

~ *The Six Realms of Samsaric Existence* ~

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In Tibetan Buddhism, we map out six realms to investigate the main mental afflictions that bind us to samsara. The six realms of samsaric existence are divided into the three lower and three higher realms. The three lower realms are the hell, hungry ghost, and animal realms. The three higher are the human, demigod, and god realms.

The first three—the hell, hungry ghost, and animal realms—correspond to anger, greed, and ignorance; the order suggests the levels of physical or emotional distress experienced in each. For example, the animal realm embodies the mental state of ignorance. Animals have wonderful qualities, but lack the capacity to reflect on their situation and to find a way out of hope and fear, or find release from living as prey or predator. Although animals have buddha nature just as we do, their circumstances inhibit their ability to recognize it.

Of course we humans have ignorance, too. It's the main obstacle to recognizing our inherent buddha qualities. But unlike animals, we are not defined by delusion and ignorance. For example, parents allow children to eat foods with high sugar contents, even as diabetes reaches epidemic proportions. As humans, we are endowed with the intelligence to make better choices. Even though the habits of desire might keep us eating too much sugar, our capacity to overcome destructive patterns exists nonetheless. Another example concerns the environment: in many areas of the world bathing and drinking water is poisoned by chemical and even human waste. There is nothing intelligent about this, yet recognizing positive alternatives exists within our power. We are not inherently bound to our unhealthy habits with regard to body and mind. We have the potential to wake up to the pure awareness that ignorance obscures. The afflictive states that characterize the realms are called *kleshas*, or

defilements, because they defile our capacity to recognize our original wisdom.

The Lower Realms: Animal, Hungry Ghost, and Hell Realms

Most often teachings on the six realms start with the lowest and work up. But of all the nonhuman realms, the animal one is the easiest for us to relate to. Let's start by taking a moment to remember an experience of getting caught in the basic impulses of our animal nature. Are there any recent instances when you craved a particular food, or experienced a primal desire for sex, or felt the fight-or-flight response to a stressful situation? Can you connect with the force of this longing? Animals live their entire lives driven by instinct and self-preservation. Many humans live in a similar state, inhibiting their capacity to know their true selves. The main point of exploring the nonhuman realms is to rejoice that we are not imprisoned by our afflictions, and to make sure that we don't misuse our opportunity for awakening.

The hungry ghost realm is inhabited by emaciated beings with bloated bellies and long skinny necks that can only swallow one drop of water at a time. These creatures, also called *pretas*, are condemned to be tortured by insatiable hunger and thirst.

What are we really talking about here? Greed. As a state of mind, greed cannot be satisfied, leaving us always grasping and desperate. Human beings know this realm intimately. With the global financial crisis of 2008, we witnessed the effects of minds so driven by greed and so restricted by selfishness that they became incapable of imagining the suffering that would surely result from their actions. When people are preoccupied with how much money they can amass each day by any means possible, including illegal and unethical actions, they are too consumed by the force of their insatiable need to benefit from dharma.

Hungry ghosts remain in this realm forever; some humans spend much of their time in this state. However, no human is destined to remain there. The point is to understand how these mental states

create obstacles to liberation—but also to understand that human beings are not imprisoned by them. We move in and out of different afflictive states of samsaric existence, but being born human gives us the key to free ourselves from our self-constructed prisons and to liberate ourselves from samsara altogether.

In the Tibetan map of the mind, hell describes the “lowest” realm, meaning it is the afflictive state with the most intense suffering. Hell beings are tortured by anger and aggression. Consider the term *blind rage*. Think of the last time you experienced an anger so hot that you became blind to any idea of what caused that feeling or what sane action might alleviate it. To have your mind totally gripped by anger causes a state of blindness to anger’s destructive effect on others and on yourself, and to any exits from this affliction.

In addition to the affliction of aggression, hell beings are tortured by their environment, which ranges from extreme heat to unimaginable cold. These conditions make hell beings trapped in their immediate misery. Imagine a moment of excruciating physical pain such as that caused by a pinched nerve, an infected tooth, or a muscle spasm; or imagine being the victim of torture. Now imagine enduring that agony from your first breath until your last. In these circumstances, the aspiration to recognize your buddha nature cannot come forth.

Please understand that “hell,” as well as every other realm, is not a location but a confused projection of the mind. External forces do not account for these mental states. The location of hell does not just confuse Westerners. Tibetans may also mistake these realms for external locations. That’s why Saljay Rinpoche used to tell me, “Everything is a manifestation of mind. There’s no hell ‘out there.’”

Since these realms describe human afflictions, it might be helpful to think about how the mind manifests various realms, rather than thinking that we were born into them. If we mistakenly think we were born into them, then we might consider this a destiny with no exit. But it doesn’t work that way. Freedom means not being dominated by anger, greed, ignorance, and other destructive emotions. Humans consumed by hatred live in a realm that we call

“hell” because there is no escape, and therefore no access to dharma, no possibility for awakening. Extreme states of mental affliction do not allow us to step back and watch what is happening. When we become identified with our negativity, we fall into the river and get swept away by the current.

These contemplations help develop the confidence that we can learn to step away from compulsion and are no longer tyrannized by the kleshas. We can make choices. Then we can access our original wisdom and nurture awareness. Therefore the suffering that most arouses our compassion is the absence of any opportunity for these beings to recognize their own enlightened qualities.

The Upper Realms: Human, Demigod, and God Realms

The human, the demigod, and god realms comprise the three higher realms of samsara. In the human realm, the main causes of suffering are craving, desire, and attachment. Attachment does not just refer to external phenomena such as houses, food, money, and partners. Our attachment becomes most intense around ideas that we hold about our- selves. We become attached to our ego, to our false sense of a contrived, fabricated persona that we cherish and protect. We put ourselves first and try to satisfy the demands made by our ideas of who we are and what we need.

The good news about the human realm is that it provides just enough suffering to cross over from samsara to nirvana. Not too much and not too little. Suffering so thoroughly oppresses beings in the lower realms that the possibility of liberation cannot arise. Our suffering does not overwhelm our longing for freedom, and our fleeting moments of happiness confirm that suffering is not fixed; suffering too is impermanent and changeable. Suffering and happiness together create the perfect conditions for awakening. Isn't this wonderful?

The realms inhabited by demigods and gods display the afflictions of jealousy and pride. (The demigod and god realms are often presented as two separate realms, but for ngondro we classify them as one realm.) The seductions of luxury and leisure overwhelm the

aspiration to wake up. Think of all the time, money, and energy some people spend on pleasure and on fulfilling sense desires—the finest food, the perfect couch, the best car, the ultimate hot tub, the ideal island vacation. They wrap their lives in material objects, creating a facade of false security and satisfaction, and all the while they are setting themselves up to be devastated by life’s inevitable fluctuations, and they remain unprepared for changing financial or social status, losing loved ones, growing old, failing health, and dying.

Meditators who indulge in this realm may spend more time arranging the beautiful images on their shrines than working with their minds. Or the seduction of comfort may be so strong that they practice while lying down on the couch. You know what the problem with this is? It’s harder to practice this way. The mind that indulges its taste for luxury and sense pleasures distances itself from the practice of awareness. Sitting up and putting some backbone into your efforts actually helps the mind to let go of its habitual traps, whether they are sensory indulgences, blind anger, or greed.

God-realm beings tend to use meditation as another way to pursue bliss, or to purposely create delightful experiences like flying to an island resort. Meditation becomes another way of seeking pleasure, rather than a method for clearly seeing the nature of mind and for experiencing things just as they are. Eventually, such misguided strategies for happiness return these beings to the lower states of suffering.

My father always emphasized that the human realm offered the best opportunity for awakening. But when I was a child, the god realms still seemed so enticing: luxurious palaces filled with delicious food, fantastic parties, great music. Then my father would explain that the complete satisfaction of the sense desires creates a degree of drunkenness that makes god-realm beings a little stupid. A drowsy kind of complacency guarantees a very long existence here. My father would say, “God-realm beings live without wisdom.” And just from his tone, I understood that living without wisdom was the saddest state of all.

Excerpt from *Transforming Confusion Into Clarity* by Yongey Mingyur Rinpoche, pp. 74–79.