

Three realms of existence

[三世間] (㊦ *san-seken*):

The realm of the five components or aggregates, the realm of living beings, and the realm of the environment. This concept originally appeared in *The Treatise on the Great Perfection of Wisdom*, and T'ien-t'ai (538–597) adopted it as a component of his doctrine of three thousand realms in a single moment of life. The concept of three realms of existence views life from three different standpoints and explains the existence of individual lives in the real world. The five components, a living being as their temporary combination, and that being's environment all manifest the same one of the Ten Worlds at any given point in time.

(1) The realm of the five components: An analysis of the nature of a living entity in terms of how it responds to its surroundings. The five components are form, perception, conception, volition, and consciousness. Form includes everything that constitutes the body and its sense organs, through which one perceives the outer world. Perception means the function of receiving or apprehending external information through one's sense organs. Conception indicates the function by which one grasps and forms some idea or concept about what has been perceived. Volition means the will to initiate action following the creation of conceptions about what has been perceived. Consciousness is the cognitive function of discernment that integrates the components of perception, conception, and volition. It distinguishes an object from all others, recognizes its characteristics, and exercises value judgments, such as distinguishing between right and wrong. From another viewpoint, while consciousness is regarded as the mind itself, the components of perception, conception, and volition are regarded as mental functions. Form corresponds to the physical aspect of life, and the other four components, to the spiritual aspect. The principle of the five components explains how life expresses each of the Ten Worlds differently. Someone in the world of hell, for example, will perceive, form a conception of, and react to the same object in a completely different manner than someone in the world of bodhisattvas.

(2) The realm of living beings: The individual living being, formed of a temporary union of the five components, who manifests or experiences any of the Ten Worlds. The realm of living beings refers to an individual as an integrated whole, but since no living being exists in perfect isolation; it is also taken to mean the collective body of individuals who interact with one another.

(3) The realm of the environment: The place or land where living beings dwell

and carry out life-activities. The state of the land is a reflection of the state of life of the people who live in it. A land manifests any of the Ten Worlds according to which of the Ten Worlds dominate in the lives of its inhabitants. The same land also manifests different worlds for different individuals. Therefore, Nichiren says, “There are not two lands, pure or impure in themselves. The difference lies solely in the positive or negative of our minds” (4). In making this statement, Nichiren was countering the popular view that there are separately existing impure lands and pure lands.

In addition, the three realms themselves are not to be viewed separately, but as aspects of an integrated whole, which simultaneously manifests any of the Ten Worlds.