

Thirty-One Realms of Existence Based on Pali Sources

- *Nirvāna* is beyond all rebirths or conditioned worlds. However, it is available to be experienced, particularly from the human state refined by calm and insight.
- *There is an Unborn, Unoriginated, Uncreated, Unconditioned. If that Unborn, Unoriginated, Uncreated, Unconditioned were not, there could be no escape from this that is born, originated, created, conditioned. But because there is That which is Unborn, Unoriginated, Uncreated, Unconditioned, an escape from this that is born, originated, created, conditioned can be proclaimed. (Khuddaka-Nikaya, Udana, 80ff.)*

WORLD	REALM	KARMA	MIND
Formless World (<i>arūpa-dhātu</i>)	1. Neither Perception nor Non-Perception	Formless Attainments	Formless-Sphere Mind Beyond, but <i>not</i> ‘above’, the realm of elemental form is the totally <u>non-material, formless (<i>arūpa</i>) realm</u> . Meditators who successfully cultivate one of the four formless absorptions are reborn in one of these four heavens. The name of each heaven describes the object of perception of the inhabitants. The gods dwelling in these realms are devoid of bodies, and these heavens are not physical places.
	2. Nothingness		
	3. Infinite Consciousness		
	4. Infinite Space		
World of Pure Form (<i>rūpa-dhātu</i>)	1. Ultimate Form	Fourth <i>Jhāna</i> (1) neither pleasure nor pain (2) one-pointedness of mind (3) Equanimity	Form-Sphere Mind The beings, belonging to the <u>realm of elemental form (<i>rūpa</i>)</u> , are seen as long-lived beings who lack a gross physical body and possess only the senses of sight and hearing. <i>Samatha</i> practice, in aiming at <i>jhāna</i> , aims to break through to this realm of pure, or elemental form: a different level of existence from our normal one. The elemental form level is one of brilliance and loving-kindness, experience of which transforms those who visit it. It is one in which the <i>basic radiant purity of mind</i> is increasingly uncovered and experienced. 4. Fourth <i>jhāna</i> : Paralleling the fourth <i>jhāna</i> , there is one ‘ordinary’ heaven, that of Extensive Fruits (<i>Vehapphala</i>). There is also the heaven of Unconscious Beings (<i>Asañña-satta</i>), representing a mistaken use of good qualities – as with <i>Māra</i> . These two heavens are at a point of transition to the next five heavens, known as the five ‘pure abodes’, where only Non-returners are reborn – that is, those who do not return to the sense-desire realm, and become enlightened <i>Arahats</i> in the pure abodes. 3. Third <i>jhāna</i> : Three heavens parallel the third <i>jhāna</i> . 2. Second <i>jhāna</i> : Three heavens parallel the second <i>jhāna</i> . 1. First <i>jhāna</i> : Three heavens parallel the first <i>jhāna</i> , including that of Great Brahmā (<i>Mahā Brahmā</i>), a being of immeasurable loving-kindness, compassion, empathetic joy, and equanimity. Achieving <i>Jhāna</i> The purpose of <i>samatha</i> is to achieve states of <i>samadhi</i> known as <i>jhāna</i> , or meditative stabilization. There are four <i>jhānas</i> corresponding to increasingly subtle states of <i>samadhi</i> , and the Buddha strongly emphasized the importance of achieving at least the first <i>jhāna</i> in order to achieve personal liberation. In the process of achieving the first <i>jhāna</i> , one’s ordinary mind and sense of personal identity dissolve into an underlying, subtle continuum of mental consciousness that is usually experienced only during dreamless sleep and at death. When this continuum is accessed by way of <i>samatha</i> , it is found to have three distinctive qualities: bliss, luminosity, and non-conceptuality. This stable, vivid awareness – like a telescope launched into orbit beyond the distortions of the earth’s atmosphere – provides a platform for exploring the “deep space of the mind.” . . . (continued on page 2))
	2. Skilful Manifestation		
	3. Skilful Vision		
	4. The Serene		
	5. The Durable		
	6. Without Perception		
	7. Great Reward		
	8. Universal Purity	Third <i>Jhāna</i> (1) pleasure (2) one-pointedness of mind	
	9. Infinite Purity		
	10. Lesser Purity		
	11. Light-Sound	Second <i>Jhāna</i> (1) rapture (2) pleasure (3) one-pointedness of mind	
	12. Infinite Light		
	13. Lesser Light		
	14. Great Brahmā	First <i>Jhāna</i> (1) applied thought (2) sustained thought (3) rapture (4) pleasure (5) one-pointedness of mind	
	15. Brahmā-Ministers		
	16. Brahmā’s Retinue		
World of the Five Senses (<i>kāma-dhātu</i>)	1. Heaven of the Pleasure of Transformations of Others	<i>Happy Destiny</i> – based on ten courses of <i>wholesome karma</i> (motivated by non-attachment, friendliness, wisdom)	Sense-Sphere Mind <u>Note</u> : There are said to be 26 increasingly refined heavenly levels of existence. The six lowest heavens : The first six heavenly realms are the abodes of the <i>devas</i> proper, who share the <u>realm of sense-desire (<i>kāma</i>)</u> with humans, <i>asuras</i> (jealous gods), animals, hungry ghosts, and hell-beings. In this realm, experience is centred on pleasures and their opposite. All beings of these worlds are seen as sexually differentiated; those above them are not. In sum, beings in this realm are, to a greater or lesser degree, bound by desires of the five senses. Recollection of <i>devas</i> : A contemplation on the <i>devas</i> , gods, or ‘shining ones’, and their qualities, which are products of wholesome action and states of mind. The Buddha referred to many different levels of existence as realms that beings can be reborn in, but also pointed out the human qualities and states that parallel and lead to such rebirths. <u>Note</u> : Recollection of the beings in the 26 heavenly realms and their qualities are seen to lead to their states, and helps to both calm and inspire the mind. The four descents : These consist of jealous gods (<i>asuras</i>); animals (living on earth, and in the oceans and sky); hungry ghosts (dwelling in a subterranean abode); and, hell-dwellers (living in the numerous hells). The Descents are caused by the ten courses of <i>unwholesome karma</i> , motivated by attachment, aversion, delusion.
	2. Heaven of those Delighting in Creating		
	3. Heaven of the Contented (<i>Tusita</i>)		
	4. Heaven of the Happy (<i>Yāma</i>)		
	5. Heaven of the Thirty-Three		
	6. Heaven of the Four Great Kings and their Subjects		
	Human Beings	<i>Four Descents</i> – ten courses of <i>unwholesome karma</i>	
	1. Jealous Gods		
	2. Animals		
	3. Hungry Ghosts		
4. Hell Beings			

The Six Heavens above Human Existence

1. **Heaven of the People of the Four Great Kings:** These are mostly cheerful beings, the concept of which is similar to western idea of fairies, tree spirits, elves, and goblins: to the east, *gandhabbas*, flying musicians; to the south, *kumbhāṇḍas*, gnomish caretakers of forests, mountains, and hidden treasures; to the west, *nāgas*, serpent-spirits; to the north, *yakkhas*, or nature-spirits. These can act as guides and protectors; some can be frightening. The Four Kings themselves dwell in heaven no.2, but keep their 'subjects' under check and guidance, as guardians of the four directions, to protect a space free of unruly energies. The beings of level 1 are reborn there by keeping precepts and generosity, and they parallel human states relating to enjoying simple pleasures, and being well 'earthed'. They can be seen to parallel the stage of practice when one's energies start to be gathered.

2. **Heaven of the Thirty-Three:** This is a place of good-hearted company and *Dhamma*-discussion. It is said that the Buddha visited this world to teach the *Abhidhamma*, to an audience which included his dead mother, who visited there from the *Tusita* heaven. Beings are reborn in the heaven of the Thirty-Three due to helpfulness, kindness, and generosity. There are said to be thirty-two deities (ministers) ruled by Sakka (also called Indra), a god who is always on the look out to help people, being seen as heroic, and full of youthful vigour and enthusiasm.

3. **Heaven of the Happy (*Yāma*):** This is a place of great joy and beauty – gemstones, parks, and lakes of crystal water. It is an "auspicious" heaven, where the gods are continually singing. Note: This heaven, and those above it, are called aerial heavens, as they are located above ground – layers of clouds support them from below.

4. **Heaven of the Contented (*Tusita*):** In this place, beings are delighted by hearing *Dhamma* and other forms of truth. A bodhisattva in his life prior to the one in which he attains Buddhahood dwells in this heaven. This is the world where Metteyya (Skt. Maitreya, meaning The Friendly One), the next Buddha, dwells.

5. **Heaven of those who Delight in Creating:** This is a subtle, shimmering, translucent realm of joyful, dancing activity, related to bright inspiration and creativity. It is a heaven where one can fulfil desires by magical transformations.

6. **Heaven of those with Mastery over Other's Creations:** This heaven is like no. 5, although here the emphasis is on encouraging, guiding, and inspiring others. When this goes wrong, it may take the form of manipulating others, represented by Māra, the Evil One, who dwells on the edges of this world; he represents the danger of perverting the potency of good qualities.

These six heavens above human existence (which are the six lowest heavens) parallel states between *normal human consciousness* and that of *jhāna*. It is thus the territory explored in much normal *samatha* practice. They can be seen to relate to some of the states present, according to the Theravādin *Abhidhamma*, in all wholesome states. Amongst these wholesome states are the 'six pairs' – states which relate both to consciousness and the experienced body. These can be seen, respectively, as strong in one or other of the six lowest divine realms:

1. **Tranquillity of body and mind:** relate to the stilling of primordial energies symbolised by the People of the Four Great Kings, and to stepping back from the fray of normal *human* activity, getting more in touch with the simple things of life. This quality is said to overcome restlessness, an aspect of the fourth hindrance.

2. **Lightness of body and mind:** involve alertness and mental buoyancy, which are strong in *Dhamma*-discussion, as in the heaven of the Thirty-Three, and in the nature of Sakka as on the lookout to help those who seek to act rightly. This quality is said to overcome dullness and lethargy, the third hindrance.

3. **Softness/malleability of body and mind:** free of stiffness of body and rigidity of view or stiff conceit: a gentle, relaxed, open state of happiness related to the heaven of the Happy. Can be seen to overcome unease, part of the 4th hindrance.

4. **Workability/wieldiness of body and mind:** like purified gold, fit for many uses; a serene, trusting state which is bright and able to respond to and delight in many good and beautiful things, thus related to the heaven of the Delighted. The quality is said to overcome the remaining hindrances.

5. **Proficiency of body and mind:** a healthy, artistic, creative skill, in a mind free from obstacles and impediments; strong in the heaven of those who Delight in Creating.

6. **Rectitude of body and mind:** straightforwardness and lack of deceit, a necessary quality in those with Mastery over the Creations of Others.

Achieving *Jhāna* (continued)

A great advantage of achieving the first *jhāna* is that the five hindrances temporarily become dormant. These are (1) sensual craving, (2) malice, (3) drowsiness and lethargy, (4) excitement and remorse, and (5) doubt, all of which obscure the essential nature of the mind, namely, the subtle, luminous continuum of mental consciousness from which all ordinary states of waking and dream consciousness emerge . . . Perhaps the most crucial discovery of the Buddha, as he launched his contemplative revolution in India, was the liberating power of first achieving *jhāna* through the practice of *samatha*, and then cultivating *vipashyana*, or contemplative insight into essential features of reality (such as impermanence, the nature of suffering, and the nonexistence of an independent self, or ego). The transformative power of Buddhist meditation occurs when the stability and vividness of *samatha* is unified with the penetrating insights of *vipashyana*. *Samatha* by itself results in a temporary alleviation of the fundamental causes of suffering, and *vipashyana* by itself provides only fleeting glimpses of reality. Only with the stabilizing power of *samatha* can the insights gleaned from *vipashyana* thoroughly saturate the mind, ultimately liberating it from deeply ingrained ways of misapprehending reality. (Wallace, B. Alan. "Why Practice Shamatha?")

Sources:

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