

Traveling the Ten Realms

Written by Tzu Chi Foundation
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[[Master's Teachings](#)]

In Buddhism, we speak of ten realms of existence: the six mundane realms of humans, animals, hungry ghosts, and asuras, as well as heaven and hell; and the four saintly realms of the sravakas, pratyekabuddhas, bodhisattvas, and Buddhas. Actually, at this very moment, we can experience any of the ten realms—it all depends on the direction of our thoughts. With a compassionate, wise thought, in that moment, we can be in an enlightened realm. With a greedy or stingy thought, we can be in an unenlightened one. In the course of one day, we can go through all ten realms.

If we feel joy in our hearts as we encounter every person, and if we dedicate ourselves unconditionally to helping people to transform their lives so they can have peace and happiness, then in that moment, ours is the heart of a Buddha. The Buddha sees all living beings as his one and only child—their pain is his pain, their happiness his happiness. Such a tender heart, like that of a loving parent, is the Buddha's heart. Although we have yet to attain the complete enlightenment of a Buddha and reach the stage where our hearts are always transcendent and full of boundless love for all beings, we can still learn to have such a heart and strive to bring it forth always.

If we harbor the sincere aspiration to seek enlightenment and to help guide all living beings, ours is the heart of a bodhisattva. Bodhisattvas work to bring people joy and free them from suffering. After people's material needs are met, bodhisattvas then skillfully guide them to understand life's truths, so that they may truly liberate themselves from suffering. This is something all of us can do. We can all serve as a bodhisattva here and now.

If we feel that life is full of suffering and wish to learn and practice the Dharma so that we can become liberated from suffering, ours is the heart of a sravaka—a spiritual practitioner who learns the Dharma through listening to and reading Buddhist teachings. Or, if we contemplate the phenomenon of the world and the changes of Nature, and through this realize the impermanent nature of everything and see how things arise as a product of causes and conditions, then ours is the heart of a pratyekabuddha—a spiritual practitioner who gains many insights and realizations from observing the world. Though sravakas and pratyekabuddhas can develop purity of conduct and a high degree of wisdom, they are not able to attain the full awakening that the Buddha has. This is because it is only through working for the enlightenment of both self and others that one gradually achieves perfect enlightenment.

In our daily spiritual practice, are our minds in touch with life's truths and filled with love for all beings? Or are we concerned about the suffering of others and dedicated to helping them? Do we observe everything around us mindfully with a pure heart to gain insight into natural laws? Do we also mindfully observe human affairs? Can we, through our observations, realize the truth of impermanence in life? Is our mind focused on learning the ways of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas? If the answers are yes, then we may experience all four saintly realms within one

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day.

If we do not have a mindset of cultivation, however, we will likely drift through the six mundane realms throughout our day.

If we are enjoying ourselves, taking comfort in material luxuries or immersed in our feelings of satisfaction and pleasure, in that moment, we are in the realm of heavenly beings. The heavenly realm is full of wealth and enjoyment.

Or perhaps we are working diligently to fulfill our responsibilities to our family or our work, but we feel frustrated over things that do not go successfully. That is the state of mind of a common, mundane human being. Life in this world involves dealing with people and matters, and in the course of this, people issues, differences in views, and things not going our way are all inevitable. That is part of life, but when in the mundane mindset, we get caught up in these issues and cannot transcend them.

Or we may be inspired to help others, our hearts touched by their difficulties and full of compassion, but suddenly something happens that angers us and we are filled with fury. Such a fluctuating mind, easily irritated and angered, continually reacting to external conditions, is the mind of an asura. Asuras are beings with a volatile temper.

We can also be in hell. For instance, perhaps we are full of misery because we find our work very taxing—the conditions are hard and our body is in pain due to the heavy manual labor we have to do. Or our hearts may be tied up in knots, full of anxiety and fear, and we cannot feel any ease or peace. Or we may be filled with suffering because of problems in our relationships, a misfortune that has befallen us, or a physical illness that makes life difficult. We are caught in our negative frame of mind and cannot let go or open our hearts to accept our circumstances—in that moment, we are in a personal hell.

We can experience the hungry ghost realm as well. Our body needs food, but if we do not have anything we can eat, the hunger is excruciating.

Then there is the animal realm. Animals are living creatures, but they take different forms: some crawl on the earth, some swim in the water, and some fly in the air. They live in different conditions and have a world of their own. What is it that makes us human beings different? Actually, there are times when we do not behave with the basic decency of a human being—in that moment, we are just like an animal.

Such are the ten realms. Today, do we choose to be a heavenly being by relishing in ease and comfort? Or do we aspire to the wisdom, insight, and awakening of a Buddha? Do we choose to be giving, or do we focus only on our own affairs?

Whether we are like a Buddha or an animal all depends on whether the thoughts in our mind are wholesome or unwholesome. It all hinges on the direction or nature of our thoughts. This is why we truly need to take good care of our mind.

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