

The Abhidhamma

(from the Third Tipitaka)

Planes of Existence

According to the Abhidhamma there are thirty-one planes of existence, only two of which are commonly visible to us: the animal and human planes. In order to understand the nature of the other planes of existence it is necessary to--

1. dispel the notion that there is something special in human beings that is not found in other forms of sentient life;
2. dispel the delusion that there exists even a minute degree of stability or compactness in the psycho-physical complex referred to as a "being";
3. accept that a human being is a group of five aggregates each of which is evanescent and devoid of any substantiality;
4. realize that in certain planes of existence one or more of the aggregates may not be manifest; and
5. realize that these planes do not exist at different physical heights, from an abysmal purgatory to a heaven in the sky, but appear in response to our kamma. Most do not appear to us because of variations in spatial dimensions, relativity of the time factor, and different levels of consciousness.

The thirty-one planes of existence go to form samsaara, the "perpetual wandering" through the round of birth and death we have been caught in with no conceivable beginning. These planes fall into three main spheres as follows:

1. The sense desire sphere (kaama loka)
2. The fine material sphere (ruupa loka)
3. The immaterial or formless sphere (aruupa loka).

The sense desire sphere (kaama loka) comprises eleven planes as follows:

1. Four planes of misery—

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- a. niraya — hell (1)
- b. asura yoni — demons (2)
- c. peta yoni — here the beings have deformed bodies and are usually consumed by hunger and thirst (3)
- d. tiracchaana yoni — the world of animals (4)

Rebirth into these planes takes place on account of unwholesome kamma. Beings reborn there have no moral sense and generally cannot create good kamma. However, when the unwholesome kamma that brought them to these planes is exhausted, some stored up good kamma can bring them rebirth in some other plane. Only stream-enterers and other ariyans can be sure they will never again be born in these planes of misery.

2. The human plane — birth in this plane results from good kamma of middling quality. This is the realm of moral choice where destiny can be guided. (5)
3. Six heavenly planes:
 - a. caatummaaraajika — deities of the four quarters (6)
 - b. taavatimsa — realm of the 33 devas (7)
 - c. yaama (8)
 - d. tusita — realm of delight (9)
 - e. nimmaanarati — deities who enjoy their creations (10)
 - f. paranimmita-vasa-vatti — deities controlling the creations of others (11).

Birth into these heavenly planes takes place through wholesome kamma. These devas enjoy aesthetic pleasures, long life, beauty, and certain powers. The heavenly planes are not reserved only for good Buddhists. Anyone who has led a wholesome life can be born in them. People who believe in an "eternal heaven" may carry their belief to the deva plane and take the long life span there to be an eternal existence. Only those who have known the Dhamma will realize that, as these planes are impermanent, some day these sentient beings will fall away from them and be reborn elsewhere. The devas can help people by inclining their minds to wholesome acts, and people can help the devas by inviting them to rejoice in their meritorious deeds.

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The fine material sphere (ruupa loka) consists of sixteen planes. Beings take rebirth into these planes as a result of attaining the jhaanas. They have bodies made of fine matter. The sixteen planes correspond to the attainment of the four jhaanas as follows:

1. Three as a result of attaining the first jhaana:
 - a. brahma parisajjaa — realm of Brahma's retinue (12)
 - b. brahma purohitaa — realm of Brahma's ministers (13)
 - c. mahaa brahmaa — realm of great Brahmaa (14).
2. Three as a result of attaining the second jhaana:
 - a. parittaabhaa — realm of minor luster (15)
 - b. appamaanaabhaa — realm of infinite luster (16)
 - c. aabhassaraa — realm of radiant luster (17).
3. Three as a result of attaining the third jhaana:
 - a. paritta subhaa — realm of minor aura (18)
 - b. appamaanasubhaa — realm of infinite aura (19)
 - c. subha kinhaa — realm of steady aura (20)
4. Two as a result of attaining the fourth jhaana:
 - a. vehapphalaa — realm of great reward (21)
 - b. asaṅṅasattaa — realm of mindless beings who have only bodies without consciousness. Rebirth into this plane results from a meditative practice aimed at the suppression of consciousness. Those who take up this practice assume release from suffering can be achieved by attaining unconsciousness. However, when the life span in this realm ends, the beings pass away and are born in other planes where consciousness returns. (22)
5. Five as a result of attaining the fruit of non-returning (anaagaamiphala), the third level of sanctity:
 - a. avihaa brahmaa — the durable realm (23)
 - b. atappaa brahmaa — the serence realm (24)
 - c. sudassaa brahmaa — the beautiful realm (25)
 - d. sudassii brahmaa — the clear-sighted realm (26)
 - e. akaniitthaa brahmaa — the highest realm (27).
 - f.

These five realms, called suddhaavaasaa or Pure Abodes, are accessible only to those who have destroyed the lower five fetters — self-view, skeptical doubt, clinging to rites and ceremonies, sense desires, and ill-will. They will destroy their remaining fetters — craving for

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fine material existence, craving for immaterial existence, conceit, restlessness and ignorance — during their existence in the Pure Abodes. Those who take rebirth here are called "non-returners" because they do not return from that world, but attain final nibbaana there without coming back.

The immaterial or formless sphere (arupa loka) includes four planes into which beings are born as a result of attaining the formless meditations:

1. aakaasaanañcaayatana — sphere of infinity of space (28)
2. viññaa.nañcaayatana — sphere of infinity of consciousness (29)
3. aakiñcaññaayatana — sphere of nothingness (30)
4. neva — sañña — naasaññaayatana — sphere of neither perception or non-perception (31).

Many may doubt the existence of these planes, but this is not surprising. Such doubt was known even in the Buddha's time. The Samyutta Nikaa (II, 254; SN 19.1) records that once, when the venerable Lakkhana and the venerable Mahaa Moggallaana were descending Vulture's Peak Hill, the latter smiled at a certain place. The venerable Lakkhana asked the reason for the smile but the venerable Mahaa Moggallaana told him it was not the right time to ask and suggested he repeat the question in the Buddha's presence. Later when they came to the Buddha, the venerable Lakkhana asked again. The venerable Mahaa Moggallaana said,

"At the time I smiled I saw a skeleton going through the air. Vultures, crows and hawks followed it and plucked at it between the ribs while it uttered cries of pain. It occurred to me: 'How strange and astonishing, that a being can have such a shape, that the individuality can have such a shape!'"

The Buddha then said,

"I, too, had seen that being but I did not speak about it because others would not have believed me. That being used to be a cattle butcher in Rajagaha."

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The question may be asked how we can develop supernormal hearing and super-normal vision so as to perceive sounds and sights beyond normal range. To understand how, we must consider three factors: spatial dimensions, the relativity of time, and the levels of consciousness. Every object in our plane of existence must possess at least four dimensions. The first three are length, width, and depth. It is as if a point were to first trace a line giving length, then turn off at a level angle giving area, then turn off at a vertical angle giving volume.

Each deviation from course brings not only a change of direction but also a new dimension with new attributes. But these three dimensions are not exhaustive, for no object is totally static. Even an object apparently still will reveal, at an atomic level, a turbulent mass of activity. Therefore, a fourth dimension is necessary — time.

The dimension of time turns "being" into "becoming" — a passage through the phases of past, present, and future. Our sense of the passage of time does not depend on "clock time," but results from the activity of the senses and the mind. The incessant arising and passing of thoughts is sufficient to give a cue to time's movement. Even in the absence of sensory stimulation the flow of thoughts would create the sense of time and keep us geared to this plane of existence. But if thoughts could be stilled, as they are in the higher jhanaas, the sense of time would cease to exist.

A different kind of awareness would replace it — a level of awareness expanded far beyond the one we are tied to under ordinary conditions. This new awareness can be called the fifth dimension. As in the case of the other four dimensions, this new one would add a new dimension, a new direction, and new attributes. For such an expanded awareness sounds and sights would be perceived, unknown and inaccessible to us locked up in our limited sense of time. ¹

¹ See E.H. Shatock, *An Experiment in Mindfulness*, Chapter 8.