

The Six Realms

Friends of the Western Buddhist Order

The Six Realms

If ego decides it likes the situation, it begins to churn up all sorts of ways to possess it. A craving to consume the situation arises and we long to satisfy that craving. Once we do, a ghost of that craving carries over and we look around for something else to consume. We get into the habitual pattern of becoming consumer oriented. Perhaps we order a piece of software for our computer. We play with it for a while, until the novelty wears out, and then we look around for the next piece of software that has the magic glow of not being possessed yet. Soon we haven't even got the shrink-wrap off the current package when we start looking for the next one. Owning the software and using it doesn't seem to be as important as wanting it, looking forward to its arrival. This is known as the hungry ghost realm where we have made an occupation out of craving. We can never find satisfaction; it is like drinking salt water to quench our thirst.

Another realm is the animal realm, or having the mind like that of an animal. Here we find security by making certain that everything is totally predictable. We only buy blue chip stock, never take a chance and never look at new possibilities. The thought of new possibilities frightens us and we look with scorn at anyone who suggests anything innovative. This realm is characterized by ignorance. We put on blinders and only look straight ahead, never to the right or left.

The hell realm is characterized by acute aggression. We build a wall of anger between ourselves and our experience. Everything irritates us, even the most innocuous, and innocent statement drives us mad with anger. The heat of our anger is reflected back on us and sends us into a frenzy to escape from our torture, which in turn causes us to fight even harder and get even angrier. The whole thing builds on itself until we don't even know if we're fighting with someone else or ourselves. We are so busy fighting that we can't find an alternative to fighting; the possibility of alternative never even occurs to us.

These are the three lower realms. One of the three higher realms is called the jealous god realm. This pattern of existence is characterized by acute paranoia. We are always concerned with "making it". Everything is seen from a competitive point of view. We are always trying to score points, and trying to prevent others from scoring on us. If someone achieves something special we become determined to out do them. We never trust anyone; we "know" they're trying to slip one past us. If someone tries to help us, we try to figure out their angle. If someone doesn't try to help us, they are being uncooperative, and we make a note to ourselves that we will get even later. "Don't get mad, get even," that's our motto.

At some point we might hear about spirituality. We might hear about the possibility of meditation techniques, imported from some eastern religion, or mystical western one, that will make our minds peaceful and absorb us into a universal harmony. We begin to meditate and perform certain rituals and we find ourselves absorbed into infinite space and blissful states of existence. Everything sparkles with love and light; we become godlike beings. We become proud of our godlike powers of meditative absorption. We might even dwell in the realm of infinite space where thoughts seldom arise to bother us. We ignore everything that doesn't confirm our godhood. We have manufactured the god realm, the highest of the six realms of existence. The problem is, that we have manufactured it. We begin to relax and no longer feel the need to maintain our exalted state. Eventually a small sliver of doubt occurs. Have we really made it? At first we are able to smooth over the question, but eventually the doubt begins to occur more and more frequently and soon we begin to struggle to regain our supreme confidence. As soon as we begin to struggle, we fall back into the lower realms and begin the whole process over and over; from god realm to jealous god realm to animal realm to hungry ghost realm to hell realm. At some point we begin to wonder if there isn't some sort of alternative to our habitual way of dealing with the world. This is the human realm.

The human realm is the only one in which liberation from the six states of existence is possible. The human realm is characterized by doubt and inquisitiveness and the longing for something better. We are not as absorbed by the all consuming preoccupations of the other states of being.

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In the Buddhist viewpoint, there are 6 different realms we can be reborn into. And beings in each of these states has different degrees of happiness and suffering. These realms are namely:

The Upper Realms	The Lower Realms
Gods	Hungry Ghosts
Humans	Animals
Demi-Gods (Asuras)	Hell Beings

These Realms represents 6 different states of existence. Though some cannot be readily seen, they can be experienced. These 6 realms also represent 6 different states of mind a person might continually go through.

* **Gods**

It is important to note that in Buddhism, gods are not beings that control or intervene in our daily lives. Rather, they are beings who experience a great deal of happiness as life goes on smoothly for a long time with absence of general suffering. However, this state is only temporal.

We all, at one time or other, have had such an experience. When "everything" goes our way, as we wish, we are experiencing a state very similar to the gods.

* **Demi-Gods (Asuras)**

These are beings who are constantly in an aggressive or competitive state of mind. They have great wealth, yet they are always reaching out, striving for more.

In our modern world many of us are not unlike them. We live a generally high standard of life. Yet, we are constantly seeking and reaching out for more endlessly.

* **Animals**

The most powerful force acting on animals is ignorance. They are guided mainly by instincts where the preoccupying thoughts are food, sex and material comfort.

Many of us have had experiences when craving for food or sex is so strong that we do things that we might regret later. A person who is too preoccupied by these thoughts is thus somewhat bestial or *animal* in nature.

* **Hungry Ghosts**

In the ghost realm, beings are in a state of neurotic desire, and not having them fulfilled. They are always filled with great hunger or thirst.

We have often seen people in less fortunate nations in great hunger due to drought or war. Their living is not unlike beings in the ghost realm. Closer to home, many people experience neurotic craving for relationships and cause great pain to both parties.

* **Hell Beings**

These beings, of all the realms, are the ones suffering from the most pain. These beings suffer from constant acute physical and mental pain.

These descriptions fit the details of the ways in which many prisoners-of-war have been tortured.

* **Human Beings**

Of course, we all know what Human Beings are! Or do we? In this state we experience a mix of happiness and suffering. It is also in this state that we are able to attain Buddhahood. Thus a Buddhist would strive not to be born as a god but as a human, as it is as a human that we are most able to best practice the Dharma.