliance with the Shadow, lead to negative consequences and eventual defeat. Ishamael, in

particular, represents the consequences of pursuing evil and chaos as his actions fail and continue opposition to the Dragon Reborn.

Anatta, Anicca, Dukkha and the Four Noble Truths

Anatta or Anatman is the Buddhist doctrine which states that humans do not have any “permanent, underlying substance” that one knows as the soul or Atman (the self) in Hinduism¹³. The self is an illusion, and an individual’s existence is constituted of five aggregates (skandhas) that are constantly changing, viz. form, feeling, perception, mental formations and consciousness or awareness¹⁴. The absence of a self or anatta is followed by two more characteristics of all existence, viz. Anicca (the impermanence of all beings) and Dukkha (dissatisfaction or suffering). The three doctrines combined constitute the “right understanding”¹⁵ (Britannica).

The concept of anatta is mirrored in the shifting identities and roles of the characters, especially Rand, who grapples with his identity as a simple shepherd versus his potential as the Dragon Reborn. Perrin Aybara’s discovery of his ability to communicate with wolves introduces him to a new aspect of his identity known as a Wolfbrother. This connection blurs the line between his human self and his link to the wolves, challenging his understanding of who he is. The character Selene (later revealed to be Lanfear, one of the Forsaken) in the second book embodies the idea of the illusion of self. She presents herself as a mysterious noblewoman, manipulating Rand by appealing to his ambitions and desires. Perrin’s struggle to accept or reject this part of himself reflects the concept of anatta as he grapples with the fluidity and multiplicity of his identity. The dreamworld, Tel’aran’rhiod, is a place where reality and illusion intertwine. Characters who enter this realm experience events and meet figures challenging their perception of reality and identity. Egwene’s journey towards becoming an Aes Sedai and her experiences with the One Power reveals her identity struggle. As she learns about her potential and the responsibilities of being an Aes Sedai, Egwene must navigate the expectations placed on her and her desires. Her journey illustrates the evolving nature of self-identity. Lan’s dual identity as a Warder and the last surviving heir of the fallen kingdom of Malkier reflects the concept of anatta. He carries the weight of his past and his duties as a protector of Moiraine Sedai. Lan’s stoic demeanour often hides his inner turmoil and sense of loss (dukkha/ suffering), suggesting that his outward identity is only a part of his true self.

The concept of impermanence, known as *anicca* in Buddhism, is one of the dominant themes in *The Eye of the World*. Trollocs and Myrddraal's attack on the peaceful village of Emond's Field is one such instance. The attack marks the end of the simple, stable lives of Rand al'Thor, Mat Cauthon, Perrin Aybara, Egwene al'Vere, and Nynaeve al'Meara and the beginning of a journey filled with uncertainty, demonstrating the impermanence of their previously secure existence. Their journey continues through the Mountains of Mist and beyond. The changing landscapes, cultures, and the constant threat of pursuit by Darkfriends and Shadowspawn emphasise the impermanence of their journey. The confrontation with the Forsaken Aginor and Balthamel and the sealing of the Dark One's prison in the battle at the Eye of the World show that even powerful entities and momentous events are subject to change and that power and victory are fragile and impermanent.

The first truth in the Four Noble Truths is *Dukkham* or suffering. Anderson (6) provides a quote from the *Sutta on the Turning of the Wheel of Dhamma*, which Buddha uses to describe pain or suffering:

*This, monks, is the noble truth that is pain. Birth is pain, old age is pain, illness is pain, death is pain, sorrow and grief, physical and mental suffering, and disturbance are pain. Association with things unliked is pain, separation from desired things is pain, and not getting what one wants is pain; in short, the five aggregates of grasping are pain.*¹⁶

This seems to be an observation that Buddha made about human life. The concept of suffering is widely embedded in the narratives of both the first and second books. Rand al'Thor, the protagonist, experiences profound suffering as he comes to terms with his identity as the Dragon Reborn. He is burdened by the knowledge that he is fated to save or destroy the world. This knowledge isolates him from others, even those he loves, as he fears for their safety and the inevitable madness of channelling Saidin. Egwene al'Vere faces immense challenges and suffering in her rise to the position of Amyrlin Seat, the leader of the Aes Sedai. She is forced to make difficult decisions during conflicts within the White Tower and endure physical and emotional hardships. Her journey is marked by sacrifice and the loss of her youthful innocence. Mat's suffering is rooted in the attachment to the dagger, even though it was initially out of necessity for survival. The curse brings continuous pain, reflecting the Buddhist understanding of *dukkha* as the suffering that arises from clinging to harmful influences and the consequences that follow.

The other three Noble Truths include Samudayo (Rising), which is associated with craving, Nirodha (Ending of pain/ suffering), and Paṭipadā (Way leading to the ending of pain). Intense personal and external struggles mark Rand's journey, depicting the truth of his suffering or dukkha (Saudayo). His internal conflicts with his identity and the external battles against the Shadow illustrate the pervasive nature of suffering. Rand's struggle to balance his immense power with the burden of his destiny highlights the universal experience of suffering. Mat's experience with the cursed dagger brings significant suffering due to the dagger's corrupting influence. His internal turmoil and the impact on his relationships reflect that suffering arises from various sources and can profoundly affect one's life. The Dark One's manipulations, the actions of the vital antagonist Ishmael and the resulting struggles of the protagonists illustrate how attachment to power, fear, and desire contribute to suffering.

Rand's acceptance of his role as the Dragon Reborn and his efforts to find balance and control over his powers represent the potential cessation of suffering (nirodha). By embracing his destiny and seeking to use his powers for good, Rand moves towards alleviating his suffering and that of others. Mat's eventual struggle to rid himself of the cursed dagger's influence and return to his true self represents the cessation of suffering. His recovery and return to normalcy illustrate the possibility of overcoming the sources of suffering. Rand's path involves confronting his fears, mastering his powers, and embracing his role. His personal growth and the support he received from his allies represent the path to overcoming suffering and achieving a sense of purpose (Paṭipadā). The cooperation among Rand's allies, such as Mat, Perrin, and Moiraine, illustrates the importance of support and collaboration in achieving personal and collective goals. Their efforts to work together and support each other represent the path to alleviating suffering.

Middle Way or Madhyamaka, and Eightfold Path

In his first talk on Dhamma/ Dharma at Sarnath, Gautam Buddha explained that extreme devotion to sensual pleasures or ascetic practices should be avoided, and a Middle Way should be followed. Although not explicitly stated, these teachings and principles are at the core of The Wheel of Time series narrative. The concept of the Middle Way relates to avoiding extremes in all aspects of life, whether in feelings or actions. Characters like Rand and Egwene in *The Wheel of Time* constantly struggle to find a balance between using power and responsibility that comes with their powerful position in the universe. Rand constantly tries to follow a middle path by not becoming a tyrant or compromising on

controlling the situation. Moiraine Sedai balances her role as a mentor and guide. She balances her strategic decisions and guidance to Rand within the world's complex political and social dynamics. Rand and the Aes Sedai strive to find a balanced approach to collaboration and the broader struggle against the Shadow. Ishmael, however, is an example of the repercussions of not following the Middle Way. His extreme pursuit of power and chaos contrasts with the balanced approach embodied by Rand and other characters.

The middle way consists of the noble eightfold path: right view, right intent, right speech, right action, right living, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration, which leads to enlightenment¹⁷. Rand's gradual understanding of his identity as the Dragon Reborn and the nature of his struggle reflects the development of the Right View. Rand's resolve to defeat the Shadow for the greater good shows his right intent, just as Aes Sedai's intentions are right. The honest and open communication among Rand's allies, including his discussions with Moiraine and his friends, reflect Right Speech. Moiraine's role as a mentor involves providing honest guidance and advice to Rand and his companions. Her ability to speak truthfully and share her knowledge represents the Right Speech. Rand's actions to protect his friends and fight against the Shadow reflect the Right Action. His efforts to secure powerful artefacts for the greater good align with the Right Livelihood. His diligence in training and preparing for his role as the Dragon Reborn reflects the Right Effort. Rand's self-reflection and awareness of his role and actions illustrate the Right Mindfulness. His ability to recognise his strengths, weaknesses, and the nature of his journey represents this principle. Rand's mental focus, especially in using the One Power and strategic decisions, embodies the Right Concentration.

The Illusory Nature of Reality (Maya)

In Mahayana sutras, it is said that people often misunderstand reality because reality is like magic, a dream, a bubble, a rainbow and so on. All reality is an illusion or Maya; if we think we understand reality, we are ignorant. All beings are likened to the magic created by a magician, i.e., the whole world is a magical creation, and this is a very apt symbol to be used by Robert Jordan in creating his world of fantasy in the Wheel of Time series. The narrative depicts reality, perception, and deception throughout *The Eye of the World*. The Dragon Reborn that appears at the beginning of the book's discussion is a false dragon, an illusion. The Emond's field villagers believe their village is peaceful and idyllic. This is merely an appearance or an illusion because the next thing we know is that

Trollocs attack the village. The illusion of safety and peaceful existence is shattered as it was illusory. Ishamael creates illusions that confuse and manipulate Rand and his friends. These encounters highlight the concept of Maya, as characters must discern truth from illusion. Throughout their journey, the protagonists encounter various Darkfriends who hide their true intentions behind false appearances. For example, Padan Fain, initially appearing as a simple peddler, is revealed to be much more sinister. These characters' deceptive appearances underscore the concept of Maya, where outward appearances mask true nature and intentions. As an Aes Sedai, Moiraine is often involved in helping others see through the illusions of Maya to the underlying truths.

Through these events and characters, *The Eye of the World* explores the concept of Maya, illustrating how illusions and false perceptions can obscure the truth. The narrative emphasises the importance of seeing through these illusions to uncover deeper realities and truths about oneself and the world.

Compassion and Nonviolence (Ahimsa)

Ahimsa, the principle of nonviolence and compassion towards all living beings, is a critical tenet in several Eastern philosophies, including Buddhism, Jainism, and Hinduism. In *The Eye of the World*, this concept can be explored through characters who embody compassion, restraint, and a commitment to avoiding harm whenever possible. Throughout the journey, Perrin Aybara consistently shows a reluctance to use violence after he begins to develop his connection with wolves. He grapples with the fear of losing his humanity, and his struggle to accept the necessity of violence when defending himself or others reflects a deep respect for life, aligning with the principle of Ahimsa.

The first book introduces a group of characters called the Tinkers. Also known as the Tuatha'an, they are nomadic people who follow the Way of the Leaf, a philosophy of absolute non-violence. When Perrin and Egwene encounter the Tinkers, they are introduced to this way of life, emphasising the sanctity of all life and the refusal to harm any living being. The Tinkers' commitment to Ahimsa is exemplified in their refusal to fight, even in self-defence, and their belief in peaceful coexistence. After Rand's first experience channelling the One Power leads to a wound from Ba'alzamon's flames, Moiraine heals him using the One Power. This act of healing, rather than causing harm, aligns with Ahimsa, as it emphasises care and the preservation of life. Moiraine's use of her abilities to heal rather than harm reflects Ahimsa's compassion.

Conclusion

The present study provides valuable insights into understanding the human condition by reflecting on the issue of suffering. Exploring the idea of Anatta helps us navigate identity and embrace self-transformation. Examining the concept of karma contributes to making ethical decisions and taking responsibility for our actions. The Middle Way, as represented in the book series, promotes balancing extremes and seeking moderation. Themes of compassion and nonviolence are woven throughout the series, with characters often struggling between the need to fight and the desire for peace. These themes resonate with Buddhist teachings on Ahimsa. They can inspire readers to consider the importance of compassion and nonviolence, particularly in a world where conflict and aggression are prevalent. The study of the quest for enlightenment and mindful presence depicted in the narratives of *The Wheel of Time* book series under consideration may guide anyone interested in personal growth, self-awareness, and mindful living. On the whole, exploring the Buddhist philosophy within *The Wheel of Time* is relevant because it connects ancient wisdom with modern-day challenges and offers a rich lens through which to explore timeless spiritual and ethical questions in a modern context.

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