

In Buddhism, 31 planes of existence are mentioned. They are:-

1. 4 Hellish worlds, “Apāyas” or realms of suffering
2. The “Human” plane
3. 6 “Sensual”/Kāma Heavens or “Dēva” realms
4. 16 “Rupāvachara Brahmic” realms (with form)
5. 4 “Arupāvachara” (Formless) realms

It is usually taught in Dhamma sermons and discussions that these are worlds in which one may be reborn, after the end of **this** [present] life. While this is perfectly true, being limited to this interpretation will limit our knowledge of Buddhism to a level similar to Hinduism, Christianity and other theistic religions.

The interpretation, as discussed by Ven. Dēvānanda, is that these 31 planes are all compatible with various states of the mind. Let us look at it in this unique way, which only the Buddha was able to completely reveal.

The value of a birth in the Human realm

Humans live such a short time compared to the Dēva and Brahma realms (where the life spans are incredibly long). They are also much more joyful. In Chaturmahārājika (the lowest “Dēva” realm), the lifespan is 500 years in Human time. In the Brahma realms with form, life spans could be up to **16,000 Mahākalpas** (Great Aeons). In the Formless worlds, it is even higher, going up to **84,000 Mahākalpas** in the Nevasaññanasaññayatana (Neither perception nor non-perception).

So, what is special or great about this human world of ours, where will live out life in a short span of time (rarely more than 120 years even in the Buddha’s time)? The answer is that this is the place where you find many a variety of experiences. This is the University, the great library. In the Human realm (or Manussa lōka) one can find all the 31 planes of existence.

Now how is this possible? You could begin to understand this, if you related the planes of existence to the states of your mind. Let us consider each plane of existence with reference to a parallel mental state.

One exists as determined by ones mind

First, the bad news! Remember the last time when you were terribly angry with someone or some thing, and you found it hard to overcome that anger for some time? Like it or not, you were living in the worst hell during your period of anger. The worst hell or “Niraya” is in fact a “System” of Hells, of which Avīchi and Rourava are just two. You may not have fire around you, or you maybe in the middle of the Arctic, but if your mind is fired up with uncontrollable anger, then you certainly are “living” in hell (“Niraya”) inside your human body. If you die at such a moment, you may be re-born in a “Niraya” realm, and may live there for a very long period of time.

The next 3 “Hellish” realms are “Tirachchana” (Animal), “Prēta” (Ghostly) and “Asura” (Demons). One who lives in fear, “lives” in the Animal realm. Animals are typically said to live in fear. Most animal attacks human beings, it is said to be, motivated by their fear.

“Prēta” called ghosts or unhappy spirits are those who are living with an unsatisfied mind. Finally, “Asuras” are those who have the means of liberation, but are not able to use them.

Escape from these states of mind may be difficult for the untrained minds, but the concept behind this liberation is quite simple and easy to understand.

If one can learn to overcome one’s anger, no matter what goes on outside, if one can observe without reacting, one can easily escape the “Niraya” Hell, overcome one’s fear, and one is above the “Animal” state of mind. Make sure that you are always satisfied with what you receive, and you can rise above the “Prēta” realm. Learn the art of liberation, and practice it, and you will be released from the Asura realm.

Buddhist insight meditation is a useful tool. It trains one’s mind to observe the thoughts. The mind is usually perfectly capable of looking after itself as long as we do not interfere with its processes. However, one thing one must do is to observe its processes, as much as possible during every waking moment of one’s life.

Liberation towards the heavenly realms

The person who has some practice in controlling 4 of the basic “elements” solidity, liquidity, heat and motion (Pattavi, Apo, Thejo and Vayo) has reached the “Chatummahārājika” state of mind. Chatus is 4, and rājika (rule or control) refers to the control one has gained over the elements. In this case, Patthavi refers to inflexibility, Apo is lassitude, Thejo if heat (in the mind) and Vayo refers to shock, disturbance or trauma.

Progress upwards can gradually take one towards Tavatimsā, Yama, Tusita, Nimmānarati and Paranimmitavasavatti states of mind. The highest of these realms **Paranimmitavasavatti** is incorrectly said to be the realm of the Mara who is a malevolent being who tries to harm or tempt Buddhist from their path. Even some Buddhist monks interpret Dhamma in this way. This could not be true, since the heavenly “Dēva” realms can only contain beneficial beings. It’s probably an “import” from Hinduism or some other religion which takes a stand similar to the concept of Satan in Christianity.

The Buddha always advised us to cultivate good thoughts, not solely because they lead to good actions. Remember, that if one dies (ends this life), one would be immediately (re)born in the realm which corresponds to the state of mind one had just before the moment of death. Therefore, being in a mental state of less greed, less suffering and less delusion would always be beneficial in the subsequent birth.

The Brahma realms (and states of mind) are usually said to be achieved by those advanced in meditation. However, meditation does not have to be that of sitting in one place in the “Lotus” position. One can meditate while being engaged in routine activities.

These Brahma worlds start with the states/realms corresponding to the 1st Jhāna (Dhyāna), - the Parisajjā Brahma and Purōhitha Brahma - and end with those corresponding to the 4th Jhāna – Vehappala and Asañña satta (“Mindless”) Dēvas if one only considers the worlds with form containing Pruthujjana (unenlightened).

There are 5 Suddhāvāsa realms (Pure Abodes) where only enlightened beings of the 3rd stage or non-returners (Anāgāmis) can exist.

The 4 formless realms (states of mind) correspond to the Jhānas from 5th to 8th. They are Infinite space, Infinite consciousness, Nothingness and Neither perception nor non-perception, respectively.

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