

BUDDHIST CONCEPT FOR TODAY'S LIVING (9)
THE THREE REALMS OF EXISTENCE
THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN EACH OF THE TEN WORLDS AND THE
ENVIRONMENT

Most of us have heard of the Buddhist principle of “three thousand realms in a single moment of life” (Jpn *ichinen sanzen*). It indicates the vast complexity and inexhaustible potential that life possesses. The term three thousand is a product of multiplying four numbers: 10 (representing the ten worlds) x 10 (the ten worlds again, equaling 100 to represent the mutual possession of the ten worlds) x 10 (the ten factors of life) x 3 (the three realms of existence). This article focuses on this final “3.”

The three realms of existence are: 1) The realm of the five components, 2) the realm of living beings, and 3) the realm of the environment (or land). Of these, the third, the “realm of the environment” is perhaps the easiest to explain and understand. It refers to the place where living beings exist and carry out their activities. The natural environment, for example, is a “realm of the environment” as is a city in which many people live. This concept is extremely important as it expands the Buddhist view of life from the individual to the dynamic relationship between the individual, society and the environment.

“Realm” here comes from the Japanese term *seken*, which, in Buddhism, also means “distinction” or “difference.” For our purpose, we can also think of it as “diversity.” Thus the term “three realms” can also be taken to mean “three spheres of diversity” or “three kinds of distinction.”

These differences mean differences in how life’s potential conditions, known as the Ten Worlds (see glossary, p. 8), express or manifest themselves. In other words, a living being who manifests the world of Hell is quite different or distinct from one who manifests the world of, say, Humanity, or Learning, even if it is the very same being. Our “angry” self is quite different from our “grateful and caring” self, or our “inquisitive” self, for example.

Nichiren Daishonin writes in “On Attaining Buddhahood in This Lifetime”: “If the minds of living beings are impure, their land is also impure, but if their minds are pure, so is their land. There are not two lands, pure or impure in themselves. The difference lies solely in the good or evil of our minds” (*The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, p. 4). The “good or evil of our minds” here can be interpreted to mean which state of life—which of the Ten Worlds—dominates our inner lives from moment to moment. The “land” tends to express the same state of life as the “living beings” who inhabit it. We know how the different “selves” mentioned above can create a completely different atmosphere around the dinner table, for example.

People who are in the depths of suffering are “living beings in the state of Hell.” People overwhelmed with joy at some development in their lives are “people in the state of Heaven.” And people who dwell in a condition of absolute happiness and satisfaction are “living beings of the world of Buddhahood.” These are distinctions in the realm of living beings.

And as I suggested above, the realm of living beings represents such distinctions even within the same individual from one moment to the next.

DISTINCTIONS OF THE TEN WORLDS WITHIN THE CONSTITUENT
ELEMENTS OF LIFE

While the realm of living beings and the realm of the environment are fairly self-explanatory, the “realm of the five components” is a bit more complex. Buddhism traditionally defines living beings as being formed of five constituent elements, or “components.” These are form, perception, conception, volition and consciousness. The realm of the five components refers to the way each of the ten worlds expresses itself throughout these five components.

“Form” means the body and its five sensory organs that perceive the world. “Perception” means the reception of sensory information through those sense organs. “Conception” is the function of becoming aware of and forming an idea or conclusion about what we have perceived. “Volition” means the will to initiate action in response to what we have perceived and conceived. And “consciousness” is the integrating factor of life, the discerning function that makes value-judgments, distinguishes right from wrong, etc. It is both the source of and the harmonizing force behind the other components. While “form” describes life’s physical aspect and the other four the “spiritual,” none can exist in a living being without the others.

In his work “The Three Secret Teachings” 26th High Priest Nichikan states, “What we call a living being is a temporary harmonizing of the five components.” In other words, a single human life is viewed as a merging and harmonizing of the physical and spiritual potentials of life. And the differences these components display in response to each of the Ten Worlds describes the “realm of the five components.”

Thus the realm of living beings and the realm of the five components indicate distinctions within life itself—different states manifested by life’s constituent elements and within the living being as an integrated whole. The realm of living beings can also be described as including all of human society, since Buddhism teaches that no single living being arises or exists independently of others.

But what do these distinctions have to do the ultimate goal of Buddhism which is the attainment of enlightenment, or absolute happiness?

THE PRINCIPLE OF HUMAN REVOLUTION AND REFORMATION OF THE ENVIRONMENT

From the perspective of life and its environment, the realms of the five components and of living beings represent life in its many diverse forms and modes. The realm of the environment corresponds to the external world—the environment, and the diversity and potential for change it contains. A human life at each moment encompasses both life and its environment. When there is a change in the depths of a person’s life, that change is reflected in the whole person—in all of his or her component functions, activities and relationships—and in the surrounding environment. The principle of the three realms of existence explains the potential for transforming an individual human life. This is what human revolution means. It also predicts how that inner revolution can transform the environment.

If the environment had no relationship to the inner condition of people’s lives, then changes in the environment would be independent of and unrelated to the human condition. The doctrine of the three realms of existence thus forms an important basis for our understanding of both human revolution and “environmental revolution,” and of how the two are related. It tells us that when there is a distortion in the inner lives of individuals, this will invite a negative change in the environment. When the inner lives of human

beings and their interrelationships are harmonious and enriched, their environment will flourish and be at peace.

The three realms of existence gives us hope in that it explains that life possesses tremendous flexibility and potential for change. When we change our inner condition, everything changes. It also explains why no two people are alike. With regard to the five components, for example, no two people possess the same form, nor will they perceive, conceive, or act on the same stimulus in the same way. Even if they are both “people of the world of Learning,” for example, their five components will function differently, uniquely.

This concept also reminds us, then, that human life is infinitely diverse, yet that everyone, no matter how different from ourselves, has the potential for the most noble state of Buddhahood and is therefore a precious being.

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