

Session 6 – September

Chapter 2: The Buddhist Philosophy of Life (1)

—The Ten Worlds—

This chapter will discuss the principle known as the Ten Worlds, and clarify that the fundamental aim of faith in Nichiren Buddhism is to reveal in our lives the state of Buddhahood that is inherent within us.

The Ten Worlds

The Ten Worlds is a classification of ten distinct states of life, and forms the foundation for the Buddhist view of life. Through examining the Ten Worlds, we can come to understand the nature of our own state of life and gain insights into how we can transform it.

The Ten Worlds are: (1) the world of hell, (2) the world of hungry spirits, (3) the world of animals, (4) the world of *asuras*, (5) the world of human beings, (6) the world of heavenly beings, (7) the world of voice-hearers, (8) the world of cause-awakened ones, (9) the world of bodhisattvas, and (10) the world of Buddhas.

The first six worlds—those of hell, hungry spirits, animals, *asuras*, human beings, and heavenly beings—are known as the six paths. The remaining four—those of voice-hearers, cause-awakened ones, bodhisattvas, and Buddhas—are known as the four noble worlds.

According to the ancient Indian worldview, the six paths refer to the six realms of existence among which life transmigrates in the unending cycle of birth and death. Buddhism adopted this concept. The four noble worlds are life states that are attained through Buddhist practice.

In Buddhist sutras other than the Lotus Sutra, the Ten Worlds are regarded as ten separate, fixed realms of existence. The Lotus Sutra, however, fundamentally rejects that point of view, teaching that the Ten Worlds are ten states of life inherent within each living being. It reveals that living beings of the nine worlds from hell through the world of bodhisattvas possess within them the world of Buddhas, and that Buddhas also possess all the other nine worlds.

Therefore, a being presently manifesting one of the Ten Worlds in fact possesses within itself all of the Ten Worlds and can subsequently manifest any

other of the Ten Worlds in response to external influences. This teaching that all of the Ten Worlds are inherent within one another is called the mutual possession of the Ten Worlds. (A more detailed explanation of this concept appears in chapter 5.)

Nichiren Daishonin writes: “Neither the pure land nor hell exists outside oneself; both lie only within one’s own heart. Awakened to this, one is called a Buddha; deluded about it, one is called an ordinary person” (WND-1, 456).

A single life possesses all the Ten Worlds. This means that, even if right now we may be experiencing the painful life state of hell, we can transform it into the supremely joyous life state of Buddhahood. The principle of the Ten Worlds based on the Lotus Sutra opens the way for such dynamic inner transformation.

Let us now examine the nature of each of the Ten Worlds. First of all, with regard to the lowest six worlds, or the six paths, the Daishonin writes in “The Object of Devotion for Observing the Mind”:

When we look from time to time at a person’s face, we find him or her sometimes joyful, sometimes enraged, and sometimes calm. At times greed appears in the person’s face, at times foolishness, and at times perversity. Rage is the world of hell, greed is that of hungry spirits, foolishness is that of animals, perversity is that of asuras, joy is that of heaven, and calmness is that of human beings. (WND-1, 358)

Based on this passage, let us look at each of the six paths in turn.

1) The World of Hell

The Japanese word for hell, *jigoku* (Skt. *naraka*), literally means “underground prison.” Buddhist scriptures describe many hells, such as the eight hot hells, the eight cold hells, and numerous others.

The world of hell is the lowest state of life, a state in which one is imprisoned by suffering and completely lacking in freedom.

The Daishonin writes: “Hell is a dreadful dwelling of fire” (WND-1, 1026). Hell is a life state in which we experience the world around us as a place that inflicts suffering upon us as intense as if we were being burned by flames.

In “The Object of Devotion for Observing the Mind,” the Daishonin says: “Rage is the world of hell” (WND-1, 358). This rage arises from bitter frustration and discontent with ourselves for not being or achieving what we

desire, or toward the world around us that inflicts such suffering on us. It is the tormented expression of a life hopelessly trapped in a realm of suffering.

Hell is the state of being in which living is itself extremely painful and everything we see is colored by our unhappiness and misery.

2) The World of Hungry Spirits

The world of hungry spirits, or the life state of hunger, is characterized by relentless craving and the suffering arising from such craving going unsatisfied.

In ancient Indian mythology, “hungry spirits” (Skt. *preta*) originally referred to the deceased or spirits of the dead, who were believed to be constantly starving. As a result, a life state where one is spiritually and physically tormented by intense, unremitting craving came to be known as the world of hungry spirits.

The Daishonin writes: “Greed is [the world] of hungry spirits” (WND-1, 358); and “The realm of hungry spirits is a pitiful place where, driven by starvation, they devour their own children” (WND-1, 1026). Hunger so strong that it drives those in its grip to devour their own children describes a life state of suffering in which one’s heart and mind are ruled by insatiable desires.

Of course, wants and desires have both good and bad aspects. Human beings could not survive without the urge to eat. Desires can also be the motivating force for human progress and self-improvement. But the life state of hunger is one of suffering in which one is enslaved by desires and unable to use them for constructive, creative purposes.

3) The World of Animals

The world of animals, or the life state of animality, is characterized by foolishness in the sense of being moved by impulse rather than reason and being concerned only with immediate benefit and gratification.

The Daishonin writes: “Foolishness is [the world] of animals” (WND-1, 358). This describes a life state of acting impulsively for short-term benefit, with no understanding of the law of cause and effect and no ability to judge between right and wrong, good and evil.

The Daishonin also writes of the world of animals: “It is the nature of beasts to threaten the weak and fear the strong” (WND-1, 302); and “[The realm of] animals is to kill or be killed” (WND-1, 1026). He describes the life state of animality as one ruled by the law of the jungle, a struggle for survival in which one is willing to harm others to stay alive, with no sense of reason or

conscience. Because it is a condition of foolishness, in which one is fixated on immediate reward and cannot give thought to future consequences, those dominated by this life state are the engineers of their own suffering and self-destruction.

[Note: The use of the term “animals” is based on ancient Indian beliefs. Naturally, there are examples of animals, such as service dogs, that devotedly assist others, and it is also true that some of the behavior of human beings—for example, wars and genocide—is often much more cruel and brutal than that of non-human animals.]

Because the worlds of hell, hungry spirits, and animals all represent conditions of suffering, they are collectively known as the three evil paths.

4) The World of *Asuras*

Asuras are contentious demons found in ancient Indian mythology.

A characteristic of the world of *asuras*, or the life state of anger, is an obsession with personal superiority or self-importance, a tendency to always compare oneself with others and want to be better than them.

When those in this life state encounter people they consider inferior to themselves, they become arrogant and look down on them. Even when they recognize that others are superior to them in some way, they are unable to respect them. And when they meet someone who is truly more powerful than they are, they become cowardly and fawning.

Those in the world of *asuras* often put on an appearance of being people of virtue and fine character, even pretending to be humble in order to impress others. Inside, however, they are filled with jealousy and resentment toward those they perceive to be better than them. This gap between outward appearance and inner reality leads to hypocrisy and self-deception, which are also characteristics of this life state.

This is why the Daishonin writes: “Perversity is [the world] of *asuras*” (WND-1, 358). Here, “perversity” means concealing one’s true feelings in order to ingratiate oneself with others. There are two aspects to this perversity—to fawn and deceive, and to distort reason.

Unlike those in the three evil paths—the worlds of hell, hungry spirits, and animals—who are dominated by the three poisons of greed, anger, and

foolishness,¹ those in the world of *asuras* act of their own volition. In this sense, the world of *asuras* can be considered a higher state than the three evil paths. Nevertheless, because it is essentially a realm filled with suffering, it is grouped together with the three evil paths to form “the four evil paths.”

5) The World of Human Beings

The world of human beings, or the life state of humanity, is a calm, composed state in which people maintain their characteristic human qualities. The Daishonin says: “Calmness is [the world] of human beings” (WND-1, 358).

Those in the life state of humanity understand the principle of cause and effect and are rational enough to know the difference between good and evil.

The Daishonin writes: “The wise may be called human, but the thoughtless are no more than animals” (WND-1, 852). Those in the life state of humanity have the capacity to distinguish right from wrong and to exercise self-control.

The life state of humanity cannot be sustained without effort. In the reality of society, which is filled with many negative influences, it is indeed difficult for people to live in a humane way. It is impossible without a constant effort at self-improvement and personal development. The world of humanity is the first step toward a life state of winning over oneself.

Those in the world of humanity are also seen as “the correct vessel for attaining the noble paths.”² While they are vulnerable to falling into the evil paths through negative influences, they also have the potential to advance to the four noble worlds, or enlightened states of life, through Buddhist practice.

6) The World of Heavenly Beings

In ancient Indian cosmology, heaven referred both to gods possessing supernatural powers and to the realm where they lived. In ancient India, it was believed that those who performed good acts in their present life would be reborn as deities in the heavenly realm.

¹ Three poisons of greed, anger, and foolishness: The fundamental evils inherent in life that give rise to human suffering. In the renowned Mahayana scholar Nagarjuna’s *Treatise on the Great Perfection of Wisdom*, the three poisons are regarded as the source of all illusions and earthly desires. The three poisons are so called because they pollute people’s lives and work to prevent them from turning their hearts and minds to goodness.

² Correct vessel for attaining the noble paths: A passage found in *The Treatise on the Rise of the World* stating that human beings represent the most appropriate vessel, or form of life, for attaining the Buddha way.

In Buddhism, the world of heavenly beings, or the life state of heaven, is regarded as a condition of joy experienced when we fulfill our desires through effort. The Daishonin writes: “Joy is [the world] of heaven” (WND-1, 358).

There are all kinds of desires—instinctive desires such as for food and sleep, material desires for things like a new car or house, social desires such as the wish for status and honors, and intellectual and spiritual desires such as the aspiration to know about yet-to-be-discovered worlds or create new works of art. The state of blissful joy one experiences upon fulfilling these various kinds of desires is the world of heavenly beings.

But the joy of the world of heavenly beings is not lasting. It fades and disappears with the passage of time. In that sense, the world of heavenly beings is not the state of genuine happiness that should be our ultimate aim.

From the Six Paths to the Four Noble Worlds

The worlds from hell to heavenly beings discussed above, together referred to as the six paths, are easily influenced by external circumstances.

When one’s desires are fulfilled, one experiences the bliss of the world of heavenly beings, and when one’s external environment is calm and stable, one enjoys the tranquillity of the world of human beings. But should those external conditions change, one can quickly tumble into states of intense suffering, such as the worlds of hell and hungry spirits.

In the sense that they are governed by external circumstances, the life states of the six paths are not truly free or autonomous.

The aim of Buddhist practice is to transcend the six paths and develop a self-determined state of happiness that is not controlled by external circumstances. The awakened states of life a person can develop through Buddhist practice are known as the four noble worlds—the worlds of voice-hearers, cause-awakened ones, bodhisattvas, and Buddhas.

7 & 8) The Worlds of Voice-Hearers and Cause-Awakened Ones

Traditionally, the worlds of voice-hearers and cause-awakened ones were life states attained through practicing the so-called Hinayana teachings.

Persons in these two worlds, which are also known as the life states of learning and realization, are together referred to as the “persons of the two vehicles.”

The world of voice-hearers is the life state attained by those who gain a partial awakening through hearing the Buddha's teaching.

The world of cause-awakened ones refers to the life state attained by those who gain a partial awakening through their own observations and effort. It is also called the realm of self-awakened ones.

The partial awakening of the persons of the two vehicles is an awakening to the impermanence of all phenomena—the reality that all things are constantly changing, coming into and going out of existence. Those in the worlds of voice-hearers and cause-awakened ones, by objectively observing themselves and the world around them, perceive the truth that all things arise in response to causes and conditions, change with the passage of time, and eventually cease to exist. And they strive to overcome their attachment to transient things and phenomena.

There are times in our daily lives when we have a strong perception of the impermanence of all things, including ourselves. The Daishonin notes: “The fact that all things in this world are transient is perfectly clear to us. Is this not because the worlds of the two vehicles are present in the human world?” (WND-1, 358). He is saying that the world of human beings also possesses these perceptive worlds of voice-hearers and cause-awakened ones.

Those who sought to attain the life states of the two vehicles identified the cause of suffering as attachment to impermanent, transient things and phenomena, and they endeavored to eradicate such attachment and other earthly desires. Because of that, however, they strayed into the mistaken path of seeking to extinguish their own bodies and minds entirely (the teaching of “reducing the body to ashes and annihilating consciousness”).³

From the perspective of the enlightenment of the Buddha, the awakening gained by those in the worlds of voice-hearers and cause-awakened ones is imperfect and partial. But those in these worlds content themselves with this lesser degree of enlightenment and do not seek the full enlightenment of the Buddha. Though they acknowledge the superior enlightenment of the Buddha, their teacher, they do not think themselves able to attain it and remain at a lower level of enlightenment.

Additionally, those in the worlds of voice-hearers and cause-awakened ones are inclined to self-absorption, seeking only their own enlightenment and

³ Reducing the body to ashes and annihilating consciousness: A reference to the Hinayana doctrine asserting that one can attain nirvana, escaping from the sufferings of endless cycle of birth and death, only upon extinguishing one's body and mind, which are deemed to be the sources of earthly desires, illusions, and sufferings.

making no effort to help others do the same. This self-centeredness is the limitation of these two worlds.

9) The World of Bodhisattvas

Bodhisattva means a living being (*sattva*) who strives continuously to attain the enlightenment (*bodhi*) of the Buddha. Although the persons of the two vehicles accept the Buddha as their teacher, they do not believe themselves capable of attaining the same life state as the Buddha. In contrast, bodhisattvas not only regard the Buddha as their teacher, but strive to obtain the same enlightened state. In addition, they also try to lead others to enlightenment by communicating and spreading the Buddha's teachings.

What distinguishes those of the world of bodhisattvas, or the life state of bodhisattva, is their seeking spirit to attain the highest life state of Buddhahood and their altruistic efforts to share the benefits they have obtained through Buddhist practice.

The bodhisattva spirit is to empathize with the pain and sorrow of others and work to relieve that suffering and impart joy out of a wish for the happiness of oneself and others.

Whereas the persons of the two vehicles, focused solely on their own welfare, content themselves with a lesser awakening, those in the world of bodhisattvas act with a sense of mission for the sake of people and the Law.

The essence of the world of bodhisattvas is compassion. The Sanskrit term for compassion, *karuna* (Jpn. *jihī*), is sometimes translated as “lovingkindness” or “mercy.” In “The Object of Devotion for Observing the Mind,” the Daishonin writes: “Even a heartless villain loves his wife and children. He too has a portion of the bodhisattva world within him” (WND-1, 358). Just as even the most heartless villain still cares for his own wife and children, a spirit of compassion for others is inherent in all life. Those in the life state of bodhisattva direct this spirit of compassion to all people and make it the foundation for their lives.

10) The World of Buddhas

The world of Buddhas, or the life state of Buddhahood, is the supremely noble life state manifested by a Buddha.

Buddha means “awakened one”—one who has awakened to the Mystic Law, the fundamental Law that pervades the entire universe and all life. Specifically, it refers to Shakyamuni, who lived in India. The Buddhist sutras

describe various other Buddhas such as Amida Buddha, but these are all fictitious beings symbolizing an aspect of the greatness of the enlightened life state of Buddhahood.

Nichiren Daishonin is the Buddha of the Latter Day of the Law who, as an ordinary human being, revealed the infinitely respectable life state of Buddhahood in his own life and established the path by which all people can attain enlightenment.

Buddhahood is an expansive life state overflowing with good fortune and benefit, attained through awakening to the fact that the Mystic Law is the foundation of one's being. Having attained this state of life, the Buddha is able to manifest unsurpassed wisdom and compassion, employing them unceasingly to enable all people to attain the same life state of enlightenment that he enjoys.

The life state of Buddhahood is originally inherent in our own beings. It is difficult to manifest it, however, in our daily lives, which are filled with unending problems and challenges. For this reason, the Daishonin inscribed the Gohonzon, or object of devotion, as a means for all people to bring forth from within them the life state of Buddhahood.

The Gohonzon embodies the enlightened life state of Nichiren Daishonin, the Buddha of the Latter Day of the Law, the essence of which is Nam-myoho-renge-kyo.

When we believe in the Gohonzon and chant Nam-myoho-renge-kyo for the happiness of ourselves and others, we can tap the life state of Buddhahood within us.

In the "The Object of Devotion for Observing the Mind," the Daishonin identifies the profound connection between the life state of Buddhahood and faith in the Mystic Law, saying: "That ordinary people born in the latter age can believe in the Lotus Sutra is due to the fact that the world of Buddhahood is present in the human world" (WND-1, 358).

The Lotus Sutra reveals that all people are inherently Buddhas; we human beings can believe in that teaching precisely because our lives fundamentally possess the state of Buddhahood.

Nichikan, an 18th-century scholar of the Daishonin's teachings, wrote: "Strong faith in the Lotus Sutra is called the world of Buddhahood."⁴ "Lotus Sutra" here means the Gohonzon that embodies Nam-myoho-renge-kyo—the

⁴ Nichikan, "The Threefold Secret Teaching."

Lotus Sutra of the Latter Day of the Law. Therefore, having “strong faith” to base our lives on the Gohonzon is nothing other than the life state of Buddhahood.

This life state of Buddhahood attained through faith in the Mystic Law can be described in contemporary terms as a state of absolute happiness that nothing can destroy. Second Soka Gakkai president Josei Toda described it as a state of life in which being alive is itself happiness.

The life state of Buddhahood is also often likened to the spirit of a lion king—a state of complete ease and confidence in which, like the lion king, one fears nothing.