



## **The Six Realms of Existence**

*transcript of a teaching given December 12, 1997*

**Geshe la:** When we talk about life or living beings, Buddhism discusses six different levels of life or living beings. According to Buddhist understanding if one has the potential to experience feelings such as pleasant, unpleasant, joy or sadness or one is considered to be a living being. Therefore, plants, trees, whatever, are living things or phenomena but not living beings. Beings that have the potential to experience pleasant or unpleasant emotions are classified into six categories or six realms.

These six realms are divided into two classifications, the upper or fortunate beings and the lower, or unfortunate beings. The upper or fortunate beings are human beings, gods and demigods. The unfortunate or lower realms are hell, spirit or ghost, and animal realms. Each of these six realms have different degrees and different levels of suffering and conditions. All these different degrees and conditions of suffering appear or occur as a result of karma.

As I mentioned earlier, unwholesome or negative karma is created through indulging in the ten negative actions and will propel individuals into the lower or unfortunate realms. Wholesome or positive karma that is created through engagement of the ten positive actions will propel individuals into the upper or fortunate realms. Therefore, one could say the six different realms are a direct result of individual karma and the sufferings of the individual realms cannot be shared by the beings in the other realms. Due to the force of an individual's karma we see the things in a differently. For example, take a cup of ordinary water. Three beings from the different realms human, spirit and god sees the cup of water in three different forms. The human sees the cup of water as ordinary water. The spirit sees the cup of water as blood, pus or mucus. The god sees the cup of water as pure nectar.

In realm of hell, there are the sufferings of cold and heat. In the realm of spirits there are the sufferings of hunger and thirst and in the realm of animals, the sufferings of being the slaves of mankind and the sufferings of eating each other. In the realm of humans, there are the sufferings of dissatisfaction, sufferings of uncertainty, sufferings of not finding the objects of desire, the sufferings of meeting with undesirable objects, sufferings of separation from desired objects, sufferings of loneliness, and the sufferings of sickness, aging and death. In the realm of gods there are the sufferings of knowing the time of one's death and where one is going to be reborn, seeing the signs of death, such as terrible smells, armpit smells, diminishing of the lights of the body and feeling uncomfortable even sitting on their favorite chair. In the realm of demigods there are the sufferings of fighting all the time, suffering of jealousy towards gods' possessions and their happy state of life.

According to Buddhism, of the six realms the human realm of existence or life is the most desirable, precious and meaningful because being a human has eighteen great qualities; eight great freedoms, and ten favorable conditions. These qualities provide all the opportunities for spiritual practice, which eventually leads to enlightenment or liberation from the chain of life that

wanders in these six realms. In addition, the human body contains the six elemental properties, which are necessary to accelerate spiritual realizations.

Therefore, the human realm is closest to the spiritual. It is important to understand this in order to make use of this human potential in meaningful way in terms of trying to reach our highest goals rather than seeking satisfaction through material possessions or power. Because of this Buddhist practitioners are always encouraging others not to fail to make use of this human potential to reach the spiritual mainly through engaging in a sound, ethical way of life, by means of consciously abstaining from the ten negative actions and by engaging in the cultivation of the ten positive actions.

**Student:** What can we do to relieve the suffering of those in the hell realms or in the hungry ghost realms? Can we help the gods and jealous gods?

**Geshe la:** There are several ways to help the suffering of those in the hell realms through prayers, generating compassion, sending positive energy and through some of the ritual ceremonies. No, we cannot help the gods and jealous gods.

**Student:** Are the Six Realms considered to be actual places or mostly psychological states?

**Geshe la:** Some are places and some are psychological states. The an animal, human and some of the god and demigod realms are actual places and others are psychological states.

**Student:** My question is essentially the same as the previous question: Do you not believe that we carry aspects of each of the six realms within us?

**Geshe la:** Are you asking physical or psychological aspect or both?

**Student:** Psychological, which is often exhibited as physical. For example: Would not an attitude of hot, uncontrolled anger be an element of the hot hell realm?

**Geshe la:** In that sense, yes. According to Buddhism, every one of us have been born in one of those realms therefore, we carry the subtle aspects in our psyche or consciousness, which will be expressed through our physical body.

**Student:** Is it then correct to say that one could move between and among certain of these realms in one lifetime?

**Geshe la:** Physically not at all. Psychologically, it is possible.

**Student:** What are the six elemental qualities of human birth?

**Geshe la:** These are earth, water, fire, air, space, and consciousness.

**Student:** What is the difference between air and space?

**Geshe la:** The fundamental quality of air is the subtle movement that exists in every object, even a dense rock. Space means mere vacuum, which allows for the possibility of action freely.

**Student:** Is it possible to quantify the realms, which is the largest, which the smallest, which holds the most beings?

**Geshe la:** I don't think it is possible to quantify the realms, but the hell realm, the ghost realm and animal realm hold the most beings in terms of numbers.

**Student:** Could you mention which particular practices might be helpful in relieving the suffering of those in the lower realms?

**Geshe la:** Prayers and the cultivation of compassion in conjunction with the practice of giving and taking. Here, giving and taking means giving one's positive attributes, merit, fortune, to others by means of loving-kindness and taking their suffering and their negatives upon oneself by means of compassion. Without having proper experience of genuine compassion and loving kindness the practice of giving and taking will be ineffective.