

## **The Six Destinations of Rebirth and the Three Realms and Their Corresponding Liberation Fruitions**

For many people, the goal of cultivating and learning Buddhadharma is to seek liberation. In order to attain liberation, however, one must first understand the relationship between the fruitions of liberation and “the six destinations of rebirth and the three realms”. The six destinations of rebirth and the three realms describe the world in which all sentient beings live. We must first understand what our world looks like and what our position is in the dharma realm so that we know what to do and what direction to take to achieve our goals. The following chart lays out the relationship between the six destinations of rebirth and the three realms and the corresponding liberation fruitions.

The chart shows the different forms of existence within the six destinies of rebirth and the corresponding correlations between the karma<sup>1</sup> and the fruitions<sup>2</sup> of liberation, with the *tathāgatagarbha* (matrix of tathagata) as the foundation. It is extremely important to bear in mind the fact that whether it be the causality brought forth within the worldly three realms,<sup>3</sup> or the realization of the transmundane<sup>4</sup> fruitions of liberation, all dharmas are generated by the *tathāgatagarbha*; the myriad dharmas thus manifest.

The desire, form, and formless realms are the so-called “three realms,” while the spheres of hell denizens, hungry ghosts, animals, humans, demigods, and heavenly beings are usually referred collectively as the six destinations of rebirth, which are constrained only to the desire realm. The teachings about the human and deva vehicles are generally about the desire realm. However, if we are to elaborate upon liberation, we will need to expand the contents of deva heavens. In addition to the demigods and six deva heavens in the desire realm, there are four dhyana (meditative absorption) heavens in the form realm, including the first, second, third, and fourth dhyana, and heavens of the formless realm, including the state of infinite space, state of infinite consciousness, state of absolute nothingness, and state of neither perception nor non-perception.

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<sup>1</sup> Action, which includes the deeds of body, speech and mind.

<sup>2</sup> Ripening or results, which refer to the maturation of past deeds.

<sup>3</sup> The mundane world, pertaining to the ordinary world or to the practices of unenlightened sentient beings.

<sup>4</sup> Beyond the world or transcendent, pertaining to liberation or to the practices of enlightened sentient beings.

**Ālaya-Consciousness (Ālayavijñāna)—Matrix of the Tathagata (Tathāgatagarbha)**

Three Realms	Six Destinations of Desire Realm and States of Form and Formless Realm	Corresponding States and Deeds ( <i>karma</i> )	Corresponding States and Fruits ( <i>phala</i> )
Formless Realm ( <i>ārūpyadhātu</i> )	Four Heavens of the Formless Realm	The Karma of Meditative Concentration, Abandonment of the View of a Physical Body	Fourth Fruition ( <i>arhat</i> , worthy one); Third Fruition ( <i>anāgāmin</i> , non-returner)
Form Realm ( <i>rūpadhātu</i> )	Four Heavens of the Form Realm	The Karma of Meditative Concentration, Renunciation of the Attachment to the Desire Realm	
Desire Realm ( <i>kāma-dhātu</i> )	Six Heavens of the Desire Realm ( <i>devas</i> , heavenly beings)	Ten Wholesome Deeds, with Forbearance	Second Fruition ( <i>sakṛdāgāmin</i> , once-returner); First Fruition ( <i>srotaāpanna</i> , stream-enterer)
	Demigods ( <i>asuras</i> )	Ten Wholesome Deeds, with Aversions	
	Humans ( <i>manuṣyas</i> )	Five Precepts (Taking Refuge in the Three Jewels)	
	Animals ( <i>tiryaks</i> )	Heavy Foolishness and Benightedness	Non-liberated
	Hungry Ghosts ( <i>pretas</i> )	Heavy Selfishness and Stinginess	
	Hell Denizens ( <i>nārakas</i> )	Ten Unwholesome Deeds and Five Heinous Crimes	

Liberation means to be free from the cycle of birth and death in all the six destinations of rebirth in the desire realm, the four dhyana heavens in the form realm, and the four dhyana heavens in the formless realms (collectively referred to as the three realms). We must first understand the connection between the three realms and their corresponding karmas to gain a clear picture of what action or deed corresponds with which destination of rebirth; that is, the destination corresponds to what we do after death.

At the lowest level of the six destinations of rebirth, hells<sup>5</sup> are the karmic retribution for the ten unwholesome deeds and five heinous crimes. What then are the ten unwholesome deeds and five heinous crimes? The five heinous crimes include killing one's father, killing one's mother, killing an arhat, shedding the blood of a Buddha, and subverting a harmonious sangha. Parents, arhats, Buddha, and sangha are the kindest and most benevolent to sentient beings; therefore, anybody who violates or assails them will fall into one of the hells. One will also descend into hells if one commits the ten severe unwholesome deeds.<sup>6</sup> The *tathāgatagarbha* of each sentient being will facilitate the involuntary rebirth into the corresponding hells depending on the individual's act of the ten unwholesome deeds.

A sentient being committing an unwholesome karmic act with an angry and vengeful mind will, as a result, correspond with fire and fall into a raging-fire hell. Similarly, a callous and apathetic mind will correspond with cold ice and fall into an icy hell. The *tathāgatagarbha* of the individual will facilitate the rebirth into the corresponding place of the six destinations depending on one's mental behaviors and karmic actions.

Above the hell denizens are the hungry ghosts. Although the hungry ghosts have not committed the serious karmic act of the ten unwholesome deeds or five heinous crimes, their selfish and stingy behavior in previous lives led them to be reborn to the destination of hungry ghosts devoid of food, drink, and resources.

Above the hungry ghosts are animals. The karma of sentient beings in the animal world is predominated with ignorance. For example, it takes a long time for cats or dogs to learn simple tricks and some may never learn. Animals with even lower intellect than cats and dogs will have even more difficulty understanding the various aspects of the world due to their severe ignorance.

Above the animals realm are humans. Unlike animals, humans normally know not to kill each other like some animals do because humans have a sense

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<sup>5</sup> In Buddhist cosmography, there is an elaborate system of hells.

<sup>6</sup> The ten unwholesome deeds are: (1) killing, (2) stealing, (3) sexual misconduct, (4) lying, (5) slander or malicious speech, (6) offensive or harsh speech, (7) frivolous prattle, (8) greed, (9) malice or ill will, and (10) wrong views.



of morality. They have the capability to understand the wholesome deed of observing and keeping precepts to deserve to be humans.

Further up are sentient beings living in the different levels of heavens. If someone practices forbearance (part of the ten wholesome deeds) and tames his malice, he will become a heavenly being (deva) in the desire realm. If he practices the ten wholesome deeds, but still harbors severe aversion in the mind, he will be reborn to become a demigod (heavenly asura).

Sentient beings in the six destinations of rebirth are closest to us humans because we can see them or be in contact with them. Heavenly beings may make contact with humans and help them learn and cultivate the ten wholesome deeds so that they can be reborn into the heavens. This is because heavenly beings enjoy having more relatives of their kind to enjoy life together. On the other hand, hungry ghosts may make contact with humans because resources in the sphere of the hungry ghosts are very scarce and they want to interact with humans in order to obtain food offerings. Usually, our naked eye can see humans and animals but not ghosts or deities. How can we distinguish between deities and ghosts? If it was a heaven deity that we supposedly encountered, he would teach us wholesome deeds without asking for food in return. Spirits of hungry ghosts may also make contact with humans; they will perform tasks for us but will ask for animal flesh or even human stool, urine, blood, pus, or tears in return. If the sentient being is a heaven deity, he will loathe such a diet since heavenly food is much better than that of humans. Therefore, we can tell the difference between heaven deities and spirits of the hungry ghosts based on their dietary preferences. Now that we know the virtuous reward of hungry ghosts is much less than and inferior to ours, and their wisdom is also lower than ours, we should not believe what they teach because they have neither the necessary virtue nor wisdom. All we need to do is to provide food to them.

If a sentient being wants to ascend from the desire realm to the form realm, he will need to practice to acquire the required karmic retribution of meditative concentration (samadhi) to attain the first dhyana. If he wants to advance further, he will need to eradicate the future karmic retribution of his heavenly body. Lust and avarice of the desire realm will need to be eliminated first before one practices meditative concentration conducive for the form realm. He has to eliminate the greed for food and sexual desire because these will continue to bind the person in the desire heavens, hence, the term “desire realm.” After having eliminated the lust of the desire realm, he will be able to bring forth the meditative power of the first dhyana or above of the form realm. Hence, to find out whether a person has already achieved any dhyana realization, we need only to know whether the person has eliminated the attachment to the desire realm. The recluses and Brahmins in the era of the Buddha understood this basic principle in the dharma realm, so they could be born into the form realm after death by eliminating the attachment to the desire realm. They could even

be born into the formless realm by further eliminating all the attachment to the form realm, including their heavenly bodies. However, wherever they were reborn, they were still trapped in the cycle of rebirth in the three realms due to their severe self-attachment which prevents the non-Buddhist practitioners from being able to liberate themselves from the cyclic rebirth.

From the chart above, we can see that in order to result in the karma of the liberation fruitions, one must secure a rebirth above the three unfortunate spheres of animals, hungry ghosts, and hells because no one can achieve liberation in the three unfortunate destinations of rebirth. To avoid falling into the three unfortunate destinations, one must observe and keep the five precepts<sup>7</sup> after taking refuge in the Three Jewels.

What then needs to be learned and cultivated to liberate oneself from the cycle of rebirth? We must first understand that there are four fruitions of liberation in the Sound-hearer Vehicle (*śrāvakayāna*). The first fruition of *srotaāpanna* (stream-enterer) is attained through elimination of the Three Fetters. The second fruition of *sakrdāgāmin* (once-returner) involves mitigating greed, aversion, and delusion. The third fruition of *anāgāmin* (non-returner) is realized through emancipation from desires of the desire realm. The fourth fruition of arhat is achieved with elimination of all attachments to the three realms.

To attain the first fruition of the Sound-hearer vehicle as a human, one will need to eliminate the Three Fetters. What are the Three Fetters? They are misconception about self, misconception about precepts, and skepticism about true reality. After having attained the first fruition of Sound-hearer vehicle through eliminating the Three Fetters, a person can be liberated from the cyclic rebirth after a maximum of seven more lifetimes between the human and heaven realms.

If a person continues to practice the second fruition of the Sound-hearer Vehicle, he must reduce his level of greed, aversion, and delusion. If he manages to mitigate most of their greed of the desire realm, he will become a once-returner and be able to reach emancipation from the cycle of rebirth after returning as a human only once.

Only after having completely eliminated his attachment to the desire realm can a person in the desire realm bring forth the first dhyana. Coupled with the elimination of misconception about self he will attain the third fruition of the Sound-hearer Vehicle, become a non-returner, and never be reborn as a

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<sup>7</sup> The five precepts are to abstain from (1) killing living creatures (usually means not killing human beings), (2) taking what is not given, (3) engaging in sexual misconduct, (4) lying (commonly defined as not to lie about achieving high states of attainment or supernatural powers), and (5) consuming alcohol (more broadly intoxicants that cause heedlessness).



human again in the future. If he is reborn into the heavens of the form realm, he will use meditative absorption to fulfill the need for food instead. In addition, he will have a genderless body since he has already eliminated sexual desire.

After having attained the third fruition, a person can stride toward liberation because he is liberation-bound. However, to find liberation in this very life, he must realize the fourth fruition of arhat. An arhat of the fourth fruition has already eliminated all the attachments to the three realms—desire, form, and formless realms. After having completely eliminated the attachment to the three realms, he has liberated himself from all the spheres of the three realms.

However, there are different types of fourth fruition arhats: arhats liberated through insight, arhats with twofold liberation, and great arhats with three insights and six supernatural powers. An arhat liberated through insight is liberated “dependent upon specific occasion,” which means he will have to wait for his due time to enter nirvana when his lifespan ends. This indicates that an arhat liberated through insight cannot immediately liberate himself from the current transmigration because he has not fully realized the four meditative absorptions associated with the form realm and the four meditative absorptions of the formless realm. As a result, he cannot immediately terminate his own life at will but has to wait till the end of his lifespan in this last life to enter nirvana. However, a third fruition or fourth fruition noble person will definitely have already realized meditative absorptions, if not fully, because his stage of realization is in either the form or formless realm, which surpasses the desire realm.

Hence, we can tell that wisdom and meditative concentration are the two main foci in Buddhist practice and cultivation. The practice of signless Buddha-mindfulness introduced in the book *Signless Buddha-Mindfulness* written by Venerable Xiao Pingshi is a clear and easy-to-follow method for cultivating meditative concentration. In general, practices that utilize or rely on any of the three kinds of signs—images, sounds, and words—make practitioners more susceptible to resonating with demons and spirits. Hence, many people practicing meditative concentration run into demon-interference if they are not aware of this potential problem. The practice of signless Buddha-mindfulness helps avoid ties to images, sounds, and words and therefore enables practitioners to cultivate meditative concentration safely.

As an arhat liberated through insight continues on to advanced cultivation, he can attain the “cessation of sensation and perception” (“equipoise of cessation”) after having completed and realized the four absorptions of the form realm and the four absorptions of the formless realm. After attaining the cessation of sensation and perception, he has the ability to liberate himself anytime; he is no longer an arhat liberated through insight who has to wait for time and condition, but can rely on his realized meditative concentration power

to decide when to liberate himself from the cyclic birth and death in this lifetime. For instance, when encountering a harsh environment, an arhat liberated through insight will not be capable of liberating himself immediately. He has to patiently endure the harsh environment until the end of his current lifespan. However, an arhat with twofold liberation can immediately end his own life through his wisdom and realization of meditative absorptions; this is called “liberation not dependent upon specific occasion.”

The third kind of arhat is a great arhat endowed with three insights and six supernatural powers. This is the highest realization among the fruitions of liberation of Sound-hearers. What are the three insights and six supernatural powers? The three insights are: (1) insight into the future rebirth destinies of all other beings (insight of divine eye), (2) the ability to remember one's own former lives, and (3) the insight of the extinction of the contaminants. The six supernatural powers are the supernatural power of: (1) divine eyes, (2) divine ears, (3) knowledge of others' minds, (4) knowledge about past lives, (5) unimpeded bodily action, and (6) extinction of the contaminants. A non-Buddhist can only attain the first five supernatural powers but not the supernatural power of extinction of contaminants, which is a unique supernatural power acquired only by Buddhist arhats. What is the extinction of contaminants? The contaminants refer to the afflictions of the three realms. If one can eliminate all the afflictions of the three realms, one will have acquired the supernatural power of “extinction of the contaminants,” and that can only be achieved through the Buddhist wisdom of liberation.

There are differences between the three insights and the six supernatural powers. Why is one named the insight of divine eye while the other the supernatural power of divine eye? The supernatural power of divine eye can be attained by non-Buddhist recluses and Brahmans. After having realized the supernatural power, they can use their divine eye to observe the phenomena of the dharma realm, but they do not know the underlying causes and effects; thus, they only possess the supernatural power of divine eye. However, one who has the insight of divine eye will be able to observe the phenomena of the dharma realm and simultaneously understands the underlying causes and effects. For instance, when a non-Buddhist practitioner with the supernatural power of divine eye saw a fish in a river being born into the heaven after death, he might conclude that the fish ascended to heaven after death because of its continuous submersion in water. Thus, he might establish a “water precept” such as if one submerged in water for a certain period of time each day, one could ascend to heaven and liberate oneself from the shackles of the mundane world. However, the reasoning in relation to causality is incorrect. On the other hand, one with insight of the divine eye could see that the fish was reborn into heaven due to the exhaustion of its karma in the animal sphere when it still possessed remnants of the heavenly merit from its previous lives. Hence, one with insight of divine eye could correctly explain that the fish was born into heaven due not to submersion in water, but the ten wholesome deeds



committed in its previous lives that had yet to mature. As the result of the ripening of the karma of the ten wholesome deeds, it was able to be born to heaven.

From the above, we know that a great arhat has witnessed and understood all the different states of the six destinations of rebirth and the three realms with his realized insights and supernatural powers. Because of this, he is absolutely certain that he will attain complete liberation, since he has extinguished all the desires and attachments in the six destinations of rebirth and the three realms and will not be reborn (“arhats—one who will have no rebirth in the future life,” Vol. 12 of the *Miscellaneous Agama Sutra* [*Samyukta Agama*]). Hence, an arhat with the three insights and six supernatural powers liberates himself from the three realms through a positivist practice approach.

This leads us to another conclusion: “The realization of an arhat is not unsurpassed.” For example, above the realization of the arhat liberated through insights is the realization of the arhat with twofold liberation; above the latter is the realization of the great arhat with three insights and six supernatural powers. Even the great arhat with three insights and six supernatural powers is surpassed by the attainment achieved through the vehicle of Buddha Bodhi. Hence, we know that an arhat is surpassable. On the other hand, the Buddha has not only attained all the fruitions and elimination of “determinative birth and death”<sup>8</sup> realized by an arhat, but also completely eliminated “transformational existence”<sup>9</sup> and realized the ultimate liberation of “nirvāṇa of no abiding”,<sup>10</sup> also known as “nirvana abiding in neither saṃsara<sup>11</sup> nor nirvāṇa.”

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<sup>8</sup> Determinative birth and death is one of the two categories of saṃsara, along with transformational existence (transfigurational birth and death). This is saṃsara as experienced by ordinary sentient beings taking rebirth in the three realms. It is called “determinative birth and death” because the physical bodies of ordinary sentient beings are restricted in their longevity, appearance, and size. The major causes and conditions that lead to determinative birth and death are contaminated action and afflictive hindrances.

<sup>9</sup> Transformational existence is one of the two categories of saṃsara, along with determinative birth and death. This is saṃsara as experienced by arhats and great bodhisattvas. It is called “transformational existence” or “transfigurational birth and death” because the great bodhisattvas undergo birth and death in the three realms through the transfigurational birth and death of their mind-made body not the determinative birth and death of their physical body. Although these noble ones appear to be reborn, their rebirths are actually transfigurations of their mind-made bodies, which may be manipulated at will to change their appearances and longevity of their lifespans. While they have overcome the afflictive hindrances that tie them to saṃsara, they have not eliminated cognitive hindrances that differentiate them from the Buddhas.

<sup>10</sup> Nirvāṇa as experienced by the Buddhas, who have eliminated both the afflictive hindrances and cognitive hindrances. It is nirvāṇa that abides in neither the saṃsara of ordinary sentient beings nor the nirvāṇa with remainder or nirvāṇa without remainder that is abided by the arhats.

<sup>11</sup> Cycle of birth and death.