

The Ten Worlds

Through examining the “Ten Worlds”—a classification of ten distinct states of life—we can get a clearer understanding of the dynamics of the Buddhist philosophy of the human condition and gain insight as to how to improve it.

The Ten Worlds are: the world of hell; the world of hungry spirits (also called hunger); the world of animals (animality); the world of *asuras* (anger); the world of human beings (humanity or tranquillity); the world of heavenly beings (heaven or rapture); the world of voice-hearers (learning); the world of cause-awakened ones (realization); the world of bodhisattvas; and the world of Buddhas (Buddhahood).

Among these, hell, hunger, animality, *asuras*, humanity and heaven are known collectively as the “six lower worlds” or the “six paths.” The worlds of voice-hearers, cause-awakened ones, bodhisattvas and Buddhas are known as the “four noble worlds.”

The idea of the six paths originates with the ancient Indian worldview that envisions six broad realms within which all living beings transmigrate through the repeated cycle of death and rebirth. Buddhism adopted this view. The four noble worlds indicate levels or states beyond the six paths that are achieved through Buddhist practice.

Sutras other than the Lotus Sutra often define these worlds as places inhabited by certain kinds of beings, or, in the case of the four noble worlds, by Buddhist practitioners. For instance, hell is viewed as a place of torment that exists underground, while Buddhas and bodhisattvas are believed to dwell in pure lands far from the ordinary realm of human beings.

But the Lotus Sutra overturns this way of thinking, teaching “the mutual possession of the Ten Worlds”—that each of Ten Worlds possesses the potential of all ten within itself. Rather than distinct

realms, the Ten Worlds are conditions of life that everyone has the potential to experience at any time.

Nichiren Daishonin writes: “Neither the pure land nor hell exists outside oneself; both lie only within one’s own heart. Awakened to this, one is called a Buddha; deluded about it, one is called an ordinary person. The Lotus Sutra reveals this truth, and one who embraces the Lotus Sutra will realize that hell is itself the Land of Tranquil Light” (“Hell Is the Land of Tranquil Light,” *The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 1, p. 456).

What does this mean for us? From one perspective, though in one moment we may experience the misery characterized by the world of hell, in that same moment, through Buddhist practice, we can begin transforming our lives so that we can savor the deep, inexhaustible joy of the world of Buddhahood.

The World of Hell

The Japanese word for hell, *jigoku* (Skt *naraka*), suggests an “underground prison.” Hell represents the basest human condition in which one is fettered by agony, completely lacking in freedom.

Nichiren writes, “Hell is a dreadful dwelling of fire” (“Letter to Niike,” WND-1, 1026). If we consider hell as a potential state of life, it describes being so overwhelmed that our suffering seems to engulf us completely, like roaring flames. Nichiren also states, “Rage is the world of hell” (“The Object of Devotion for Observing the Mind,” WND-1, 358). Rage, here, means desperation and resentment arising from the inability to quell misery, with no hope of respite from torment.

Hell is a state of life in which one feels that living itself is suffering and that whatever one sees or encounters causes more suffering. We could also say that in the world of hell we are controlled by destructive impulses. War, which embodies extremes of human misery, can be considered an expression of the world of hell.

The World of Hunger

The world of hungry spirits, or hunger, is characterized by overwhelming desires and the suffering that comes from those desires going unfulfilled.

The Japanese term *gaki* (Skt *preta*), translated as “hungry spirit” or “hungry ghost,” originally referred to the dead. This is because the dead were thought to be in a constant state of starvation. The world of hunger is a condition in which our mind and body burn with constant intense craving.

Nichiren Daishonin writes, “The realm of hungry spirits is a pitiful place where, driven by starvation, they devour their own children” (“Letter to Niike,” WND-1, 1026). He also says, “Greed is [the world] of hungry spirits” (“The Object of Devotion for Observing the Mind,” WND-1, 358). To be hungry to the point of devouring one’s own children is to be ruled by the misery of craving that knows no bounds.

Desire in itself is neither good nor bad. Without a sense of hunger when our bodies need nourishment, we would starve to death. Desires and wants can provide impetus for self-improvement, for human advancement. In the world of hunger, however, we are unable to use desires creatively. We become slaves to them and suffer as a result.

The World of Animals

The world of animals, or animality, is characterized by motivation based on immediate gain or loss rather than on reason or logic. Nichiren Daishonin says, “Foolishness is [the world] of animals” (“The Object of Devotion for Observing the Mind,” WND-1, 358). When in the state of animality, one acts based on instinct or impulse, unable to distinguish between right and wrong, good and evil.

Nichiren also writes, “It is the nature of beasts to threaten the weak and fear the strong” (“Letter from Sado,” WND-1, 302),

and that the realm of animals is characterized by the need “to kill or be killed” (“Letter to Niike,” WND-1, 1026). In the world of animality, people lack reason and conscience, seeing life as a struggle for survival in which they are willing to harm others to protect themselves. Unable to look beyond the immediate, they cannot plan for the future. Such a state of ignorance ultimately leads to suffering and self-destruction.

While Buddhism draws from ancient Indian tradition in associating this state of life with animals, in reality, animals can exhibit qualities, such as loyalty and selflessness, from which humans could gain by learning. And animals play an irreplaceable role in supporting human life. Human beings, on the other hand, can be capable of baseness and cruelty, such as seen in wartime, that surpasses anything in the animal world.

Because the worlds of hell, hungry spirits and animals all represent conditions of suffering, they are collectively known as the “three evil paths.”

The World of Asuras

An *asura* is a contentious god or demon found in Indian mythology. One characteristic of those in the life state known as the world of asuras, also called anger, is a strong tendency to compare themselves with and a preoccupation with surpassing others. When they see themselves as superior to others, these people become consumed with arrogance and contempt. If, on the other hand, they encounter a person who seems clearly their superior, they become obsequious and given over to flattery.

People in the world of asuras often put on airs in order to impress others with their self-perceived greatness.

On the surface, those in this world may appear well-intentioned and civil, even humble. Inwardly, however, they harbor jealousy or

resentment toward those they sense as better than them. This conflict between outward appearance and behavior and inner feelings and orientation makes those in the world of asuras prone to hypocrisy and betrayal.

This is why Nichiren Daishonin writes that “perversity is [the world] of asuras” (“The Object of Devotion for Observing the Mind,” WND-1, 358). The Japanese word *tengoku*, translated here as “perversity,” is composed of two characters meaning “to submit without revealing one’s true intent,” and “bent” or “twisted,” respectively.

Unlike the three evil paths—the worlds of hell, hunger and animality—in which one is controlled by the three poisons (the fundamental human delusions of greed, anger and foolishness), those in the world of asuras display a stronger degree of self-awareness and control. In this sense, it could be considered a higher state than the three evil paths. Nevertheless, remaining in the condition of asuras ultimately gives rise to suffering and therefore constitutes, together with hell, hunger and animality, one of the “four evil paths.”

Though the world of asuras is often called the world of anger, this does not mean it is characterized by rage or the tendency to lose one’s temper. Rather, it suggests an abiding sense of contention or predisposition toward conflict arising from self-centered ambition.

The World of Human Beings

The world of human beings, or humanity, is a condition of composure and tranquillity. Thus, Nichiren Daishonin says, “Calmness is [the world] of human beings” (“The Object of Devotion for Observing the Mind,” WND-1, 358).

One aspect of the world of humanity is the quality of reason that enables us to distinguish right from wrong and to make judgments based on that distinction. In this condition, a person also has

a fair degree of self-control. “The wise may be called human, but the thoughtless are no more than animals” (“The Three Kinds of Treasure,” WND-1, 852), writes Nichiren.

To remain in this state of humanity, however, requires effort. In a world rampant with negative influences, it is not easy to continue to live in a truly human manner. It is actually impossible without consistent effort to improve oneself. Moving up from the lower four of the Ten Worlds, the world of human beings is the first in which improving one’s condition becomes a possibility.

Furthermore, those in the world of humanity, while vulnerable to negative influences, are also capable of exerting themselves in Buddhist practice and thereby advancing to the four noble worlds.

The World of Heavenly Beings

The name of this world derives from the Indic word *devaloka*, which means the place where gods and superhuman godlike beings reside.

In Buddhist philosophy, the world of heavenly beings, or heaven, refers to a condition of life in which one experiences the joy of having one’s desires fulfilled. Hence, Nichiren says, “Joy is [the world] of heaven” (“The Object of Devotion for Observing the Mind,” WND-1, 358).

Human beings experience many kinds of desire. There are fundamental or instinctual desires, such as for sleep and food. There are desires for material things, as well as social, intellectual and spiritual desires. In general, we can think of the world of heaven as the condition of joy that pervades our lives at having any of these various desires fulfilled.

But the joy associated with the world of heaven is not lasting; it eventually weakens and disappears. The world of heaven, therefore, is not the condition of genuine happiness that Buddhism aims to achieve.

From the Six Paths to the Four Noble Worlds

The six worlds discussed above, together referred to as the six paths, describe states of life easily influenced by external circumstances. Those who remain in them cannot enjoy true freedom or independence.

The aim of Buddhist practice is to transcend these six paths and build a self-determined happiness that is uncontrolled by the environment. The conditions of life a person develops through Buddhist practice are known as the four noble worlds, the worlds of voice-hearers (learning), cause-awakened ones (realization), bodhisattvas and Buddhas.

The World of Voice-Hearers and Cause-Awakened Ones

In Hinayana teachings, the two worlds of voice-hearers and cause-awakened ones (also called the worlds of learning and realization) represented the two highest states Buddhist practitioners could attain and are together called the “two vehicles.”

“Voice-hearers” originally meant those who had achieved a partial awakening through hearing (listening to) the Buddha’s teachings. In contrast, cause-awakened ones were those who had achieved an awakening on their own, through their connection with or observation of various phenomena.

The partial enlightenment that characterizes both worlds of the two vehicles consists of an awakening to the transience or impermanence of all things. Impermanence indicates the reality that all phenomena change with the passage of time and eventually die out and cease to exist. Those who possess the life condition of the two vehicles, having overcome the tendency to be attached to impermanent things, can view themselves and the world objectively, awakened to the truth that everything in this real world changes and perishes with the passage of time.

Nichiren Daishonin says: “The fact that all things in this world are transient is perfectly clear to us. Is this not because the worlds of the two vehicles are present in the human world?” (“The Object of Devotion for Observing the Mind,” WND-1, 358). He is saying that within the world of humanity exists the potential for the life states of the two vehicles.

Considering the Ten Worlds as potential conditions of human life, we could say that the worlds of learning and realization represent states of awakening and self-determination that transcend those of the six paths. People in these states may be inquisitive, intellectual and creative. The shortcomings those in these conditions face, however, are complacency—the assumption that one has reached a pinnacle of development—and a preoccupation with personal attainment to the exclusion of concern and effort for the good of others. It is this tendency toward self-centeredness on the part of people of the two vehicles that caused early Mahayana Buddhist scriptures to deny them the possibility of attaining enlightenment.

The World of Bodhisattvas

Bodhisattvas are beings who relentlessly exert themselves to gain the enlightenment of a Buddha. Persons of the two vehicles, though regarding the Buddha as their teacher, do not believe themselves capable of attaining the same state of enlightenment as the Buddha. In contrast, bodhisattvas not only regard the Buddha as their teacher but also aim to realize the same supreme enlightenment. In addition, bodhisattvas believe that all people can attain Buddhahood and work to spread the Buddha’s teaching widely to relieve people’s suffering and lead them to happiness.

What distinguishes bodhisattvas is their strong spirit to seek the world of Buddhahood, the highest state a human being can manifest, as well as their efforts to share with others the benefits they have

obtained through Buddhist practice. Bodhisattvas are filled, before all else, with a strong wish for people's happiness.

The world of bodhisattvas is a state of life in which one acts with a sense of mission for the sake of people and for the Law. Compassion is fundamental to this world. The Sanskrit term for compassion, *karuna* (Jpn *jibi*), is sometimes translated as "loving kindness" or "mercy." Regarding this, Nichiren Daishonin says: "Even a heartless villain loves his wife and children. He too has a portion of the bodhisattva world within him" ("The Object of Devotion for Observing the Mind," WND-1, 358). Here, Nichiren reminds us that all people, even the cruel and corrupt, have the potential for compassion.

It is the nature of those who exhibit the world of bodhisattvas to base their lives and actions upon compassion for all people.

The World of Buddhas

The world of Buddhas, or Buddhahood, is a supremely noble and virtuous state of life. The Sanskrit word *buddha* means "one who has awakened." A Buddha is someone enlightened to the Mystic Law, the wonderful law or principle that is the basis of all life and phenomena in the universe.

Specifically, "the Buddha" refers to Shakyamuni, also known as Gautama or Siddhartha, who lived and taught in India roughly 2,500 years ago.

The Buddhist sutras describe various other Buddhas such as Amida and Mahavairochana, but these are mythical figures intended to represent the wonder and greatness of a particular virtue or quality of the Buddha's enlightened state of life.

Nichiren Daishonin appeared in the Latter Day of the Law, the age in which Shakyamuni's teachings had been predicted to fall into decline and become ineffective in leading people to enlightenment. To save all people in the Latter Day from suffering, Nichiren manifested

the world of Buddhahood in his own life as proof that an ordinary human being can do so. Because he established the way by which all people can attain Buddhahood, he is respected as the true Buddha of the Latter Day of the Law.

The world of Buddhahood is a life condition rich in noble virtue and good fortune. It emerges when individuals awaken to the reality that the source and foundation of their very lives is the Mystic Law. A Buddha is someone who opens this state of life within and thus embodies unsurpassed compassion and wisdom. And, fueled by that compassion and wisdom, a Buddha works constantly to enable all people to manifest the same world of Buddhahood.

All of us inherently possess the world of Buddhahood, but bringing that condition forth amid the reality of our lives is no easy matter. For that reason, the Daishonin inscribed the Gohonzon, the object of devotion, as an embodiment of the world of Buddhahood he had attained. He did this to provide a means for all to bring forth Buddhahood in their own lives.

The world of Buddhahood, the state that Nichiren manifested, in essence, is the law of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo. When we believe in the Gohonzon and strive to chant for our own happiness and that of others, we can tap the world of Buddhahood inherent within us and embody it in our lives.

In “The Object of Devotion for Observing the Mind,” Nichiren refers to the deep connection between faith and our innate Buddhahood. He writes, “That ordinary people born in the latter age can believe in the Lotus Sutra is due to the fact that the world of Buddhahood is present in the human world” (WND-1, 358).

The Lotus Sutra reveals that all people are innately Buddhas; we human beings can believe in that teaching precisely because our lives fundamentally possess the world of Buddhahood.

Based on Nichiren’s statement above, Nichikan, the great scholar of Nichiren Buddhism, writes, “A heart that strongly believes in the

Lotus Sutra is [another] name for the world of Buddhahood.” The Lotus Sutra here means the Gohonzon. And the world of Buddhahood is none other than absolute happiness gained from basing one’s life on chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo to the Gohonzon whatever our circumstances.

Buddhist texts, including Nichiren’s writings, often liken the world of Buddhahood to a lion king. Like the lion king, those who have activated their Buddhahood neither fear nor are daunted by anything or anyone. It is a condition of courage, genuine peace, absolute happiness and enlightenment.

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