

On the Principle of Three Thousand Realms in a Single Moment of Life



THE Twelve-linked Chain of Causation

Question: What is the twelve-linked chain of causation as it applies to the process of transmigration?

Answer: The first link is ignorance. *The Dharma Analysis Treasury* says: “The state resulting from past delusion is ignorance.” That is to say, ignorance represents the earthly desires of love and craving that one gave rise to in the past. Thus a son may conceive hatred for his father and love for his mother, or a daughter may conceive hatred for her mother and love for her father, as described in the ninth volume of *Dharma Analysis Treasury*.

The second link is action. *Dharma Analysis Treasury* says: “The various deeds carried out in the past are called action.” That is, the deeds or karma one has created in the past are called action. There are two kinds of karma. The first is “karma leading to rebirth,” that is, karma that determines what realm of existence we will be reborn into. The second is “completing karma,” which represents all the karma not included in the above category. It is past karma that determines such things as whether one will break a leg or cut a finger. This is completing karma.

The third link is consciousness. *Dharma Analysis Treasury* says: “Consciousness is the one of the five aggre-

gates that is crucial in the forming of life.” The five aggregates are already present when the child is in the mother’s body. The five aggregates are form, perception, conception, volition, and consciousness. They are also known as the five components.

The fourth link is name and form. *Dharma Analysis Treasury* says: “What precedes the six sense fields is name and form.”

The fifth link is the six sense fields. *Dharma Analysis Treasury* says: “After the eyes and other organs are produced, but before the three elements of perception,¹ the six sense fields come into being.” The six sense fields are the activities, or output, of the six sense organs, the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind.

The sixth link is contact. *Dharma Analysis Treasury* says: “In the process of perception, the stage before there is any awareness of whether the perception is pleasing, unpleasing, or neutral, is known as contact.” This is the stage in which one does not yet understand that fire is hot, that water is cold, or that a knife is something that can cut a person.

The seventh link is sensation, or perception. *Dharma Analysis Treasury* says: “The stage before any inordinate desire exists is called sensation.” At this time one understands that a thing is hot or

cold, but has not yet experienced any sexual desire.

The eighth link is desire. *Dharma Analysis Treasury* states: “The craving for material goods or sexual satisfaction is called desire.” This refers to the time when one desires a woman and has feelings of sexual desire.

The ninth link is attachment. *Dharma Analysis Treasury* says: “Because one hopes to acquire various objects, one races here and there in search of them, and this is called attachment.” This means that while one is in this present life, one pursues worldly affairs and is greedy to grasp and acquire things that belong to others.

The tenth link is existence. *Dharma Analysis Treasury* states: “Existence means that one performs karmic actions that will determine the kind of fruit, or state of existence, that one will have at one’s next birth.” That is, existence here refers to the carrying out of karmic actions that will lead to one’s receiving life once more in a future existence.

The eleventh link is birth. *Dharma Analysis Treasury* says: “Birth refers to the receiving of life in one’s next existence.” This refers to the time when one receives life in a future existence and enters the womb of one’s mother.

The twelfth link is aging and death. *Dharma Analysis Treasury* says: “Until one reaches the stage of sensation in one’s future existence, one is subject to aging and death.” To be subject to birth, aging, and death means that one suffers the anxieties and distress of aging and death.

Question: How do the twelve links in the chain of causation apply to the three realms of past, present, and future and the two categories of cause and effect?

Answer: Ignorance and action represent two causes in a being’s past existence. Consciousness, name and form, the six sense organs, contact, and sen-

sation represent five effects that appear in a being’s present existence. Desire, attachment, and existence represent three causes appearing in a being’s present existence. Birth and aging and death represent two effects that will appear in a being’s future existence.

I will summarize these as follows: two causes in the past (ignorance, action), five effects in the present (consciousness, name and form, the six sense organs, contact, sensation), three causes in the present (desire, attachment, existence), and two effects in the future (birth, aging and death).

Question: How does the twelve-linked chain of causation operate when it applies to the process of transmigration?

Answer: Ignorance is the condition that causes or brings about action, action brings about consciousness, consciousness brings about name and form, name and form bring about the six sense organs, the six sense organs bring about contact, contact brings about sensation, sensation brings about desire, desire brings about attachment, attachment brings about existence, existence brings about birth, and birth brings about the anxieties and distress of aging and death.

Thus it is that one transmigrates through the sea of the sufferings of birth and death. This is how one comes to be an ordinary mortal.

Question: How does one go about wiping out the twelve-linked chain of causation, thereby attaining emancipation?

Answer: Wipe out ignorance and action will be wiped out. Wipe out action and consciousness will be wiped out. Wipe out consciousness and name and form will be wiped out. Wipe out name and form and the six sense organs will be wiped out. Wipe out the six sense organs and contact will be wiped out. Wipe out contact and sensation will be wiped out. Wipe out

sensation and desire will be wiped out. Wipe out desire and attachment will be wiped out. Wipe out attachment and existence will be wiped out. Wipe out existence and birth will be wiped out. Wipe out birth and this will wipe out the anxieties and distress of aging and death. This is how one wipes out the chain of causation, thereby attaining emancipation. This is how the Buddha frees himself from earthly desires.

In my view, persons who are in the intermediate state between death and a new life are not affected by all of the links in the twelve-linked chain of causation. Likewise, beings in the heavenly realm are not affected by all of them. And likewise, beings in the world of formlessness are not affected by all of them.

The Principle of Three Thousand Realms in a Single Moment of Life

[The Chinese character translated as "life" here literally means "thought." In the T'ien-t'ai doctrine, it is also used in the sense of "mind" or "life," which includes or pervades the entire universe. Hence in the quotations below these terms are used interchangeably.]

The ten factors of life are as follows:

(1) Appearance is the body. (*The Profound Meaning of the Lotus Sutra*, volume two, says: "Appearance is the aspect of things that can be discerned by observation from the outside." *The Annotations on "The Profound Meaning of the Lotus Sutra,"* volume six, says: "Appearance exists only in what is material.")

(2) Nature is the mind. (*Profound Meaning*, volume two, says: "Nature is what resides within a thing and will not change by itself." *On "The Profound Meaning,"* volume six, says: "Nature exists only in what is spiritual.")

(3) Entity is the body and mind together. (*Profound Meaning*, volume two, says: "The principal substance of a thing is called entity.")

(4) Power is also the body and mind together. (*Great Concentration and Insight* says: "Power is latent ability.")

(5) Influence is also the body and mind together. (*Great Concentration and Insight* says: "The exercise of ability is called influence.")

(6) Internal cause pertains to the mind. (*Great Concentration and Insight* says: "Internal cause is what calls forth an effect. It is also known as karmic action.")

(7) Relation. (*Great Concentration and Insight* says: "Relation, or conditions, help karmic action to produce its effect.")

(8) Latent effect. (*Great Concentration and Insight* says: "Latent effect refers to [potential] achievement.")

(9) Manifest effect. (*Great Concentration and Insight* says: "Manifest effect is what results from a cause.")

(10) Consistency from beginning to end. (*Profound Meaning*, volume two, says: "Appearance constitutes the beginning and manifest effect constitutes the end.")

The three realms of existence are as follows: (1) The realm of the five components. (*Great Concentration and Insight* says: "Since the five components and the eighteen elements of perception differ in each of the Ten Worlds, we speak of the realm of the five components.")

(2) The realm of living beings. (*Great Concentration and Insight* says: "How can the living beings in each of the Ten Worlds fail to show differences? Hence we speak of the realm of living beings.")

(3) The realm of the environment. (*Great Concentration and Insight* says: "The surroundings in which the living beings of the Ten Worlds exist are referred to as the realm of the environment.")

In the new translations of the sutras the five components are called the five aggregates. The word *on* of *go'on*, or

five components, means collection or accumulation.

The first of the five components is form. This refers to the five types of form or color.²

The second of the five components is perception. This refers to the taking in [of one's surroundings].

The third component is conception. *Dharma Analysis Treasury* says: "Conception is the function that forms mental images."

The fourth component is volition. Volition is what creates or motivates action.

The fifth component is consciousness. Consciousness is what carries out the process of discernment or discrimination.

Volume five of *Great Concentration and Insight*, quoting a doctrinal commentary, states: "Consciousness first carries out the process of discernment or discrimination. Then perception takes in a thing, conception forms an image of the thing, volition decides whether to go along with or reject the thing, and form responds to the decision of volition."

On the Hundred Worlds, Thousand Factors, and Three Thousand Realms

Because of the mutual possession of the Ten Worlds, this makes one hundred worlds. (1) Hell (realm of living beings, ten factors), realm of the five components (ten factors), realm of the environment (ten factors, under the earth, red-hot iron).

(2) The world of hungry spirits (realm of living beings, ten factors), realm of the five components (ten factors), realm of the environment (ten factors, under the earth).

(3) The world of animals (realm of living beings, ten factors), realm of the five components (ten factors), realm of the environment (ten factors, water, land, air).

(4) The world of asuras (realm of liv-

ing beings, ten factors), realm of the five components (ten factors), realm of the environment (ten factors, border or bottom of the sea).

(5) The world of human beings (realm of living beings, ten factors), realm of the five components (ten factors), realm of the environment (ten factors, four continents surrounding Mount Sumeru).

(6) The world of heavenly beings (realm of living beings, ten factors), realm of the five components (ten factors), realm of the environment (ten factors, palaces).

(7) The world of voice-hearers (realm of living beings, ten factors), realm of the five components (ten factors), realm of the environment (ten factors, Land of Sages and Common Mortals).

(8) The world of cause-awakened ones (realm of living beings, ten factors), realm of the five components (ten factors), realm of the environment (ten factors, Land of Sages and Common Mortals).

(9) The world of bodhisattvas (realm of living beings, ten factors), realm of the five components (ten factors), realm of the environment (ten factors, Land of Sages and Common Mortals, Land of Transition, Land of Actual Reward).

(10) The world of Buddhahood (realm of living beings, ten factors), realm of the five components (ten factors), realm of the environment (ten factors, Land of Eternally Tranquil Light).

Volume five of *Great Concentration and Insight* states: "When life and an object of perception come into contact, then all three realms of existence and three thousand aspects arise in life."

Volume five of *The Annotations on "Great Concentration and Insight"* says: "When at last he revealed the method

of meditation in *Great Concentration and Insight*, he at the same time employed the 'three thousand realms' as a way to understand. This principle is the ultimate revelation of his final and supreme teaching. That is why Chang-an states in his introduction [to *Great Concentration and Insight*], '*Great Concentration and Insight* reveals the teaching that T'ien-t'ai Chih-che himself practiced in the depths of his being.' He had good reason for saying this. I hope that those who read this work and seek to understand it will not allow their minds to be distracted by anything else."

The same volume states: "If one does not understand the wonderful region of enlightenment represented by the principle of three thousand realms in a single moment of life, then how can one be aware of how all phenomena are contained in a single entity? And if one does not understand that, then no phenomena in the three thousand realms will ever break free from the ignorance of each moment of life, and therefore one will only experience painful causes that lead to painful results." And it also says: "All karmic actions are contained within the Ten Worlds, the hundred worlds, the thousand factors, and the three thousand realms."

Volume two of *On "The Profound Meaning"* states: "What exists in name is the realm of living beings, and what exists in reality are the realm of the five components and the realm of the environment. These make up the three realms of existence. The phenomena that comprise the thousand factors apply to all three realms of existence. Hence we speak of the three thousand realms."

Volume five of *On "Great Concentration and Insight"* states: "With regard to what is present in life at a single moment, if we did not employ the concept of the Ten Worlds, we would be unable to explain everything that

is encompassed there. If we did not employ the concept of the three truths, we could not fully explain the principle that is at work here. If we did not speak of the ten factors, we could not explain all the workings of cause and effect. And if we did not have the concept of the three realms of existence, we could not fully cover life and its environment."

Volume one of *The Annotations on "The Words and Phrases of the Lotus Sutra"* says: "If we did not have the concept of the three thousand realms, we could not convey all that is embraced within a single moment of life. And if we did not have the concept of the perfectly-endowed life, we could not explain how all three thousand realms can be contained within life."

Volume two of *Profound Meaning* says: "It is simply that the phenomena relating to the ordinary realms of existence are extremely wide in scope, while those relating to the realm of Buddhahood are extremely lofty, and therefore it is difficult for beginners in religious practice to contemplate them. But for beginners to contemplate the mind itself is relatively easy."

Volume five of *On "Great Concentration and Insight"* states: "T'ien-t'ai first quotes the passage from the Flower Garland Sutra: 'The mind is like a skilled painter, who creates various forms made up of the five components. Thus of all the phenomena throughout the entire world, there is not a single one that is not created by the mind. The Buddha is the same in nature as the mind, and living beings are the same in nature as the Buddha. The mind, the Buddha, and all living beings—these three are without distinction. . . . If one wishes to understand all the Buddhas of the three existences of past, present, and future, one should contemplate this truth: it is the mind that creates all the Thus Come Ones.'"

The Diamond Scalpel says: “The true aspect invariably manifests in all phenomena, and all phenomena invariably manifest in the ten factors. The ten factors invariably manifest in the Ten Worlds, and the Ten Worlds invariably manifest in life and its environment.”

Interpretation of the Three Bodies

First, with regard to the Dharma body, the Great Teacher T’ien-t’ai quotes a passage in the Nirvana Sutra and states: “All the various worldly truths are, as far as the Thus Come One is concerned, none other than the supreme truth. But ordinary living beings, due to their inverted ways of thinking, suppose that such truths are not part of the Law of the Buddha.”³

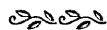
From this passage of commentary we can understand that although the concepts of self and other, environment and self, realm of the devil and Buddha realm, impurity and purity, cause and effect, appear to be opposites, they all in no way stand in opposition to the Dharma body of the Buddhas. Thus the disbelief of Sunakshatra is identical with the believing mind of the king of Lankā.⁴ And the doctrines of the Prajnāmita school of non-Buddhist believers,⁵ though they appear to be erroneous, are not different from the

correct views of the rich elder Sudatta.

One should understand, therefore, that the basis of the Dharma body is the entity of the ordinary living being. The religious practices and vows of the Buddhas of the ten directions are in fact meant to enable one to acquire this Dharma body.

Next, with regard to the reward body, the commentary by the Great Teacher T’ien-t’ai states: “The wisdom that accords with the true nature of phenomena, following the way that accords with the truth, reaches perfect enlightenment. Wisdom accords with the principle of the true nature, and because it abides by this principle, it is called ‘Thus.’ One comes in accordance with wisdom and hence the word ‘Come’ is used. Hence the term ‘Thus Come One of the reward body.’ This is called rohana, which is translated as ‘pure and full.’”⁶

This means that the wisdom that accords with the true nature of phenomena follows the way that accords with the truth. When the principle and the wisdom of perfect enlightenment become perfectly fused with the realm of phenomena, then the principle is called “Thus” and the wisdom is called “Come.”⁷



Background

Nichiren Daishonin wrote *On the Principle of Three Thousand Realms in a Single Moment of Life* in 1258. There is no known recipient or addressee; rather, it appears to be notes recorded in preparation for subsequent works.

The contents are divided into three parts. First, “The Twelve-linked Chain of Causation”; second, “The Principle of Three Thousand Realms in a Single Moment of Life”; third, “Interpreta-

tion of the Three Bodies.” These three interrelated subjects are key to an understanding of Buddhism.

In the first section, the Daishonin lists and defines each link of the twelve-linked chain of causation: ignorance, action, consciousness, name and form, the six sense fields, contact, sensation, desire, attachment, existence, birth, and aging and death.

He then answers the question of

how the twelve-linked chain of causation operates over the three existences, from one's past life to one's present life to one's future life, in terms of cause and effect.

Next he summarizes the operation of this causal chain first from the perspective of transmigration, that is, how the chain of causality keeps on transmigrating in a state of delusion and suffering, and then from the perspective of emancipation, or how one frees oneself from the chain of delusion and suffering.

In the second section covering the principle of three thousand realms in a single moment of life, the Daishonin explains the ten factors of life and the three realms of existence, the two components of that principle, and how they relate to the Ten Worlds. Because of the mutual possession of the Ten Worlds, these constituents form the hundred worlds, the thousand factors,

and the three thousand realms. All of them exist in a single moment of life.

He then proceeds to shed light on the significance of the principle of three thousand realms in a single moment of life by quoting from T'ien-t'ai's *Great Concentration and Insight*, from Miaolo's *Annotations on "Great Concentration and Insight," Annotations on "The Profound Meaning of the Lotus Sutra," Annotations on "The Words and Phrases of the Lotus Sutra,"* and *Diamond Scalpel*. These passages clarify that this all-inclusive principle constitutes an indispensable aid to understanding the true nature of life.

In the last section, "Interpretation of the Three Bodies," the Daishonin, citing T'ien-t'ai's interpretations, addresses the significance of the Dharma body and the reward body ascribed to the Buddha, but does not discuss the manifested body.

Notes

1. The three elements of perception are the six sense organs, six objects, and six consciousnesses. The six objects are objects perceived by the six sense organs, and contact between the six sense organs and their respective objects gives rise to the six consciousnesses.

2. The five types of form are five of the six sense organs, excluding the mind. The five types of color are uncommon in Buddhist texts but may indicate blue, yellow, red, white, and black.

3. *The Profound Meaning of the Lotus Sutra*.

4. The king of Lankā is a demon king said to have lived in Lankā in southern India, and to have been instructed by Shakyamuni, receiving a prophecy of future enlightenment.

5. The Prajnāmita school is thought to have been a non-Buddhist school in India in Shakyamuni's day, but no details concerning it are known.

6. *The Words and Phrases of the Lotus Sutra*.

7. The words "Thus" and "Come" form the term "Thus Come [One]."