

The Ten Worlds

Buddhism identifies Ten Worlds--ten states or conditions of life that we experience within our lives, moving from one to another at any moment according to our interactions with our environment and those around us. Each of us possesses the potential to experience all ten, from the prison-like despair and self-hatred of Hell to the expansive joy and wisdom of Buddhahood.

The Ten Worlds are Hell, Hunger, Animality, Anger, Humanity, Heaven, Learning, Realization, Bodhisattva and Buddhahood. By strengthening our spiritual lives through the practice of chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, Nichiren Buddhism teaches that rather than being at the mercy of our surroundings we can develop the ability to set our own direction and spend more of our lives in the more positive life states.

Each of us has a tendency to gravitate toward a particular life state, and if this is one of the lower worlds, great suffering can be caused to ourselves and those around us. Through raising up our life condition which manifests in the Ten Worlds, we can bring out the positive aspects of any situation we find ourselves in.

The world of Bodhisattva is a state of compassion in which we devote ourselves to the welfare and happiness of others. Buddhahood is a state of completeness and perfect freedom filled with wisdom, vitality and courage in which even overcoming challenges becomes a source of joy.

The Ten Worlds in Detail:

Hell: A state of suffering and despair in which we perceive we have no freedom of action. It is characterized by the impulse to destroy ourselves and everything around us.

Hunger: The state of being controlled by insatiable desire for money, power, status etc. While desires are inherent in any of the Ten Worlds, in this state we are at the mercy of our cravings and cannot control them.

Animality: In this state, we are ruled by instinct with neither reason nor moral sense nor the ability to make long-range judgments. We operate by the law of the jungle and will not hesitate to take advantage of those weaker than ourselves and fawn on those who are stronger.

Anger: Here, awareness of ego emerges, but it is a selfish, greedy, distorted ego, determined to best others at all costs and seeing everything as a potential threat to itself. In this state we value only ourselves and tend to hold others in contempt.

Humanity (also called Tranquility): This is a flat, passive state of life, from which we can easily shift into the lower four worlds. While we may generally behave in a humane fashion in this state, we are highly vulnerable to strong external influences.

Heaven (or Rapture): This is a state of intense joy stemming, for example, from the fulfillment of some desire, a sense of physical well-being, or inner contentment. Though intense, the joy experienced in this state is short-lived and also vulnerable to external influences.

The six states from Hell to Heaven are called **the six paths or six lower worlds**. Any happiness or satisfaction to be gained in these states depends totally upon circumstances and is therefore transient and subject to change. In these six lower worlds, we base our entire happiness, indeed our whole identity, on externals.

The next two states, **Learning** and **Realization**, come about when we recognize that everything experienced in the six paths is impermanent, and we begin to seek some lasting truth. Unlike the six paths, which are passive reactions to the environment, these four higher states are achieved through deliberate effort.

Learning: In this state, we seek the truth through studying the teachings or experience of others.

Realization: In this state we seek the truth not through others' teachings but through our own direct perception of the world. Having realized the impermanence of things, people in these states have won a measure of independence and are no longer prisoner to their own reactions as in the six paths. However, they often tend to be contemptuous of people in the six paths who have not yet reached this understanding. In addition, their search for truth is primarily self-oriented, so there is a great potential for egotism in these two states.

Bodhisattva: Bodhisattvas are those who aspire to achieve enlightenment and at the same time are equally determined to enable all other beings to do the same. Conscious of the bonds that link us to all others, in this state we realize that any happiness we alone enjoy is incomplete, and we devote

ourselves to alleviating others' suffering. Those in this state find their greatest satisfaction in altruistic behavior.

Buddhahood: Buddhahood is a dynamic state that is difficult to describe. We can partially describe it as a state of perfect freedom, in which we are enlightened to the ultimate truth of life. It is characterized by infinite compassion and boundless wisdom. In this state, we can resolve harmoniously what appear from the standpoint of the nine worlds to be insoluble contradictions. A Buddhist sutra describes the attributes of the Buddha's life as a true self, perfect freedom from karmic bonds throughout eternity, a life purified of illusion, and absolute happiness.

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