
Week 2 – Knowing your realm

Buddhism Level 2 – Buddhist Wisdom – symbolic Dharma

THE SIX REALMS

Realms illustrate the different modes of being & consciousness – where we're at now.

Realms as the result of karma

The black & white segments illustrate karma in operation, while the realms illustrate the results of that karma – “karma vipaka”.

We evolve from realm to realm (and within the realm) according to our karma. The realms are objectification of karma vipaka.

They can be seen in two ways

- As objectively existing worlds (we know the human & animal worlds) - traditional
- More psychologically, as different modes of human consciousness.

Points to note:

- All the realms are impermanent – not fixed states.
- There's no judgement or judger – it's the natural operation of karma that determines the realm a being enters – a being becomes into a realm through their actions.

Name of realm	Description of realm	The inhabitants	Characteristic mental state	“Human paradigm”	What the Buddha offers
Hell realm	Flames & ice; many kinds of torment, extremely grisly.	Experiencing pain being inflicted on them; unrelenting	Pain	Strong hatred; psychosis; living in warzone.	“Amrita”- balm to relieve suffering.
Hungry ghost realm (pretaloka)	Bleak, grey, lifeless, desert.	Tiny mouths & necks, big bellies; food turns to excrement in mouth	Unsatisfied desire; misplaces, neurotic craving.	Addiction; neurotic attachment to someone; shopaholic	Food they can really eat – meet true needs.
Titan / Angry gods (asuraloka)	Ongoing battle with gods over the wish-fulfilling tree; constant warring	Powerful, aggressive, warlike beings. No trust or love.	Jealousy & fierce competition	Stockbrokers, politicians... fighting to top of hierarchy	Sword of wisdom – only true conquest is over ignorance
Animal realm	Animals eating, sleeping, reproducing	All kinds of animals going about their instinctual life.	Ignorance & un-selfawareness	Overriding concern for comfort & bodily satisfaction.	Book of Culture – intermediate between savagery & spirituality.
Human realm	The world of human culture, civilisation, endeavour, striving	Self aware humans, experiencing pleasure & pain	Awareness of self & other; ability to make ethical choices	“Happy healthy human being”	The robe & staff of a spiritual aspirant
Heaven realm (devaloka)	Beauty, refinement, light, music	Very refined beings, dwelling in subtle bodies, needs are spontaneously met.	Pleasure & bliss; bright, clear mind	Light hearted, carefree, attractive people; happy artists(!); very spiritually-developed people	Lute of impermanence – positive fruits of karma will run out; devas will fall from grace.

THE BUDDHA IN EACH REALM

Each realm contains a Buddha that offers the inhabitant something that they need to transcend their present predicament.

When we have identified which realm we are in, we have a clue about what we need to do next.

SUBJECTIVE & OBJECTIVE ASPECTS OF THE REALMS

We have talked about two ways of viewing realms: as an objectively real world or as a psychological state. Maybe they're not so different. Consider:

*Change your mind and experience the world differently; change your mind and experience a different world.
What is the difference between these two statements?*

Sangharakshita (aphorism quoted from memory)

In a sense, we all dwell in our own realm; the degree of overlap is a function of the commonality of our karma. We share more karma with each other than with dogs, so our world is more alike than it is to a dog-world.

By becoming familiar with the realms, we can start to recognise which realm we're inhabiting, and understand how to navigate to the more favourable realms – human & god – by orientating to the Buddha in that realm & what he's offering us.

HOME PRACTICE

Continue colouring in the Wheel of Life image.

Whenever you meditate, or look in a mirror, or look at your wheel of life image then try to recognise which realm you are in, feel the strongest affinity to.

Over the week, try to gain a sense of which realms you inhabit most. Can you describe the peculiarities of your own habitual realms in terms of images? Maybe even draw them? Are they hot/cold; beautiful/ugly, pleasant / painful?

RECOMMENDED FURTHER READING

Wheel of Life, Kulananda, ch 4-10

The Six Realms chapter in *A Guide to the Buddhist Path*, Sangharakshita

The Symbolism of the Tibetan Wheel of Life, Sangharakshita, CD 103 or chapter in *Creative Symbols of Tantric Buddhism*

The Six Realms chapter in *Exploring Karma and Rebirth*, Nagapriya