

Buddhist Cosmology

There are many religions that believe in the existence of heaven and hell, and Buddhism, too, affirms their existence. In Buddhist cosmology, heaven is divided into twenty-eight levels.

These twenty-eight heavens exist within three different realms: the *desire realm*, in which there exists six levels of heaven; the *form realm*, in which there exists eighteen levels of heaven; and the *formless realm*, in which there exists four levels of heaven.

Six Heavens of the Desire Realm

The beings who live in the six heavens of the desire realm are very similar to human beings. They have material bodies and physical needs just as we do, and they enjoy the spiritual life. These beings also excessively indulge in the desires for food, drink, and sex; this is why it is said that these heavens are located in the "desire realm".

In addition to the six heavens mentioned above, there are also five other domains within the desire realm: the *human realm* with its four continents, the *asura realm*, the *animal realm*, the *hungry ghost realm*, and the *hell realm*.

The Eighteen Heavens of the Form Realm

The beings who reside in the heavens of the form realm lack the desire for sex, food, and drink. They also are superior to human beings in beauty, spiritual love, community, and social organization. These beings are sustained by the pleasure of meditation as we are sustained by food. This is why they are known as the heavens of the "form realm".

The Four Heavens of the Formless Realm

Those beings who reside in the heavens of the formless realm have completely transcended the impediments caused by sex, food, and the physical form. They are not attached to any form appearance, and only have a purely spiritual existence. Just as in the form realm, these beings subsist on meditative bliss and consciousness itself.

The twenty-eight heavens mentioned above may be considered superior or inferior to each other in terms of how pleasurable they are, but they are all still realms of delusion, for it is impossible for heavenly beings to escape the cycle of birth death. That is why the *Lotus Sutra* says, "The turmoil of the three realms is like a burning house, for they are filled with a host of sufferings that are terrible and frightening to behold."

The three realms are full of the suffering of birth, old age, sickness, and death, and these sufferings harass the bodies and minds of sentient beings like a house on fire, preventing us from dwelling in peace. That is why sentient beings should look for a way out of the three realms. Only by attaining *nirvana* can we be completely liberated.

In sum, in Buddhist cosmology there are many layers of heavenly realms, but these realms are not so far away that they cannot be reached. As long as ordinary individuals strive to do good and accumulate merit, they have the same opportunity to be reborn in heavenly realms as heavenly beings.

Heaven of the Thirty-Three Gods

The heaven of the thirty-three gods is one of the six heavens of the desire realm, and is ruled by Sakra-devanamin-indra, also known as Lord Indra.

There is a heaven beyond: the heaven of the thirty-three gods. Beyond the sky are the heavenly immortals. Such heavenly immortals were once ordinary people, though one doubts that the minds of ordinary people are so resolute.

This particular heaven is notable in Buddhism, because the Buddha once went there for three months to teach the Dharma to his mother, Queen Maya, to repay her kindness for giving birth to him.

During this time when the Buddha was gone, King Udayana of Kausambi had fallen sick over his longing for the Buddha. His ministers consulted with the Venerable Maudgalyayana, known as the disciple who was foremost in supernatural powers. Maudgalyayana used such powers to transport craftsmen to where the Buddha was teaching so that they could directly observe the Buddha's glorious appearance and carve a five-foot tall statue of the Buddha using the best sandalwood. This is said to be the beginning of the tradition of carving Buddha images.

Among the six realms of existence, the heavenly realms are where living beings have the greatest karmic rewards and enjoy the greatest pleasure. Heavenly beings are still subject to the five signs of decay and re-entry into the cycle of birth and death after they have exhausted their positive karma. But, when compared to the human realm, heavens still have many attractive qualities.

For example, the bodies of heavenly beings emit light, and they can fly freely wherever they please. The extreme pleasures of their existence exceed any pain: palaces and gardens are prepared their use and their sublime clothing and food manifest at a single thought.

There is no need to work or rush about as there is in human life, nor is there any worry of hunger or want.

The Buddhist sutras say that among the various distinctions of heavenly beings, those who are taller have garments that shine more brightly. For example, beings of the Brahma-parisadya Heaven do not wear clothing at all, for they are naturally cloaked in garments of sublime radiance.

The levels of meditative concentration that are possible in the heavenly realms are more enjoyable than those of the human realm. Heavenly beings are also considerably taller and live longer than human beings. In terms of height, a height of six feet is about average for modern humans, but beings in the Caturmaharajika Heaven reach a height of nine hundred feet if calculated in our measurements. With each successively higher heavenly realm, the average height of the beings who reside there increases, with the supreme heaven of the form realm being home to beings with the gigantic stature of 265,000 kilometers. The distance from Taipei to Kaohsiung in Taiwan is only 380 kilometers; which should give us an idea of the colossal height of these heavenly beings. If a human being were to gaze up at one, it would be like an ant looking up at one of us – we could not help but marvel at such perfection, and likely feel that such a state is far beyond our reach.

Considering the life span of heavenly beings, it is a blessing for a human being to live to the age of seventy, while anyone who lives to be one hundred is respected by all. Even Pengzu, the Chinese sage who was said to live for eight hundred years, would pale in comparison to the longevity of heavenly beings.

How long do heavenly beings live? Beings who reside in the Heaven of the Thirty-three Gods live for five hundred “heavenly years”, which is equivalent of nine million human years. In the highest formless heaven of neither thought nor non-thought, beings live for eighty thousand large *kalpas*. Such longevity is beyond measure.

Buddhism does not say that we should be satisfied with rebirth in heaven, though a heavenly rebirth should still be praised, for it requires many lifetimes of cultivating the ten wholesome actions – entire *kalpas* of performing acts of generosity and upholding the precepts. To be reborn in the higher heavenly realms even requires attaining levels of meditative concentration. For this reason there is a Chinese saying, “Being reborn in heaven is its own reward. Immortality is not attained just by seeking it.”

In Buddhism, doing good deeds leads to rebirth in heaven, and doing bad means falling into hell. In Buddhist thought, there are eighteen levels of hell, which are comprised of eight cold hells, eight hot hells, the isolated hells, and the adjacent hells.

Among the three lower realms, beings in hell receive the most suffering. Sentient beings fall into the hells and experience suffering in accordance with their karma.

Buddhas, on the other hand, manifest themselves in the hell realms to liberate sentient beings in accordance with their compassion and vows. For example, Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva vowed: "Not until hell is vacant shall I become a Buddha; only when all sentient beings are liberated will I attain *bodhi*." Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva considered, "If I do not enter hell, then who will?" enabling him to teach liberation throughout the hell realm, liberating beings from suffering.

Source: Chuang, Venerable Tzu. *Faxiang: A Buddhist Practitioner's Encyclopedia*. Translated by Robert Smitheram. Los Angeles, California: Buddha's Light Publishing, 2012. (Pages 112-124.)

In sum, Buddhists have no doubt that both heaven and hell exist, because they are within the scope of *samsara*; everyone may experience heaven or hell, and in fact, everyone has been to heaven or hell at one time or another.

Those who practice the five precepts and the ten good deeds to a superior degree will be reborn in the heavens, and those who commit the great wickedness of the ten evil deeds or five heinous crimes will go to the hells.

When their karmic retribution of suffering ends, hell-dwellers have the potential to be reborn in the heavens, and after their good rewards have been exhausted, sentient beings in the heavens could potentially descend to the hells. For Buddhists, heaven is an enjoyable place but not an everlasting paradise, and hell is a place of agony but is not eternal.

Because people perform varying degrees and amounts of good and evil deeds, heaven and hell have different levels, too. The hell to which one goes depends on the type and amount of evil one has committed. In truth, whether one goes to heaven or hell depends solely on one's karma. If one has "divine" karmic energy, one will be reborn in a heaven; if one has "infernal" karmic energy, one will end up in hell.

Source: Yen, Chan Master Sheng. *Orthodox Chinese Buddhism: A Contemporary Chan Master's Answers to Common Questions*. Translated by Douglas Gildow and Otto Chang. Edited and annotated by Douglas Gildow. Elmhurst, New York: Dharma Drum Publications, 2007. (Pages 40-41.)