

LEARNING FROM THE PRINCIPLE OF THREE THOUSAND REALMS IN A SINGLE MOMENT OF LIFE

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The glossary of The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin explains three thousand realms in a single moment of life:

A philosophical system established by T'ien-t'ai [sixth-century Buddhist scholar]. The three thousand realms indicates the varying aspects and phases that life assumes at each moment. At each moment, life manifests one of the Ten Worlds. Each of these worlds possesses the potential for all ten within itself [mutual possession of the Ten Worlds], thus making one hundred possible worlds. Each of these hundred worlds possesses the ten factors and operates within each of the three realms of existence, thus making three thousand realms. (WND, 1279)

The Ten Worlds,² from lowest to highest, are: Hell, Hunger, Animality, Anger (Belligerence), Humanity (Tranquillity), Heaven (Rapture), Learning, Realization, Bodhisattva and Buddhahood. Within a single state at any given moment, life manifests the characteristics of one of these particular worlds or life-states.

These worlds are not static—they change freely, moment to moment, in no specific order. Each contains the potential to become any of the other nine. This changeability is explained by the “mutual possession of the Ten Worlds.”

All of the Ten Worlds have “ten factors” in common, which function within any of the Ten Worlds. They are appearance, nature, entity, power, influence, internal cause, relation (or external cause), latent effect, manifest effect and their consistency from beginning to end.

The “three realms” clarify that the Ten Worlds operate beyond the confines of individual human lives, extending into the environment and all phenomena. The concept of the three realms describes *where* the Ten Worlds function. They are: the realm of the individual comprised of the five components (form, perception, conception, volition and consciousness), the realm of living beings and the realm of the environment. The five components form a living being who manifests the Ten Worlds in his or her surroundings or environment.

The teaching of three thousand realms clarifies the dynamic relationship between human life and the life of the universe. Buddhism perceives that while life may seem calm at the surface, just beneath is a powerful whirlpool. T'ien-t'ai, too, recognized the ever-changing aspect of human life, yet also perceived the constant reality within the whirlpool: the reality of Buddhahood.

Praised by Miao-lo [711–82, sixth patriarch of the T'ien-t'ai school] as “the ultimate of all Buddhist teachings,” three thousand realms systematizes the inner realm of all life and constitutes the pinnacle of the Buddhist life-philosophy. It is a spectacular product of human wisdom. In the comprehensive scope of this principle we can sense T'ien-t'ai's genius.

Early Mahayana Buddhist scholars such as Nagarjuna³ and Vasubandhu⁴ had similar insights, but did not present them in the form of a comprehensive life-philosophy. T'ien-

t'ai, however, accomplished the awesome task of elucidating a holistic philosophy of life.

In early Buddhist tradition, the Ten Worlds were often described as distinct realms or categories of beings. In other words, before T'ien-t'ai appeared in China in the sixth century, Buddhas were believed to reside in worlds beyond the reach of ordinary people. But T'ien-t'ai, using the Lotus Sutra as his guide, redefined the Ten Worlds as ten conditions within human life. T'ien-t'ai was aware, as the Lotus Sutra dramatically taught, that ordinary people possess all Ten Worlds including Buddhahood. This concept was revolutionary compared to pre-Lotus Sutra teachings.

SGI President Ikeda said:

In *The Threefold Secret Teachings* [expounded by the twenty-sixth high priest of Nichiren Shoshu, Nichikan⁵], the question is posed: How can the life-moment, which is infinitesimally short, contain three thousand worlds? The answer given is this: "Three Thousand Possible Worlds in Every Life-moment" [three thousand realms in a single moment of life] has two meanings according to the Lotus Sutra: 'to contain' and 'to permeate.' The entire universe is contained in each life at every moment of its existence. Conversely, each life-moment continually permeates the entire universe. The life-moment is a particle of dust holding the elements of all worlds in the universe. It is a drop of water whose essence differs in no way from the vast ocean itself." (*Life: An Enigma, A Precious Jewel*, p. 165)

These two concepts—"to contain" and "to permeate"—are vital to comprehending the essence of "three thousand realms."

"TO CONTAIN"

Our lives contain the vastness of the universe. Specifically, "to contain" means that we inherently possess the supreme, universal life-condition called Buddhahood.

In "The Object of Devotion for Observing the Mind," Nichiren Daishonin states:

The mutual possession of the Ten Worlds is as difficult to believe as fire existing in a stone or flowers within a tree. Yet under the right conditions such phenomena actually occur and are believable. To believe that Buddhahood exists within the human world is the most difficult thing of all—as difficult as believing that fire exists in water or water in fire. (WND, 359)

Although difficult to fathom, Buddhism posits that the mutual possession of the Ten Worlds, which applies to the microcosm of human life, also applies to the macrocosm of the universe. The fact that this principle applies on a universal scale also tells us that the potential of Buddhahood is present in all universal phenomena. Buddhism equates the nature of our innate Buddhahood with the Buddhahood inherent in the universe; they are in essence the same, but manifest themselves differently. Because of the obvious vastness of the outer universe, inner life must be equally vast. Praising the grandeur of the human heart, Victor Hugo writes in *Les Misérables*, "There is one spectacle grander than the sea—that is the sky; there is one spectacle grander than the sky—that is the interior of the soul."⁶

Similarly, because all people are potential Buddhas, the lives of all people should be treasured. Nichiren Daishonin writes in "The Gift of Rice": "Life is the foremost of all

treasures. It is expounded that even the treasures of the entire major world system cannot equal the value of one's body and life" (WND, 1125).

"TO PERMEATE"

To permeate," in terms of "three thousand realms," refers to the pervasive power of one's life. Nichiren Daishonin states in "The Object of Devotion for Observing the Mind":

The Great Teacher Miao-lo says: "You should understand that one's life and its environment at a single moment encompass the three thousand realms. Therefore, when one attains the Buddha way, one puts oneself in accord with this fundamental principle, and one's body and mind at a single moment pervade the entire realm of phenomena." (WND, 366)

Our lives permeate the universe. Therefore, the condition of our lives—what is in our hearts and minds—is crucial. The core philosophy of three thousand realms is that "it is the heart that is important" (WND, 1000). In his lecture on Nichiren Daishonin's letter "Gift of an Unlined Robe," President Ikeda states:

The Mystic Law elucidates the inscrutable workings of the heart. The doctrine of a life-moment possesses three thousands realms explains the immense power of the heart. A Buddha is someone who understands, on the most profound level, the workings and the power of the heart. (*Learning from the Gosho*, p. 24)

As American author James Allen⁶ put it, "The vision that you glorify in your mind, the ideal that you enthrone in your heart—this you will build your life by, and this you will become." Buddhism teaches that the power of our lives can permeate the universe and change our environment for the better.

"To permeate" and "to contain" encourage us to reflect on the state of our heart: What is our frame of mind? Is it strong or weak? Is it empowered or lifeless? Is it expanding or shrinking? Is it pure or impure? These are crucial questions for us as Buddhists. *Soka* of Soka Gakkai means "value creation." The Buddhist way of life is characterized by ceaseless effort to *improve* our state of life—to lead a valuable and worthwhile existence. We chant Nam-myoho-renge-kyo to manifest Buddhahood.

WHAT WE CAN LEARN FROM THE TEN WORLDS

The theory of the Ten Worlds prompts us to ask where our life-state resides, giving us further clues as to our inherent Buddhahood.

There is a major difference between how the six lower worlds (Hell, Hunger, Animality, Anger, Humanity and Heaven) and the four noble worlds (Learning, Realization, Bodhisattva and Buddhahood) manifest in our lives. In the six lower worlds, we passively react to stimuli in our environment, controlled by what are usually negative impulses. But in the four noble worlds, we actively explore the meaning of life and orient ourselves in a positive direction.

While other Buddhist philosophies look at Buddhahood as removed from the other nine worlds, Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism locates the supreme life-condition of Buddhahood, inherent in every individual, nowhere but in the lower nine worlds. This is a very important point. Attaining Buddhahood in this lifetime means that our innate

Buddhahood manifests itself in the reality of our day-to-day existence and is reflected nowhere but in our actions as human beings. Nichiren Daishonin states, “The purpose of the appearance in this world of Shakyamuni Buddha, the lord of teachings, lies in his behavior as a human being” (WND, 852). A Buddha is by no means a supernatural being.

WHAT WE CAN LEARN FROM THE MUTUAL POSSESSION OF THE TEN WORLDS

The principle of the mutual possession of the Ten Worlds points to the truth that ordinary people inherently possess the Buddha nature and that even a Buddha possesses the lower nine worlds. This principle expresses the dynamic changeability of life.

Suppose there is a man who is happy one day but suffering the next day due to some misfortune. The joy he felt yesterday is completely gone. It does not exist anywhere in his heart now. His entire being is in a hellish state. Where did yesterday’s Heaven and Humanity go? Suddenly, he receives incredibly good news. His emotional pain is instantly gone. He is light, happy and full of joy. Where did these new feelings come from? Surely, they came from within his life. What happened to that state of Hell — is it gone for good?

The fact is, he may find himself in the world of Hell again according to what happens in the next moment. When he is experiencing Hell, the other nine worlds are dormant. Any of the other nine worlds can replace the life-condition of Hell. Also, the current state of Hell may be further aggravated. We can go from one level of suffering to an even deeper suffering. Likewise, when we are in a rapturous state, all other life-conditions are latent, but they retain the potential to become the dominant state at any moment. The mutual possession of the Ten Worlds allows any world to transform into any of the other nine.

Then, how do the Ten Worlds coexist in one’s life? Hunger, for instance, does not necessarily follow after Hell. Nor are Hunger and Anger physically side by side. They coexist within one’s life sort of like ten different liquids mixed in a cocktail. This fusion of the ten different worlds in one’s life and their potential to become manifest or dormant is what is meant by the expression “mutual possession.”

Our life-condition is fluid. The vital question is what is our fundamental, dominant life-condition. Are we constantly frustrated, in a state of Hunger? Or are we always seeking the truth of life and trying to share with others what we’ve discovered, living as a bodhisattva? The principle of the mutual possession of the Ten Worlds points to the necessity of Buddhist practice to make Buddhahood our fundamental life-condition. Since Buddhahood exists as a potential within everyone’s life, it is vitally important to solidify Buddhahood and allow it to dominate the other nine worlds. The most positive transformation within one’s life is attaining Buddhahood, referred to in the SGI as “human revolution.”

Buddhism teaches us how to cultivate our inner Buddha nature until it constitutes the basis of our existence. Our Buddha nature is most easily reflected in the actions of the bodhisattva. Bodhisattvas of the Earth, as described in the Lotus Sutra, are bodhisattvas-in-action and Buddhas-in-essence. In “Dialogue on the Lotus Sutra,” President Ikeda explains: “The Bodhisattvas of the Earth are in fact also Buddhas whose lives are illuminated by the awareness that the present moment is one with eternity” (October 1997 *Living Buddhism*, p. 38). Buddhahood is strengthened through our bodhisattva action based on our faith in the Mystic Law.

The word *renge* (lotus flower) of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo symbolizes the blossoming of human beauty out of the impurities of greed, anger and foolishness. Since Buddhahood

does not exist apart from the lower nine worlds, a Buddha is not aloof from reality enjoying absolute happiness by him- or herself apart from the interconnectedness with all life and living beings. Nor is the life-condition of Buddhahood supernatural. The mutual possession of the Ten Worlds suggests that the location of this supreme life-condition is within the lives of ordinary people. The Daishonin looked upon Buddhahood as “the unchanging reality that reigns over all of life’s functions” (“The Real Aspect of the Gohonzon,” WND, 832).

Buddhism teaches that we attain Buddhahood as we are. The key is strengthening and expanding our inner self by chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo. Ralph Waldo Emerson said: “That only which we have within, can we see without. If we meet no Gods, it is because we harbor none. If there is a grandeur in you, you will find grandeur in porters and sweeps.”⁸

WHAT WE CAN LEARN FROM THE TEN FACTORS

While the Ten Worlds and the mutual possession of the Ten Worlds focus on the differences in these states of life, the theory of the ten factors points to their equality. People may display different states of life, but the workings of the ten factors within those states is always the same.

The first three factors (appearance, nature and entity) describe life as an existing phenomenon whose essence has both a physical and spiritual aspect. The next six factors (power, influence, internal cause, relation, latent effect and manifest effect) describe the functions and workings of life as defined by the first three factors. The final factor (consistency from beginning to end) integrates and unifies the other factors, guaranteeing that where there is one factor, the other nine also exist. Moreover, consistency from beginning to end ensures that whichever of the Ten Worlds manifests at that moment, all factors exist according to the characteristics of that world.

By understanding the law of cause and effect, we can choose to make causes that improve our state of life. Nichiren Daishonin states: “How one’s life finds expression in the three thousand realms differs from individual to individual. The law of cause and effect is strict” (*Gosho Zenshu*, p. 714). Understanding the ten factors allows an individual to direct the course of his or her life-condition.

WHAT WE CAN LEARN FROM THE THREE REALMS OF EXISTENCE

As we have learned from the tenth factor of consistency from beginning to end, the causes we make permeate the ten factors of our life-condition. Furthermore, the three realms explains where our life-condition manifests (the five components, living beings, environment), and we see that our causes not only permeate each aspect of our existence but also our whole being and environment as well. In light of the law of cause and effect, this principle of the “three thousand realms” shows that we can change our environment for the better. Buddhism allows us to win over negativity both in our lives and our environment.

The concept of the three realms addresses the individuality of our lives. Society consists of a web of unique individuals. The condition of the people in our environment and the condition of the land where we dwell are related to our life-condition. As Nichiren Daishonin states: “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” (“On Attaining Buddhahood in This Lifetime,” WND, 4).

The objective world of the land where we live is a part of our lives — this is the holistic approach of the Buddhist view of life and the philosophical principle of the oneness of life and its environment. Enlightenment can be expressed as “My life contains the universe” and “My life permeates the universe.”

In his foreword to *The Human Revolution*, President Ikeda states, “In any case, a great human revolution in just a single individual will help achieve a change in the destiny of a nation and further, will enable a change in the destiny of all humankind9.”

The principle of “three thousand realms” in Nichiren Daishonin’s Buddhism demonstrates that changing ourselves can change our environment. We determine not only our own life-condition, but also that of our environment. By chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo and carrying out the SGI’s altruistic movement to manifest and solidify our innate Buddhahood and help others do the same, we develop a global network of forces for peace and happiness. This is why Nichiren Daishonin’s Buddhism is relevant — why we can call it engaged, Buddhism.

THE GOHONZON AS THE ENTITY OF “THREE THOUSAND REALMS”

T’ien-t’ai systematized the contents of Shakyamuni’s enlightenment to the Law as the philosophy of “three thousand realms.” Nichiren Daishonin’s awesome achievement was to establish the object of devotion for the people of the Latter Day of the Law based on this principle.

The Gohonzon — the object of devotion — inscribed by Nichiren Daishonin, has as its philosophical basis the mutual possession of the Ten Worlds. The Mystic Law (Nam-myoho-renge-kyo or Buddhahood) on the Gohonzon illuminates all the other life-conditions within the life of the Daishonin. The Gohonzon depicts how our Buddhahood can uphold and illuminate our lower nine worlds.

The Gohonzon is the actual embodiment of the principle of three thousand realms [For further explanation of the Gohonzon see page 17]. The Daishonin turned the theory expounded by T’ien-t’ai into reality. In other words, when the Daishonin talks about Buddhahood, he means something that every human being can actually attain.

CONCLUSION

The teachings of Shakyamuni and T’ien-t’ai are like a detailed map pointing to the location of a great treasure. Nichiren Daishonin’s Buddhism is the treasure itself. While the former had an impact in their day, the latter is the energy source for ceaseless value creation today.

Even though the principle of “three thousand realms” contains the potential for human revolution and environmental reformation, it was never presented in a concrete manner until Nichiren Daishonin appeared in thirteenth-century Japan, some six hundred years after T’ien-t’ai’s death.

The philosophy of “three thousand realms” clarifies both the internal and external structures of our existence that resonate with the life of the universe, putting theory into practice by chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo. This teaching clarifies the dynamic relationship between human life and the life of the universe. In this light, T’ien-t’ai’s “three thousand realms” is theoretical while the Daishonin’s “three thousand realms” is actual.

The practical point of “three thousand realms” is to strengthen our inner self — our heart — which is also universal. The Daishonin provides us with the concrete way to do this.

In “The Record of the Orally Transmitted Teachings,” Nichiren Daishonin states:

Nam derives from Sanskrit and is rendered here [in Japanese] as *kimyo*, meaning “devote one’s life.”... “Devotion” (*ki*) indicates dedicating our lives to the principle of the eternal and unchanging truth revealed in the theoretical teaching of the Lotus Sutra. “Life” (*myo*) indicates basing ourselves upon wisdom that functions in accord with changing circumstances as revealed in the essential teachings of the Lotus Sutra. Thus, to “devote one’s life” is the very meaning of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo. T’ien-t’ai states, “The eternal unchanging truth and wisdom that functions in accord with changing circumstances are both contained within ‘life at each moment,’ which embodies and permeates all phenomena.” (*Gosho Zenshu*, p. 708)

Wisdom in this context signifies all necessary human qualities for creating value in our lives and environment. As indicated in this passage, Nichiren Daishonin’s Buddhism put the principle of “three thousand realms” into perspective and gave us a practical way to call forth wisdom by basing our lives on the universal Law of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo.

More than 2500 years ago in India, Shakyamuni Buddha became enlightened to the Law that was his innate Buddhahood. What he expounded was later collected as Buddhist sutras; thus Buddhism was born. Near the end of his life, Shakyamuni Buddha told his leading disciple, Ananda: “In this world be an island to yourself, be a refuge to yourself and take refuge in no other. Make the Dharma your island, the Dharma your refuge and no other.”¹⁰ Buddhism is synonymous with inner strength and a well-grounded sense of self. True inner strength derives from the Dharma or Law inherent within us—our innate Buddhahood. It emerges from and permeates our life when we chant Nam-myoho-renge-kyo with all our hearts. By chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, we are reaping the fruits of the teaching of “three thousand realms.”

In closing, let me quote President Ikeda:

Some people say that the prevailing mood in the world today is one of powerlessness [...]. At the opposite extreme of this sense of powerlessness lies the Lotus Sutra’s philosophy that a single moment of life encompasses three thousand realms (*ichinen sanzen*) and the application of this teaching to our daily lives. The principle that one moment of life contains three thousand realms teaches us that the inner determination (*ichinen*) of one individual can transform everything. It is a teaching that gives ultimate expression to the infinite potential and dignity inherent in the life of each human being. (April 1995, *Seikyo Times*, p. 37).

1. For convenience sake referred to subsequently as “three thousand realms” in this article.
2. The glossary in *The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin* lists more literal translations of the Ten Worlds: 1) hell, 2) hungry spirits, 3) animals, 4) *asuras*, 5) human beings, 6) heavenly beings, 7) voice-hearers, 8) cause-awakened, 9) bodhisattvas and 10) Buddhas.
3. 150–250. Indian Mahayana scholar.
4. Indian Buddhist scholar thought to have lived in the fourth or fifth century.
5. 1665–1726. The twenty-sixth high priest and restorer of Nichiren Shoshu.
6. Hugo, Victor, *Les Miserables* (Penguin Books Ltd., New York: 1982) p. 208.
7. Allen, James *As a Man Thinketh* (Putnam Publishing Group, New York) p. 66. (1849–1925), Writer and educator.
8. Emerson, Ralph Waldo, “Worship,” *The Conduct of Life*, 1860. See www.jjnet.com/emerson/worship.htm.

9. Ikeda, Daisaku, *The Human Revolution* (Los Angeles, CA: World Tribune Press, 1986) vol. 1, p. IV.
10. Hajime Nakamura, *Gotama Buddha*, p. 114)

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