Three Thousand Realms in a Single Moment of Life

The Buddhist principle of “three thousand realms in a single moment of life” forms a philosophical framework for Nichiren Buddhism, expressing why and how it is possible for ordinary human beings to attain Buddhahood amid the realities of daily life.

Nichiren Daishonin inscribed the Gohonzon, or object of devotion, embodying in written form the supreme state of enlightenment he had manifested in his own life, so that all people can themselves attain Buddhahood. The philosophical pillar upon which he explains the significance of the Gohonzon is the principle of three thousand realms in a single moment of life.

In his work Great Concentration and Insight, the Great Teacher T’ien-t’ai of China systematized the Lotus Sutra’s teaching that Buddhahood is possible for all people and expressed it through the principle of three thousand realms in a single moment of life.

“A single moment of life” refers to the state or condition of one’s life at any given moment. It might be compared to a multidimensional snapshot of life’s reality. T’ien-t’ai described the vast potential of life at each moment in terms of three thousand realms, or aspects. “Three thousand realms” represents the entirety of life as synthesized and viewed from three different perspectives: “the mutual possession of the Ten Worlds,” “the ten factors of life” and “the three realms of existence.”

1) The Mutual Possession of the Ten Worlds

The Ten Worlds are ten potential conditions or life states a person can experience. From lowest to highest, they are the worlds of hell, hungry spirits (hunger), animals (animality), asuras (anger), human beings (humanity or tranquillity), heavenly beings (heaven or rapture), voice-hearers (learning), cause-awakened ones (realization), bodhisattvas and Buddhas (Buddhahood).

All people possess within their lives all ten of these worlds or conditions as distinct potentials, though only one can be fully active at any given moment. Most important from the standpoint of Nichiren Buddhism is that all people, without exception, possess the world of Buddhahood, or the potential to be a Buddha.

Each of the Ten Worlds possesses all Ten Worlds within it. This is called “the mutual possession of the Ten Worlds.”

Buddhist teachings other than the Lotus Sutra perceived the Ten Worlds as static, and each world as a realm completely distinct from the others. In general, it was presumed that a person must inhabit one particular world
throughout the duration of a lifetime. It was thought that people could only attain Buddhahood by gradually ascending through the Ten Worlds one at a time over many lifetimes. The mutual possession of the Ten Worlds breaks through the limitations of this view and expands the possibility for human transformation. Once we view each world as an ever-present potential in life, it becomes clear that whatever our current state of life, we have the potential to manifest Buddhahood and make it our dominant condition. And this can be accomplished within this single lifetime. This is the significance of the mutual possession of the Ten Worlds.

As a component of the “three thousand realms,” the mutual possession of the Ten Worlds is referred to as the “one hundred worlds,” since each world encompasses within it all Ten Worlds.

2) The Ten Factors of Life

The ten factors of life are ten attributes of life and its function. They are common to all life, regardless of which of the Ten Worlds is active. A person in the state of hell and a person in the state of Buddhahood, different as they may seem, have in common the ten factors.

The ten factors are set forth in “Expeditious Means,” the second chapter of the Lotus Sutra, where it says: “The true aspect of all phenomena can only be understood and shared between Buddhas. This reality consists of the appearance, nature, entity, power, influence, internal cause, relation, latent effect, manifest effect, and their consistency from beginning to end” (The Lotus Sutra and Its Opening and Closing Sutras, p. 57).


To briefly explain each of the ten factors, appearance (1) refers to the attributes of a being that are discernible from the outside. Nature (2) is the inherent disposition or quality of a being that cannot be discerned externally. Entity (3) literally, body, is the reality of a being that integrates appearance and nature. These first three factors describe the reality of existence, of life itself.

The next six factors explain the functions and workings of life, specifically with regard to the principle of causality. Power (4) is life’s inherent or potential energy. This gives rise to influence (5), which is comparable to kinetic energy: the actions produced when life’s potential energy is activated. Internal cause (6) is the causal root or seed created by that action, or influence, that remains dormant in life. Relation (7), or indirect cause, refers to the various conditions, both internal and external, that interact with the internal cause to help it produce an effect. The effect produced immediately through the interaction of cause and relation is called a latent effect (8). This latent effect is of the same quality, good or bad, as the cause that created it (good actions and causes yield good effects, and bad causes yield bad effects). It resides as a latent potential in life. Manifest effect (9) is the tangible or perceivable result that occurs when a latent effect becomes manifest with the passage of time and in response to certain conditions. Consistency from beginning to end (10) is the unifying principle among the ten factors. It indicates that all the other nine factors from appearance (beginning) to manifest effect (end) are consistently present and harmoniously interrelated. All nine factors consistently and harmoniously express the same condition of existence—that is the same world of the Ten Worlds—at any given moment.

Consistency from beginning to end also means that the particular world among the Ten Worlds embodied at any moment by the first three factors—which describe life’s reality or entity—is expressed consistently at that moment in each of the remaining seven factors, which describe life’s functions.
On a more fundamental level, Nichiren Daishonin indicates that consistency from beginning to end signifies that all of the ten factors are manifestations of the Mystic Law, no matter which of the Ten Worlds they are expressing at any given moment. Nichiren clearly says, “These ten factors represent Myoho-renge-kyo” (“The Doctrine of Three Thousand Realms,” The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin, vol. 2, p. 87).

SGI President Ikeda writes, “Nam-myoho-renge-kyo is the fundamental Law of the universe (the true aspect) that ceaselessly manifests as life in the Ten Worlds (all phenomena).”2 He goes on to point out that on the Gohonzon, Nam-myoho-renge-kyo written down the center indicates the true aspect, and the beings of the Ten Worlds written on both sides indicate all phenomena. In terms of three thousand realms in a single moment of life, a single moment of life corresponds to the true aspect, and three thousand realms, to all phenomena.

President Ikeda concludes: “When we pray to the Gohonzon as beings of the nine worlds, our daily activities, illuminated by Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, reveal the true aspect of all phenomena. Nichiren says, ‘The living beings of the Ten Worlds are all Buddhas of the true aspect of all phenomena’ (Gosho zenshu, p. 830). Our lives just as they are—whether in the world of hell or the world of humanity—can shine as the embodiment of the true aspect, that is, of Myoho-renge-kyo.”3

3) The Three Realms of Existence

The three realms of existence describe life from three perspectives: the internal realm of the individual, the realm of the individual as a discrete being living among other individuals, and the realm of the entire environment where living beings dwell. The three realms are the “realm of the five components,” the “realm of living beings” and the “realm of the environment.”

“Realm” signifies difference or distinction, and the three realms describe how differences in the Ten Worlds become manifest in the sphere of life in three ways.

The realm of the five components consists of form, perception, conception, volition and consciousness; all living entities are said to be composed of these five elements.

“Component” here signifies a joining or union, and a living being is considered to be a “temporary union of the five components.” “Form” includes everything that constitutes the physical body and its sense organs, through which one perceives the outer world. “Perception” means the function of receiving, or taking in, external information through the six sense organs: eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body and mind. “Conception” indicates the function by which one grasps, or forms some idea or concept about, what has been perceived. “Volition” means the will or desire to initiate action in response to one’s conception of what has been perceived. “Consciousness” is the cognitive function of discernment that integrates the components of form, perception, conception and volition. In summary, a person’s body and mind is itself the realm of the five components and the functions of each component change depending on which of the Ten Worlds that person experiences.

The living being as an integrated whole, such as an individual human being, and beings as a collective entity, or society, constitute the realm of living beings. So the realm of living beings refers to individuals and their interrelations that manifest the Ten Worlds.

The land or environment where individuals and groups of individuals dwell is the realm of the environment. The realm of the environment manifests each of the Ten Worlds depending on the collective life state of the living beings that inhabit it. Nichiren Daishonin says: “There are not two lands, pure or impure in themselves. The difference lies solely in the good or evil of our minds” (“On Attaining Buddhahood in This
Therefore, when people improve their state of life, the quality of their environment improves accordingly.

The Connection Between “A Single Moment of Life” and “Three Thousand Realms”

In Great Concentration and Insight, T’ien-t’ai states:

Life at each moment is endowed with the Ten Worlds. At the same time, each of the Ten Worlds is endowed with all Ten Worlds, so that an entity of life actually possesses one hundred worlds. Each of these worlds in turn possesses thirty realms, which means that in the one hundred worlds there are three thousand realms. The three thousand realms of existence are all possessed by life in a single moment. If there is no life, that is the end of the matter. But if there is the slightest bit of life, it contains all the three thousand realms. (See “The Object of Devotion for Observing the Mind,” WND-1, 354)

T’ien-t’ai indicates here that each of our lives encompasses three thousand realms described by the mutual possession of the Ten Worlds, the ten factors of life.

SGI President Ikeda on the Ten Factors of Life

Let me try to explain the ten factors of life through an example. Your own existence is a phenomenon. Your features, posture and so on compose the “appearance” of the phenomenon of your life.

Invisible to the eye, such traits as shortness of temper, magnanimity, kindness or reticence or the various aspects of your personality or temperament make up your “nature.” Your physical and spiritual totality—that is, your “appearance” and “nature” together—make up your “entity,” the person you are.

Also, your life has various energies (power), and these produce various external functions (influence). Your life thus becomes a cause (internal cause) and, activated by conditions internal and external (relation), changes arise in your life (latent effect), and these eventually appear externally (manifest effect).

Moreover, these nine factors interweave your life and your environment without any inconsistency or omission (consistency from beginning to end). This is the true aspect of the ten factors of your life.

Each of us lives within the framework of the ten factors. No one could say that he or she has no appearance. Such a person would be invisible. Similarly, no one could truly claim not to have a personality, not to have any energy or not to carry out any activity. Nor could there be a situation where the appearance was one person, the nature someone else and the entity another person still. There is consistency among all factors, and together they make up the irreplaceable totality of your being.

People in each of the Ten Worlds are endowed with the ten factors according to their state of life. For example, people in the world of hell have the dark and depressed appearance of those overwhelmed by suffering. Since their nature is filled with suffering and anger, their power and influence tend to mire those around them in darkness too.

Those in the world of heaven are typically bright and smiling in their appearance. In their nature, since they feel uplifted—as though ascending into the sky, as it were—anything they see makes them happy. Their power and influence tend to make those around them too feel buoyant and cheerful.
and the three realms of existence. This means that the life of a single individual at each moment includes all three thousand realms and at the same time thoroughly permeates and pervades the three thousand realms.

Put another way, three thousand realms in a single moment of life can be viewed from two perspectives: First, our lives at each moment encompass and include all phenomena in the entire universe; second, our lives at each moment permeate and fill the entire universe. In short, a single life possesses vast and limitless potential.

This important teaching, which gives us a comprehensive view of how life operates, underlies many essential Buddhist concepts such as the oneness of body and mind, the oneness of life and its environment, the attainment of Buddhahood in a single lifetime and the attainment of Buddhahood in our present form. Therefore, the principle of three thousand realms in a single moment of life forms the basis for Nichiren Buddhism’s philosophy of boundless hope.

—Prepared by the SGI-USA Study Department

1. For a more detailed description of the Ten Worlds, see An Introduction to Buddhism, pp. 16–26.
3. Ibid., 111–12.

Similarly, each of the Ten Worlds has its own factors of appearance, nature, entity, power, influence, internal cause, relation, latent effect and manifest effect, and there is consistency from beginning to end. This is the true nature of all phenomena.

Second Soka Gakkai President Josei Toda explained this as follows: “Suppose there is a thief in front of us. He is a thief from appearance to manifest effect. That’s consistency from beginning to end in a thief’s life. There is no discontinuity.”

Rather than simply looking at surface appearances, understanding the true aspect of all phenomena means to grasp the vastness and profundity of life in its entirety.

The ten factors of life are not limited only to human beings. Flowers blooming on the roadside, for example, have the appearance, nature and entity of beauty. They also possess power, influence, internal cause, relation, latent effect and manifest effect, without any omission. And in their totality, all of these factors are coherently integrated with the life of the flower.

The same is also true of inorganic things. A pebble, the sky, the moon, stars, the sun, the sea with its salty scent, rugged mountains, skyscrapers overlooking noisy streets, houses and cars and every utensil and piece of furniture—the ten factors of life describe the existence of all things.

This is the wisdom of the true aspect of all phenomena that the Buddha has attained. In other words, when observing any phenomenon, the Buddha understands its true aspect. When looking at people, the Buddha understands their state of life and sees their Buddha nature within. When looking at something in nature, the Buddha can sense its noble brilliance. And, when considering social phenomena, the Buddha can deftly discern their underlying significance.

It might be said that the wisdom of the true aspect of all phenomena is the ability to discern the true nature of all things.