

BUDDHISM IN DAILY LIFE THE THREE REALMS OF EXISTENCE

The concept of the three realms of existence first appeared in the “Treatise on the Great Perfection of Wisdom,” written by the Indian sage Nagarjuna. The concept was adopted and developed by the Chinese scholar and priest T’ien-t’ai, as a component part of the theory of three thousand realms in one moment of existence. The three realms are the dimensions in which the Ten Worlds (the life-conditions possessed by all phenomena) and the ten factors (the aspects common to all life) are manifested.

The three realms are: the realm of the five components; the realm of living beings; and the realm of the environment. These correspond to the individual, society and the physical environment. Let’s look at each of these in more detail.

The five components are the elements that unite temporarily to form an individual living being. They consist of: 1) form, the physical aspect of life, which possesses shape and color, and includes the five sensory organs; 2) perception, the function of receiving external information from the five sensory organs and the mind, the sixth sensory organ, which integrates this information; 3) conception, the function by which life creates thoughts, or ideas, about what has been perceived; 4) volition, the will to take some form of action about what has been perceived and conceptualized; 5) consciousness, the function of discernment that makes value judgments, distinguishing good from evil, sweet from sour, hot from cold, etc.

Form defines the physical aspect of life; the other four components define the spiritual aspect. However, Buddhism teaches that the spiritual and physical aspects of life are essentially one and inseparable. Therefore none of these five components can exist on its own without the other four to support and sustain it. Their mutual interactions make up the complete living being, and in turn allow us to interact with each other.

A living entity is endowed with the five components from the moment it is conceived. How these components function will depend entirely upon the karma this particular life-entity has accumulated during its past. Take form, for example. Will the life-entity be male or female, what will its racial characteristics be? The karma that governs these physical attributes will also govern exactly how the other four components function, all of which are unique to that person because no two people’s karma is exactly the same. Every human being is therefore spiritually and physically unique. This karmic influence also has a direct bearing on the society and environment into which the life-entity is born.

The second of the three realms, the realm of living beings, is, quite simply, society as a whole. This includes all forms of sentient life: animals, birds, insects, and so on. Although every human being is unique, because we all possess the Ten Worlds, we find that we have much in common with other people. We also find that we tend to be drawn to people whose predominant life-state is the same as our own. The way in which we perceive our society depends upon our karma, since this determines our sensory perception.

The third realm, the environment, is the location inhabited by sentient life-entities. It includes all inanimate life forms such as grass, trees, rivers and mountains. Our perception of this realm, too, is dependent on our karma.

In his book, *The Buddha in Daily Life*, Richard Causton explains why the social and physical environment of each individual is uniquely different: “...the scope or extent of the realms which we inhabit depends upon our dominant life-state...as we manifest each of the

Ten Worlds in the way that is unique to our personality, through the actions of the five components, so the realms of sentient beings and the environment alter accordingly. Thus, the three realms can be seen as the theoretical basis for the concept of the inseparability of the self and its environment (ibid., p. 204).

A good example of this is seen in the destruction of the Brazilian rain forests. People—whose greed and blindness to the effects of their actions, stemming from the world of Hunger—destroyed huge tracts of forest. This not only resulted in the denudation of the land, and the near annihilation of some Indian tribes, it also resulted in global warming. This affected the weather patterns of the entire world, in turn causing soil erosion in other, far distant parts of the globe.

By chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo with faith in the Gohonzon, we are able to access the energy of life itself, Buddhahood, a force that exists within all life and is untainted by karma. Our repeated efforts to draw forth our Buddhahood enable us to purify our karma, and to make Buddhahood our predominant life-tendency. This enables us to affect our world differently, as Daisaku Ikeda points out: “The fundamental law of life is the Mystic Law, and, with faith in the Gohonzon, you can harness it as the driving force for happiness. This is why the land where you practice faith becomes the Buddha land, and why society itself becomes the Buddha land. Through faith, you can transform the land where you live into a land of victory and happiness (Daisaku Ikeda, *Buddhism in Action*, vol. 4, pp. 327–28).

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