

“The Ten Worlds” BY REVEREND JO’GU NATSUI

A passage from Nichiren Daishonin’s writing, “The True Object of Worship,” reads;

Question: Now I look repeatedly at people's faces, but I see only the world of Humanity. I do not see the other worlds. And the same is true when I look at my own face. How am I to believe in the Ten Worlds?

Answer: When we look at a person’s face, at times he appears joyful, enraged, or calm. At other times, we may see the appearance of greed, foolishness, or flattery. Rage is a manifestation of the world of hell, greed is a manifestation of the world of hunger, stupidity is a manifestation of the world of animality, fawning is a manifestation of the world of anger, calmness is a manifestation of the world of humanity, and joy is a manifestation of the world of rapture. These worlds, the six paths, are all present in the physical appearance of the person's face. The remaining four noble worlds are hidden and dormant and do not surface in the face, but if we search carefully, we can tell that they are there.

(“The True Object of Worship” Gosho, p.647)

The human heart is very easy to change. It is always open to being affected by what is outside of ourselves. We become sad, happy, angry, joyful, frustrated, anxious, selfish, compassionate, competitive, generous, patient and impatient... Buddhism categorizes these moment-to-moment experiences of our spiritual realm into ten states of life, which is termed the Ten Worlds.

The Ten Worlds are hell, hunger, animality, anger, humanity, rapture, learning, realization, Bodhisattva, and Buddhahood. The first six worlds are called the six paths and the other four worlds are called the four noble worlds.

There are thousands of Buddhist scriptures that exist today, but the Lotus Sutra, which we recited today, is the only one that revealed the oneness of these ten worlds. For example, the world of hell contains all the worlds from hunger to Buddhahood, and Buddhahood contains everything from hell to Bodhisattva, which is very, very different from Western theology.

Now, let me give you a brief explanation of the Ten Worlds.

First is the world of hell. This world is where people suffer from their own desire, jealousy, discontent, extreme anxiety, and hopelessness. So, what exactly is this world? How can we apply this state of life to our real, day-to-day lives?

Here is an example: generally speaking, some people have a tendency to refrain from talking about the topic of death, simply because it makes them feel uncomfortable. It is typically associated with a sense of sadness or loneliness, none of which might lead to a positive conversation. It might also evoke a dark imagery, such as being stranded in the middle of the night during a harsh winter.

So, talking about topics like this tends to be viewed as far less significant than talking about life, which, on the other hand, gives a sense of hope and happiness. Life is indeed characterized by a positive image of the sun’s warm embrace with beautiful spring flowers in bloom. When we see this juxtaposition of life and death, it might be clear as to which better defines the concept of hell.

However, there is no denying that there are times when this positive idea of “life” becomes harder than we

imagined, and turns into a blazing hell that seems to be far more unbearable than death. For example, think of a life loaded with insurmountable financial debt; being in a painful relationship with a loved one; or feeling like the people around us constantly add undue pressure. Usually, we react in a negative manner in response to negative circumstances, victimize ourselves and justify the reasons for our negative reactions.

However, circumstances can be so excruciating to endure that one might reach a breaking point where the afterlife looks more hopeful. This is one way to describe the world of hell.

Next is the world of hunger.

This is a world of desire. Of course, desire is possessed within any of the Ten Worlds, and it is natural to think things like, “I want to have some water” and “I want to live a better life.” But, when we see other possible choices, this kind of thinking develops into more demanding thoughts, such as “I want to have champagne rather than just water” or “I want to lead a rich, healthy, active life, rather than simply a better life.” In this way, one who is in the world of hunger is controlled by their desires, and eventually, they grow so blinded that they become submerged in the desire to find only their own happiness, and the happiness of others is often ignored.

Of course, desire will never cease to exist. For instance, we have already had enough, but we think we want more. It’s a constant desire. We like to see, hear, smell, eat, touch, and feel good things, but desires originating from our six senses will not come to be satisfied. So, this is a world in which one continues to suffer from not being spiritually and materialistically satiated.

In Japanese, the English word “hunger” is translated as “*ga ki* (餓鬼).” The Japanese character “*ga* (餓)” (as in *ga ki*) is written in a way that consists of two parts: “to eat (食)” and “oneself (我).” So, *ga ki* or hunger means to fall victim to one’s own desire to the point of self-destruction, believing that the fulfillment of desire leads directly to their happiness, while this “fulfillment,” in fact, never comes to be fulfilled.

In other words, hunger is a state of life where one cannot use their desire in a productive and constructive manner and inevitably winds up suffering by their own hand.

Next is the world of Animality.

In Buddhism, Animality is represented by stupidity. Stupidity in Buddhism is not about the lack of intellect, but it is to act on instinct like an animal. It also means to be impulsive and to lack sound reason and discreet judgment, without being able to foresee the possible future consequences based on the correct understanding of the law of cause and effect.

Animality is also characterized by survival of the fittest. What I mean by this is that someone who is in the world of Animality always tries to win the favor of those in high ranking positions, and looks down on those of lesser power or status in a high-handed manner.

Of course, animals in our environment can actually help us in many ways. For example, you know your pets can heal your heart. Guide dogs spend their lives assisting humans with directions, and they find joy in it. On the other hand, humans often create problems, and they can be more thoughtless, cruel, merciless, and impulsive than those animals.

So, the world of Animality is the life condition in which a human being cannot think or behave as a human being; they fear the superior and condescend to the inferior, and become fixated only on what is superficially apparent to them, never coming to understand the principle of cause and effect on the most profound level.

Next is the world of Anger.

This is also known as “*shura*” or “*ashura*” in Japanese. It basically means someone who is very competitive, always comparing himself with others, and trying to be above and better than others. This is more than just a sense of rivalry, in that a person with this kind of competitive nature is prone to fits of anger, ready to erupt at any given moment.

For example, let’s say you are driving along the highway and are about to change lanes. You make sure that there is no sign of danger and you observe the “three second rule.” Now that you’ve changed lanes, the person who

is now behind you in the same lane, becomes upset, gets out of the lane, speeds up, and then races past you. To put it simply, the world of Anger is where people have a hard time thinking or saying things, such as “please do so,” “after you,” or something related to admitting wrongdoing or showing apology. They can’t genuinely seek a peaceful resolution.

Nichiren Daishonin also defines this world in his writings. He said, “Fawning is the manifestation of the world of Anger.” The term “fawning” (or you can also say “perversity”) describes those who are egocentric flatterers who possess a twisted mind. People in this world have a way of appearing to be a nice person externally, a humble person, or someone with the highest integrity, while internally harboring grudges and jealousy against someone who they think is better. This type of two-faced display is also one of the characteristics of the world of Anger.

Moreover, when something happens to them that they find to be troublesome or inconvenient, they cast the blame on and shift the responsibility to others. In this sense, what distinguishes the world of Anger from the worlds of hell, hunger, or animality is that it causes a negative impact on others more obviously and strongly than those first three worlds. Therefore, people in this state of life can neither become happy themselves nor do they bring themselves to genuinely wish for somebody else’s happiness.

Nichiren Daishonin states:

When people are too ruled by hatred, it blinds them to their own shortcomings
(As they only see the shortcomings of others).
 (“Letter to Shimoyama” Gosho, p.1150)

Next is the world of “Humanity,” or the world of tranquility.

Nichiren Daishonin said (in Japanese), “*tairaka naruha hito*,” which is roughly translated as, “stillness is the quality of a human being.” So, this life condition is the state of calmness, just like a glass of water showing no ripples in it.

As opposed to the world of animality, someone in this life condition has the ability to use reason and meet a certain moral standard in terms of good and evil as set forth in human society.

But it requires a lot of effort to maintain this serene state of life, because it is very susceptible to any external influence, and it fluctuates quite easily at any moment, just like giving a gentle touch to a glass of water can cause it to become agitated in an instant. So, when one falls prey to a bad influence, it leads him or her down to the first four evil paths, and when he or she carries out Buddhist practice and accumulates good causes, it raises their life condition and leads them up to one of the four highest states of life, called the Four Noble Worlds.

Next is the world of “Rapture.” This is the world of joy.

There are many times in our everyday lives that we find to be very joyful, pleasant, and delightful, especially when something we wished to come true is fulfilled. But the point that needs to be made here is the fact that a joyful experience is always momentary, and it does not last forever. When we hear something joyful, we instantly become happy and excited, but once we reach the apex of this feeling, then we gradually return back to our normal state of life and the sense of joy naturally fades away. What this teaches us is that the world of rapture is where we find a sense of happiness that will not stand the test of time, and it is not where we find the abiding state of true happiness. In this way, people in this life condition often mistake this kind of temporary sense of happiness to be true happiness, become attached to it, and stop making progress toward pursuing higher states of the Ten Worlds.

So, these six lower life conditions, from hell to rapture, are unstable. We are always transmigrating back and forth within these worlds. And in this transmigration of the six paths, happiness or a sense of fulfillment is always at the mercy of our immediate surrounding environment. It means we are controlled by these life conditions, and we have no control over them.

The purpose of the Buddha’s appearance into this world is to teach people how to overcome these sufferings through the medium of Buddhist practice, in order for them to be able to establish happiness that is not affected by external influences in a negative way.

Now, let me explain the last four worlds, the Four Noble Worlds.

The first of the Four Noble Worlds is called “learning,” also known as “voice hearer.” It originally means to listen to the voice of the Buddha, or it also means someone who passionately learns the teachings of the Buddha with a seeking spirit. We can also manifest a part of this life condition every now and then in our day-to-day situations.

For example, when a child is misbehaving in public, his parent will tell him not to do it or the parent might go so far as to reason with him about why he should not act out that way. Then the child stops what he is doing as he *listens* to his parents and *learns* his lesson.

Another example would be at your workplace. When you are receiving a suggestion from your coworker about how your team should proceed with the project you’re currently working on, you are willing to listen to them or might even embrace the coworker’s idea. Or let’s say, when your superior gives you some advice with the intention to, for example, correct your manner, you listen to him and it feels like you’re slowly absorbing his advice and internalizing it, not begrudgingly but genuinely with your willing heart. In this sense, this world is where people try to enrich and improve their lives through learning from other people’s advice, life experiences, and so on and so forth.

Next is realization.

There is a Buddhist phrase portraying the state of realization. In Japanese, it is called “*hike rakuyo*.” *Hi* means to fly, *ke* means flower, *raku* means to fall, and *yo* means leaf. So, the phrase “*hike rakuyo*” symbolizes the “grasping of the concept of impermanence through seeing the petal of a flower flying away in a gentle breeze or through seeing the leaf naturally falling from a tree.” A prime illustration of this would be the story of Newton’s law of gravity, where he was said to have had a sudden epiphany from witnessing an apple that detached from a tree. The world of realization is, thus, also described as “independent understanding.”

Other examples that represent a partial function of this state of life include:

- Scientists who discover a new solution or create a new medicine for a disease.
- Artists or musicians who use creativity, giving birth to new forms of art or music.
- Or anyone, previously at a crossroads in life, who has finally figured out the best solution to their dilemma.

Now, there is one thing we need to know about the nature of the worlds of learning and realization. It is the fact that people in the world of learning are focused on their own learning experiences and improvement, and people in realization just rely on themselves. As they gain more experience and knowledge, they tend to believe that they are superior, and they develop an arrogant, self-serving attitude that leaves no room for any consideration and compassion toward others. Such are the flaws of these life conditions.

Next is the life condition of Bodhisattva.

To make a long story short, this is the world of compassion where people care so much about others that they spare no effort to help others in any way they can.

But the most significant characteristic of Bodhisattvas in Buddhism is that they make their finest endeavors in an effort to attain the highest path.

There is a Japanese phrase: “*jogu bodai geke shujo*.” Each individual word of the phrase literally means, “up, seek, enlightenment, down, guide, living beings.” It means to try to reach the highest life condition to seek enlightenment, while guiding all living beings in the lower worlds towards Buddhahood. Here, in this state of life, their paramount focus is to guide others on to the path of attaining their own enlightenment, and share the supreme law of Buddhism with others. Therefore, they devote themselves to the two types of Buddhist practices; the practice for oneself, and the practice for others. This is a big contrast to the worlds of learning and realization, who practice

only for their own sake.

You could say that those who engage in the fields of medicine, volunteering, and care-giving or people who unconditionally make it their priority to protect others are good examples of this life condition, as partly manifested in their everyday lives.

The last world is Buddhahood.

This is the world of perfect enlightenment. It is also called “the world of indestructible happiness,” because it is where our happiness is not determined by how our environment affects us.

But, here is a question. I mentioned at the beginning of the lecture that each of the Ten Worlds possessed the rest of the Ten Worlds. It means Buddhahood contains the worlds of suffering. How, then, could the world of Buddhahood be indestructible happiness if there is suffering involved?

In the Lotus Sutra, Shakyamuni Buddha said even the Buddha has “*shobyō shono*,” which literally means “little, illness, little, concern.” This real world, in which we live life, is essentially where everyone is equally bound to encounter basic sufferings, such as birth, ageing, illness, and death, just as the Buddha observed. And this phrase “little, illness, little, concern” clearly proves that the Buddha is no exception – he also suffers. But the Buddha’s suffering is different – it’s more like positive suffering, so to speak. What does that mean? For example, we just recited the Lotus Sutra, and at the end of the recitation, we read “*mai ji sa ze nen i ga ryo shu jo toku nyu mu jo do soku jo ju busshin*,” which means

At all times I think to myself: How can I cause living beings to gain entry
into the unsurpassed way and quickly acquire the body of a Buddha?

(Hokekyō, p.; cf. The Lotus Sutra, Watson, p.)

The Buddha is always concerned about all living beings and genuinely hopes that they can attain enlightenment and their true happiness. In other words, the Buddha’s suffering stems from us who are suffering and are still unaware of how to overcome our basic suffering. It is, thus, more compassionate and far-reaching in a positive way. And the practice of chanting Nam-Myōhō-Renge-Kyō allows us to profoundly open up this wonderful state of Buddha’s life that all of us possess. By reaching this state of Buddhahood, what seems to be just a human craving desire is going to be enveloped by the virtues of the Buddha, and it transforms into a noble driving force that engenders far more productive and constructive effects for the sake of personal and societal development.