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**(Majjhima) Deva,dūta Sutta**

The (Majjhima) Discourse on the Divine Messengers | **M 130**  
 or **(Pañca) Deva,dūta S**, The Discourse of the (5) Divine Messengers  
 Chinese Āgama MĀ 64 = T1.503; T42 = T1.826; T43 = T1.828; T86 = T1.907;  
 EĀ 32.4 = T2.674; T741 = T17.543  
 Theme: The 5 sights and their meanings  
 Translated by Piya Tan ©2003; rev 2010

**1 Two kinds of teachings**

**1.1 TWO KINDS OF TEACHINGS.** Clearly, the (Majjhima) Deva,dūta Sutta is an elaborate version of the shorter (and probably older) **(Yama) Deva,dūta Sutta** (A 3.35). Furthermore, this (Majjhima) Deva,dūta Sutta forms a sequel to the preceding **Bāla,paṇḍita Sutta** (M 129), repeating its §10-16.<sup>1</sup> However, the **(Majjhima) Deva,dūta Sutta** itself elaborates on §17 of the Bāla,paṇḍita Sutta giving the classic description of the hells [§16-27].<sup>2</sup>

The hell stories are a graphic means of conveying the notion that worldly suffering is very real and painful indeed. **Yama**, as the mythical god of the underworld, passes judgement on the dead and assigns them to their future destiny.<sup>3</sup> According to some accounts, Yama does this by holding up a mirror that reflects their karma, good and bad.

The Sutta closes the Buddha declaring thus:

Bhikshus, I tell you this not as something I heard from another recluse or brahmin. I tell you this as something that I have actually known, seen and discovered by myself [§29]

This statement might induce the pious to take all the descriptions here *literally* without giving heed to the Buddha's advice on the two kinds of teachings: those whose meaning is direct, that is "drawn out" or explicit (*nī'tattha*) and those whose meaning is indirect, that is, needs to be drawn out (*neyy'attha*), that is, implicit, referential or figurative (D 3:127 f; A 1:60).<sup>4</sup> [4.5]

**1.2 THE YAMA MYTH** is a powerful *neyy'attha* narrative where Yama, the hell-wardens and the hells themselves are graphic depictions of our bad karma or what they can bring upon. In questioning the bad-doers or holding up the mirror of karma before them, Yama is intimating to them that they have been responsible for their own actions and as such have brought suffering upon themselves. [4.5]

This is not to say that the accounts here are "mythical" in the sense of being fairy tales and stories used by desperate teachers and followers to scare the frivolous and the pious towards spirituality (or, by the less scrupulous, to extort donations). Despite the culture-bound and earthy depictions of the hells, the pains described here are very real. Yet we must keep in mind the pervading subtle humour of the Buddha in all his teachings.<sup>5</sup>

**1.3 HELLISH DEVELOPMENTS.** Scholars like **Ineke Van Put** (2007) have attempted to trace how the Buddhist idea of "hell" began with only one, that is, *niraya*, as attested in the well known canonical stock phrase, *apāyam duggatim vinipātam nirayam*, "(a state of) deprivation, a suffering state, the downfall,

<sup>1</sup> M 129,10-16, also at A 1:141 f and J 1:174.

<sup>2</sup> On the evolution of the 3 Suttas, see SD 48.10 (1.2).

<sup>3</sup> A number of similar celestial beings are called Yama: see DPPN: Yama.

<sup>4</sup> A 2.3.5+6/1:60 (SD 2.6b).

<sup>5</sup> On the Yama myth, further see SD 48.2 (2.1).

hell.”<sup>6</sup> The oldest Chinese translations, the Āgama, too, mention only this one same hell, calling it *mahā-niraya* (“the great hell”), an idea first described in **the Bāla Paṇḍita Sutta** (M 129).<sup>7</sup>

Apparently, around the beginning of the Common Era, the single-hell idea expanded into a new system of multiple hells, based on the *mahā-niraya* structure. It consisted of eight hot hells, each surrounded by four times four supplementary hells, now called *ussada* (Skt *utsada*, “supplementary”)<sup>8</sup>. A second series of hells, called *abbuda* (Skt *arbuda*), clearly had its roots in **the Kokāliya Sutta** (Sn 3.10).<sup>9</sup>

The early Buddhist conception of hell seemed to culminate in the combination of the eight great hells (from the *mahā-niraya* idea) and the *abbuda* series. However, even after this development, various elements were combined or varied in various texts, such as Pali works as the Visuddhi, magga (Buddhaghosa, c 430), the Loka, paññatti (Saddhammaghosa, 1443) and the Traim, bhūmi, kātha of Phra Ruang (Lithai, 1345), and Sanskrit works, such as the Abhidharma, kośa, bhāṣya (Vasubandhu, 4<sup>th</sup> cent; T1558) and Mahā, prajñā, pāramitopadeśa (Nāgārjuna?, T1509).

## 1.4 VASUBANDHU’S VIEWS

**1.4.1 The Vaibhāṣika**<sup>10</sup> school, following Vasubandhu’s **Abhidharma, kośa, bhāṣya**,<sup>11</sup> viewed that all karma is initiated in the non-material aggregate of mental formations (*saṃskārā*) as intentions. After this mental action, there arises a bodily or verbal action that is perceptible, and thus belongs to the material (sense) world. Immediately following this material manifestation of an intention, there is an unmanifested trace of the action that also belongs to the material aggregate (*rūpa, skandha*).

Since everything is momentary, this unmanifested trace begins a series of momentary unmanifested material traces that continues until the original karma ripens as a palpable pleasant or unpleasant result. Hence, according to this view of **karma**, non-physical actions (intentions) can create a particular kind of matter. The text also says that mental events can influence the sense-faculties, and therefore can help determine the sorts of phenomena the physical sense-faculties can register.

The 4<sup>th</sup> chapter of the Abhidharma, kośa states that all the physical worlds are the result of the ripening of the karmas of countless sentient beings. It seems that the physical world arises in a manner that the sentient beings inhabiting them can mentally experience them as conditioned by their karma. While the totality of sentient beings shape the various world-systems, the karma of individual sentient beings determines, as it were, where they would be reborn.

The experiences of that new world, in turn, shapes the mentality of the being. In such a cycle of mental events shaping physical events, and physical events shaping mental events, it is not really possible to determine whether the mental events shapes the physical events, or vice versa. However, we would not be wrong is surmising that they both shape each other in a complex interaction without a beginning.

**1.4.2** Vasubandhu, in a later work, the **Vimśatikā, kārikā** (“the work of 20 verses”),<sup>12</sup> argues that the traditional hells cannot physically exist as they are described in the Buddhist texts. They are described as

<sup>6</sup> V 3:5; D 1:82; S 5:442; A 1:55; Sn 231. See **Bāla Paṇḍita S** (M 129) @ SD 2.22 (7).

<sup>7</sup> M 129, 16/3:167 (SD 2.22).

<sup>8</sup> Van Put 2007:205.

<sup>9</sup> Sn 3.10/p123-131/657-678.

<sup>10</sup> Followers of the *Vibhāṣā* (or fully, Abhidharma Mahā, vibhāṣā, compendium of Mahāyāna Abhidharma teachings, 2<sup>nd</sup> cent CE) associated with the Abhidharma of the Sarvāstivāda (one of the 18 pre-Mahāyāna Indian schools). The Vaibhāṣika was esp influential in Kashmir-Gandhāra and Bactria. Vasubandhu’s Abhidharma, kośa, bhāṣya (c 4<sup>th</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> cent) was a more systematic presentation of the school’s views. The school disappeared as an independent school around 7<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> cent CE. See Ency Bsm: Sabbatthivāda; Vaibhāṣika.

<sup>11</sup> *Abhidharmalośabhāṣyam*, tr Leo M Pruden from La Vallée Poussin’s French tr. Berkeley, CA: Asian Humanities Press, 1988.

<sup>12</sup> See Vasubandhu, *Seven Works of Vasubandhu: The Buddhist Psychological Doctor*. Tr Stefan Anacker. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1984.

places of terrible torment, reminiscent of the tortures used by ancient kings and the powerful on criminals, prisoners and victims.

The problem is that the hells are also described as places where hell wardens bring people to various places of tortures, and afflict tortures on them. If, argues Vasubandhu, these places were unbearably hot or unbearably cold (as they are said to be), then the wardens themselves would be unable to perform their tasks.

This, then, suggests that the hell beings, even the hells themselves, do not physically exist. They are merely a mental projection that are so depraved, so that they are only capable of the worst kinds of sufferings. Vasubandhu gives other examples of mental projections that are experienced by the mind alone, and not shared with others. Dreams, hallucinations and powerful fantasies surely must be caused by the mind experiencing itself, rather than the external physical world acting upon us through the physical sense-faculties. The physical world, as stated in the Abhidharma,kośa, as the collective karmic fruit of countless beings surely could not have produced such suffering states.<sup>13</sup>

## 2 The divine messengers

**2.1 YAMA AND MĀRA.** The divine messengers (*deva, dūta*) are apparently sent by **Yama** to warn the world against doing bad, by which they would fall onto his realm. In this sense, he is a samsaric antithesis of **Māra**, who encourages worldlings to remain in the world so that they continue to be under his power. Yama, on the other hand, does not really have such power over those whom he judges.

In fact, the (Majjhima) Deva, dūta Sutta, shows that it is almost with some regret that Yama questions those brought before him by the warden of hell: “Did you not see ⟨such and such a divine messenger⟩ appear in the world?” Indeed, Yama himself in due course tires of seeing worldly frailties and aspires to meet the Buddha to understand the Dharma [§28].

### **2.2 THE THREEFOLD PRIDE AND THE SIGNS**

**2.2.1** The (Majjhima) Deva, dūta Sutta mentions 5 “divine messengers”: a young tender infant [§4], an aged person [§5], a diseased person [§6], a criminal being tortured [§7], and a festering corpse [§8]. The psychological sources of *three* of these messengers—an aged person, a sick person and a corpse—are found in **the Sukhumāla Sutta** (A 3.38), when the Buddha recounts how he reflected on the three great bads of life—decay, disease and death—and how he would himself be subject to them. Through this reflection, his pride or intoxication (*mada*) with youth (*yobbana, mada*), with health (*ārogya, mada*) and with life (*jīvita, mada*), respectively, all dissolved away.

The threefold pride is the subject of the following **Mada Sutta** (A 3.39), where the monks, intoxicated with youth, with health and with life, “give up the training and return to the low life,” but these intoxications lead us to be reborn in suffering states.<sup>14</sup>

**2.2.2** Earlier on, in the same Aṅguttara Book of Threes, **the (Yama) Deva, dūta Sutta** (A 3.35) contains an abridged account of the same 3 messengers of the (Majjhima) Deva, dūta Sutta [§§5, 6, 8], the sutta verse on the great hell [§16] and the closing verses [§30].<sup>15</sup> Clearly, this shorter Aṅguttara text is older than the longer (Majjhima) Deva, dūta Sutta, and very likely the model for it.

It is possible that **the 3 reflections** on decay, disease and death in the Sukhumāla Sutta (A 3.38) and the Mada Sutta (A 3.39) form *the oldest account* on which all the suttas dealing with the divine messengers are based. Historically, this is probably followed by their imageries (A 3.35). The 5 divine messengers are likely to be the latest stage in the evolution of the “divine messengers” teaching, with the final stage occur-

<sup>13</sup> See Hayes 2013.

<sup>14</sup> A 3.39/1:146 f (SD 42.13).

<sup>15</sup> A 3.35 (SD 48.10).

ring in the Commentaries with Prince Siddhattha himself encountering these “three signs” (*nimitta*) as a human being (DhA 1:107; AA 1:36; J 1:59).

## 2.3 THE 4 SIGHTS

**2.3.1** Not all the reciters (*bhānaka*) agree on this episode of the Buddha life. **The Dīgha reciters**, it is said (BA 280; J 1:59), claim that the Bodhisattva sees all 4 signs *on the same day*. In the Dīgha story of the past buddha Vipassī, recorded in **the Mahā’padāna Sutta** (D 14), however, the Bodhisattva Vipassī sees the 4 signs *on 4 different occasions*, separated by very long times.<sup>16</sup> According to the Buddha,vaṃsa Commentary, our Bodhisattva Gotama, too, sees the 4 signs on four different days, each with *4 months* intervening (BA 280).

**2.3.2** All the other Commentarial accounts generally follow or quote the Mahā’padāna Sutta account (eg BA 279 f; J 1:59, 31 f). The Jātaka Commentary says that they are visions seen only by the Bodhisattva and his charioteer (J 1:59).<sup>17</sup>

## 3 Are the hells real places?

**3.1 TWO LEVELS OF RELIGIOUS LANGUAGE.** In **the Neyy’attha Nīt’attha Sutta** (A 2.3,5-6) the Buddha makes a clear statement on religious language in general, and in how to read his teachings in particular, thus:

Bhikshus, there are these two who misrepresent the Tathagata. What are the two?

- (1) Those who explain a sutta whose sense has been drawn out (*nīt’attha*) as that whose sense *is to be drawn out* [whose sense is direct as being indirect].
- (2) Those who explain a sutta whose sense needs to be drawn out (*neyy’attha*) as that whose sense *has been drawn out* [whose sense is indirect as being direct].

These, bhikshus, are the two who misrepresent the Tathagata. (A 2.3.5/1:60), SD 2.6b

In the second (and closing) part of the same Sutta, the Buddha says that he is *not* misrepresented when we understand accordingly whether the teaching whose meaning “needs to be drawn out,” that is, an implicit teaching, or whose teaching is already “drawn out,” that is, an explicit teaching.

Let us look at the second case first. This is the “drawn out” or **explicit teaching**, which refers *directly* to true reality. Most of the Dhamma,cakka Pavattana Sutta (S 56.11), for example, is given as an explicit teaching or in Dharma language. These teachings refer *directly* to true reality (such as suffering and awakening).<sup>18</sup>

The first, **the implicit teaching**, usually makes use of stories, figures, skillful means or other means pointing to true reality. This is a more common approach for the unawakened beings who still lack the right conditions to see the true reality directly. Such examples would be discourses that use stories, describe ritual acts, or use words like “beings,” “gods,” “hells,” etc, all whose meanings “need to be drawn out” (*neyy’attha*), as they do not directly refer to true reality: they are provisional teachings.<sup>19</sup>

## 3.2 THE HELLS ARE ALLEGORICAL

**3.2.1** The (Majjhima) Deva,dūta Sutta (M 130) is one of the discourses that gives a full-length description of the hells. Its descriptions of pain and suffering [§§16-27] are graphic and easily grasped by the

<sup>16</sup> D 14,2.1-15/2:21-29 (SD 49.8).

<sup>17</sup> Further see SD 49.8b (1.0.4.4-1.0.4.5).

<sup>18</sup> S 56.11/5:420-424 (SD 1.1).

<sup>19</sup> See **Language and discourse**, SD 26.11(1) & *Pariyāya nipariyāya*, SD 68.2.

motley crowd, even if they lack the wisdom for higher teachings. The message is that suffering is very real, and this is perhaps the best way we can understand suffering, even when we are not in pain or misfortune, but others are. This is of course not a very popular teaching—people do not like hearing about pain and suffering—hence, we do not see many discourses dealing with the subject using such graphic imageries.

**3.2.2** Many of the imageries of suffering depicted in **the (Majjhima) Deva,dūta Sutta** reflect the kinds of torture that the ancient Indian kings and authorities inflict on their prisoners and criminals.<sup>20</sup> **The Mahā Dukkha-k,khandha Sutta** (M 13) and **the Cūḷa Dukkha-k,khandha Sutta** (M 14), for example, explain how, on account of sense-desires, people commit crimes, for which the authorities inflict various kinds of painful hell-like tortures.<sup>21</sup>

**3.2.3** **The Cūḷa Dukkha-k,khandha Sutta** (M 14) also uses images of suffering and destruction incurred by warfare to describe the nature of pain, and as clear from the purpose of the Sutta, the Buddha is trying to impress on Mahānāma the fact that sense-desire is at the root of activities that bring about such unnecessary suffering, and that there is a higher kind of bliss than sense-pleasure.<sup>22</sup>

**3.2.4** **The (Majjhima) Deva,dūta Sutta** (M 130) tells us how the lord of the hells, king Yama, regularly questions those who have fallen into the hells why they did not heed the 5 divine messengers (rebirth, old age, disease, suffering, and death)<sup>23</sup> and turn away from bad. In due course, it is said, even king Yama himself seeks to hear the Buddha’s teaching so that he is liberated from samsara itself.<sup>24</sup>

**3.3 HELLISH SUFFERINGS ARE REAL AND PHYSICAL MENTAL SUFFERINGS. The Pātāla Sutta** (S 36.4) is instructive in telling us not to locate “hell” anywhere, even as an abyss deep under the ocean. The Buddha declares that such things are merely ideas and stories:

This “bottomless abyss,” bhikshus, is rather a designation (*adhivacana*) for painful bodily feelings. (S 36.4/4:206 f), SD 2.25

Even if the hells are not geographical places into which the bad fall and are tortured, the pains and sufferings that are described *are real indeed*. For the bad bring upon themselves the sufferings of those very things they fear the most: they create their own suffering in their own minds in due course. As **the Sall’atthena Sutta** (S 36.6) says that while the awakened (the noble disciple) feels only the one “dart” of bodily pain, but not the second dart of mental pain; but the foolish unawakened suffer from both the darts

<sup>20</sup> For a similar development in Chinese Buddhism, see eg Stephen F Teiser, *The Scripture on the Ten Kings*, Honolulu, 1994, esp pt 2.

<sup>21</sup> M 13,14/1:87 (SD 6.9) & M 14,13/1:92 (SD 4.7) (verbatim passages). These same tortures—such as the cutting off of limbs and live flaying—are also given in **Bāla Paṇḍita S** (M 129,4/3:164), SD 2.22, & **Kamma,karaṇa (or Vajja) S** (A 2.1.1/1:47-49), SD 111.2. For other details of such tortures, see AA 2:88-90 (for tr, see nn in A:WH 1:42 f).

<sup>22</sup> M 14,15-22/1:92-94 (SD 4.7).

<sup>23</sup> A better known set is that of the 3 divine messengers (an old man, a sick man, and an aged man: allegories of decay, disease and death) described in **(Yama) Deva,dūta S** (A 3.35) by king Yama himself, and the Sutta closes with Yama himself aspiring to hear the Buddha’s teaching for the sake of his own liberation (A 3.35/1:138-142), SD 48.10, an account found also in **Cūḷa Dukkha-k,khandha S** (M 130,28-30/1:186 f), SD 2.23. The “3 messengers” account is prob older. This triad evolved into the first 3 three sights, of the 4 sights of prince Siddhattha, which arouse samvega in him. On seeing the 4<sup>th</sup> sight, that of a pleasant-looking recluse, Siddhattha feels joyful faith (*pasāda*), and is moved to renounce the world (J 1:59; cf AA 1:36; DhA 1:84 f). Siddhattha, in other words, heeds the warnings of the divine messengers.

<sup>24</sup> See **(Yama) Deva,dūta S** (A 3.35/1:138-142), SD 48.10, & **Cūḷa Dukkha-k,khandha S** (M 130.28-30/1:186 f). SD 2.23.

of bodily pain and mental suffering.<sup>25</sup> In short, we create our own suffering, and, therefore, we can remove such sufferings ourselves.<sup>26</sup> [3.4.1]

### 3.4 SECTARIAN VIEWS ON THE HELL WARDENS

**3.4.1 Are the hells real?** Both the (Yama) Deva,dūta Sutta (A 3.35) and the (Majjhima) Deva,dūta Sutta present the Buddha near their respective conclusions as declaring that he has himself witnessed all this [§29]. Clearly the Theravāda teachers view that the various hell-states and their tortures should be taken literally. However, as we have noted above, such a view has many significant problems.

The main problem with the idea of hell-wardens torturing and punishing hell-beings is the question: Don't the hell-wardens themselves create bad karma for themselves? Moreover, it is clear from such teachings as those in **the Neyy'attha Nīt'attha Sutta** (A 2.3.5+6) that such accounts are those whose meaning must be teased out. In other words, these are conventional truths, not ultimate reality.<sup>27</sup>

**3.4.2 The Abhidhamma view.** Although traditionally, none of the ancient Indian Buddhist schools and their offshoots ever questioned the actual existence of the hell-states, not all of them agreed on the nature of the hell wardens (*niraya,pāla*). In fact, the Kathā,vatthu (the 7<sup>th</sup> and latest book of the Abhidhamma) and the Pali Commentaries explicitly reject any opinion (especially those of the Andhakas and the Vijñānavādins) that the hell-wardens are not real sentient beings, but that they are some kind of “robot-like forms” (*yanta,rūpaṃ viya*) or only empty shapes (*niraya,pāla,rūpa*)!<sup>28</sup>

The psychology of modern virtual-reality role-playing computer games may help us imagine how the hells (and the heavens, too) work. When we play a certain game role, we are likely to feel or imagine to feel whatever the computer conjures up for us—the way such digital beings are depicted in a science fiction like *Tron*<sup>29</sup> may help us understand how for some people such a virtual reality can be as real as true reality. In other words, the suffering works on a mental level.<sup>30</sup>

### 3.4.3 Karma works on its own

**3.4.3.1** Clearly then, there were those elders who rejected the notion the hell-wardens are actually real. Those elders, seeing the problems attending the idea of hell-wardens torturing hell-beings, quoted the Buddha in this untraced verse with a contemporary ring:

*Na vessabhū no pi ca petti,rājā  
somo yamo vessavaṇo ca rājā  
sakāni kammāni hananti tattha  
ito paṇunnaṃ para,loka,pattan'ti*

Neither Vessabhū nor the preta king is there,  
nor Soma, nor Yama, nor king Vessavaṇa.  
One's own deeds [karma] punish one there,  
who, driven from this world, attains to other worlds.

[Untraced, quoted at Kvu 20.3/598,7]

The phrase *yanta,rūpaṃ viya* can, in fact, be rendered as “in a mechanical manner,” that is, the karma works on its own, without any need of external agency. Or, we may surmise that those hapless hell-beings, on account of their karma, actually see these beings, and suffer the pains—like in a virtual computer game

<sup>25</sup> S 36.6/4:207-210 (SD 5.5).

<sup>26</sup> See further **Myth in Buddhism**, SD 36.1(4.3).

<sup>27</sup> A 2.3.5+6/1:60 (SD 2.6b).

<sup>28</sup> Kvu 20.3/598,7. Interestingly, we have here perhaps an earliest idea of a science fiction motif in world literature!

<sup>29</sup> *Tron* (1982) is an American science fiction movie written and directed by Steven Lisberger based on a story by Lisberger and Bonnie MacBird. In the story, a computer programmer is transported inside the software world of a mainframe computer, where he interacts with various programs in his attempt to get out, back in the real world.

<sup>30</sup> See SD 48.10 (1.2.1-1.2.2).

or as depicted in the science fiction movie, *Tron!* [3.4.2]. This almost contemporary view is reported in the Commentaries, although they all support the Abhidhamma view.<sup>31</sup>

**3.4.3.2** The third line of the verse [3.4.3.1] is especially significant as it reminds us of the well known Buddha-word on karma and self-accountability, as recorded in **the Abhiṅga Paccavekkhitṭabba Tḥāna Sutta** (A 5.57): “I’m the owner of my deeds, the heir to my deeds, the womb of my deeds, the relative of my deeds, my deeds are my refuge; whatever deed I’ve done, good or bad, I’ll be its heir.”<sup>32</sup>

We are here reminded that karma is not some divine system of rewards and punishments. Rather, it is our own deliberate habitual actions, conscious and unconscious, that shape our lives even here and now, and continue to affect us powerfully even in future lives. Karma, in other words, is our own mental states, which are also expressed externally as bodily deeds and speech. It does not make sense to that they would be a group of torture specialists who make us suffer for our bad karma, unless it is a psychological allegory, meaning that we imagine these beings—but the suffering is real.

### 3.5 THE PERCEPTION OF SUFFERING

**3.5.1 Related suttas.** We have ventured to say that the imageries of suffering depicted in **the (Yama) Deva,dūta Sutta** (A 3.35) [§2.2.2], **the (Majjhima) Deva,dūta Sutta** (M 130),<sup>33</sup> **the Mahā Dukkha-k,-khandha Sutta** (M 13) and **the Cūḷa Dukkha-k,-khandha Sutta** (M 14),<sup>34</sup> are clearly based on the various methods used the ancient kings and authorities to punish or torture criminals and prisoners. These may have been the practices of the ancient Indians themselves, or they would have come from accounts of the practices in Mesopotamian kingdoms or empires.<sup>35</sup>

**3.5.2 Karma and suffering.** Characteristically, the Buddha only relates such accounts, not for their historical interest, but for the purpose of moral instruction, mental training and spiritual upliftment. Indeed, it would be unhelpful, even unhealthy and pathological, to insist on regarding such suffering states as being real places where we are sent to if we commit bad karma. Karma is much more than merely a natural way of settling moral accounts and meting of social justice. We are not so much *punished* for our karma, as we become our karma, which then seals us within our own painful habits and false realities, whether we are aware of them or not.<sup>36</sup>

**3.5.3 The 3 characteristics.** If we accept that the Buddha’s teachings centre around mind-training, then it is not difficult to see such suttas [3.5.1] as colourful instructions in the practice of **the perception of suffering** (*dukkha,sañṇā*). Although the perception of suffering is not as well known as the perception of impermanence (*anicca,sañṇā*),<sup>37</sup> it is found in a well known set of 10 perceptions.<sup>38</sup> If we are new to this kind of practice, it is helpful to have some idea of the practice’s context.

<sup>31</sup> *Ettha ekacce therā, niraya,pālā nāma n’atthi, yanta,rūpaṃ viya kammam eva kāraṇaṃ kāretīti vadanti.* The Adhidhamma, quoting Kv 598,7, however, rejects this view. (MA 4:231,4; AA 2:227; NmA 2:424). See S Mori 1997.

<sup>32</sup> A 5.57,6(5)+8), SD 5.12.

<sup>33</sup> For a similar development in Chinese Buddhism, see eg Stephen F Teiser, *The Scripture on the Ten Kings*, Honolulu, 1994, esp pt 2.

<sup>34</sup> M 13.14/1:87 @ SD 6.9 & M 14.13/1:92 @ SD 4.7 (verbatim passages). These same tortures—such as the cutting off of limbs and live flaying—are also given in **Bāla Paṇḍita S** (M 129,4/3:164 @ SD 2.22) & **Kamma,karaṇa (or Vajja) S** (A 2.1/1:47-49). For other details of such tortures, see AA 2:88-90 (for tr, see nn in A:WH 1:42 f).

<sup>35</sup> On possible influences of Mesopotamian ideas on Buddhist narratives, see SD 36.1 (1.5) & SD 36.9 (3.3).

<sup>36</sup> See *Anusaya*, SD 31.3.

<sup>37</sup> See **(Anicca) Cakkhu S** (S 25.1) & SD 16.7 (5).

<sup>38</sup> For the 10 perceptions, see **Bojjhaṅga Saṃyutta** (S 46.71-76/5:132 f): see SD 19.16 (3.4).

Impermanence (*aniccatā*) is one of the well known “3 characteristics” (*ti, lakkhaṇā*); the other two being suffering or unsatisfactoriness (*dukkhatā*) and non-self (*anattatā*).<sup>39</sup> These **3 universal characteristics** are always given in this sequence, and for good reason. The suttas often speak of the relationship of the 3 characteristics by presenting this sequence, that is, from the awareness of impermanence (*anicca, saññā*), there arises the appreciation of the unsatisfactoriness in the impermanent (*anicce dukkha, saññā*), and then on to the understanding of the selfless nature of the unsatisfactory (*dukkhe anatta, saññā*).<sup>40</sup>

### 3.5.4 Suffering, heedlessness and bad karma

**3.5.4.1 The (Majjhima) Deva, dūta Sutta** describes the sufferings of hell-beings in unparalleled graphic detail for one main purpose: that of the perception of suffering [3.5.3]. Despite the terribly lurid details of the various tortures and sufferings, including the hell wardens (*niraya, pāla*) who inflict many of them upon the hell-beings, the Sutta unequivocally declares that these tortures and sufferings are not the work of anyone else, not even the gods (or God) (and definitely not the Buddha), but the results of our own bad karma.<sup>41</sup> This “self-effort karma refrain” occurs 5 times, that is, following each of passages on the 5 divine messengers [§§4-8].<sup>42</sup>

**3.5.4.2** The tortures and sufferings that we experience are the results of our own “bad karma” (*pāpa, kamma*): “this bad deed was done by you yourself, and you yourself will feel its result.”<sup>43</sup> This is a very familiar teaching, echoed in the Dhammapada, especially the following verses:

By oneself is bad done. It is self-born; it arises in the self. It grinds the weak-minded like a diamond (grinds) a hard gem.	<i>attanā'va kataṃ pāpaṃ atta, jaṃ atta, sambhavaṃ abhimanthati dummedham vajiraṃ v'asmamayaṃ maṇim</i>	Dh 161
By oneself, indeed, is bad done; by oneself is one defiled. By oneself is bad not done [undone]; by oneself is one purified. Purity and impurity depend on oneself. No one purifies another.	<i>attanā'va kataṃ pāpaṃ attanā saṅkilissati attanā akataṃ pāpaṃ attanā'va visujjhati suddhi asuddhi paccattaṃ n'añño aññaṃ visodhaye</i>	Dh 165

Such statements must be carefully understood not as a self-centred ethics of personal salvation. While it is true that early Buddhism teaches that we have a capacity for *personal* salvation, we also have sutta accounts of the Buddha, on numerous occasions, admonishing others, even mentally preparing them for self-awakening.<sup>44</sup> In fact, the (Majjhima) Deva, dūta Sutta is itself a record of the Buddha's reaching out to us by way of an early warning to help us prevent any bad karma from overwhelming us. [4]

<sup>39</sup> S 4:1; A 1:286; Dh 277-279; cf VbhA 49 f.

<sup>40</sup> D 3:243, 251, 290, 291; S 5:132, 345; A 1:41, 3:85, 277, 334, 452, 4:46, 52, 148, 387, 465, 5:105, 309.

(Literally tr, the pattern runs: “cognition of impermanence, cognition of unsatisfactoriness in the impermanent, cognition of non-self in the unsatisfactory.”) This pattern is also reflected in the statement “what is impermanent that is unsatisfactory, what is unsatisfactory that is non-self,” eg at S 3:22, 45, 82, 4:1, 153. Cf also S:B 844. Ñāṇananda explains: “in *sukha* and *attā* we have the affective and conative reactions to the illusion of permanence” (1971:92, 1986:103). (Anālayo's fn, normalized). See SD 13.1 (3.8).

<sup>41</sup> On *karma*, see **Karma**, SD 18.1; **Cūḷa Kamma Vibhaṅga S** (M 135), SD 4.15.

<sup>42</sup> §§4.5, 5.5, 6.5, 7.5, 8.5.

<sup>43</sup> *Tāya v'etaṃ pāpaṃ kammaṃ kataṃ. Tvañ ñeva tassa vipākaṃ paṭisaṃvedissasīti.*

<sup>44</sup> See **Spiritual friendship: Stories of kindness**, SD 8.1; **Skillful means**, SD 30.8.

**3.5.4.3** That karma is not any kind of *lex talionis* or tit-for-tat, nor is it in any way measurable, is clear from the (Majjhima) Deva,dūta Sutta. The karma refrain, “There he suffers sharp, piercing, racking pains. Yet, he does not die, so long as the result of that bad deed [bad karma] is not exhausted,” appears 20 times, following each description of a particular painful hellish torture.<sup>45</sup> In other words, the duration of such sufferings or the life-span of a hell-being is indeterminate, lasting as long as the result or momentum of our bad karma.<sup>46</sup> It is clear again here that we are not (or not merely) “punished” for any bad deed we have done, but we become (that is, experience) that deed for ourselves.<sup>47</sup>

## 4 Yama’s role

**4.1 MYTHOLOGICAL EVOLUTIONS.** The (Majjhima) Deva,dūta Sutta is an elaborate statement on the practice of **heedfulness** (*appamāda*).<sup>48</sup> This is clear from the Sutta theme of the 5 “divine messengers” (*deva,dūta*), employed figuratively as the personification of birth [§4], decay [§5], disease [§6], pain [§7], and death [§8].<sup>49</sup> Yama, playing the role of a teacher asks each “departed being” who appears before him, “Have you not seen” any of these 5 signs? The beings answer that they have seen them, but they have been heedless (*pamāda*), so that they all fell under the power of these “messengers.”

Evidently, from the suttas, this is the only role of King Yama. We can notice that in the suttas, the descriptions of the hells are very rare, and the most elaborate descriptions are found in the two **Deva,dūta Suttas**,<sup>50</sup> and in the **Bāla Paṇḍita Sutta** (M 129).<sup>51</sup> Because **the (Yama) Deva,dūta Sutta** (A 3.35) is the shortest of the suttas relating to Yama and the descriptions of the hells, it is probably the oldest of the three suttas.

Next in age is **the (Majjhima) Deva,dūta Sutta** (M 130), where we see a more elaborate and graphic descriptions of the hells, and the Yama account is introduced wholesale from the (Yama) Deva,dūta Sutta. The latest of this triad of “hell” suttas is clearly **the Bāla Paṇḍita Sutta** (M 129), which not only gives the most graphic accounts of the hells, but also highlights the sufferings of bad karma against the pleasures of good karma, represented by the world monarch. The Yama story is omitted here so that our attention is more fully drawn to the blessings of the world monarch as an exemplar of a good and noble person.<sup>52</sup>

**4.2 YAMA AS OUR CONSCIENCE.** Yāma, in other words, plays **the role of our conscience or true self**. “True self” refers to a mind that is inclined to good, through mind, speech and body, and who is self-reliant in the quest for awakening [3.5.4.2]. So, those beings who appear before him lack conscience or true self—they are all spiritually immature and foolish—and they pay dearly for it. Yama does not act further, and has nothing more to say: he falls silent [§9]. The hell wardens—not Yama—inflict torture and suffering upon these foolish beings.

**4.3 YAMA AS SPIRITUAL ADVISOR.** Although Yama is traditionally regarded as the “king” or “ruler” of the hell-states, his true role is, as evident from the Deva,dūta Sutta, that of **a spiritual advisor or exist-**

<sup>45</sup> §§10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17.2, 18.4, 18.5, 18.6, 18.8, 18.11, 20.3, 21.2, 22.3, 23.3, 24.3, 25.3, 26.4.

<sup>46</sup> On the life-spans of the beings of the 31 realms, see SD 1.7 (Table 1.7).

<sup>47</sup> See **Karma**, SD 18.1 (6).

<sup>48</sup> **Heedfulness** essentially entails mindfulness in avoiding bad (being morally virtuous), doing good (cultivating the mind), and purifying the mind (abandoning the mental hindrances) (Dh 183), a training that is rooted in sustained wise attention (*yoniso manasikāra*) and spiritual friendship. See **Kalyāṇa,mitta Appamāda S** (S 3.18), SD 34.3 & **Viveka,nissita**, SD 20.4 (1.4).

<sup>49</sup> An older set is clear that of the 3 divine messengers, ie, of disease, decay and death. In fact, it is this triad that we find in an older parallel, **(Yama) Deva,dūta S** (A 3.35), SD 48.10.

<sup>50</sup> **(Pañca) Deva,dūta S** (M 130/3:178-187), SD 2.23 & **(Yama) Deva,dūta S** (A 3.35/1:139-142), SD 48.10.

<sup>51</sup> M 129/3:163-178 (SD 2.22).

<sup>52</sup> See SD 48.10 (1).

**ential instructor** to ensure (or at least instruct) so that we would not have to appear before him! He is almost like a compassionately wise headmaster who wants his students to graduate from his reform school rather than get stuck there, as it were. Or, worse, if we have to go for detention, then the punishment is rather severe. However, there is still room for learning. Hence, the (Majjhima) Deva,dūta Sutta (M 130) and the (Yama) Deva,dūta Sutta (A 3.35).<sup>53</sup>

**4.4 YAMA’S ASPIRATION.** With some wry humour, the Sutta then presents Yama being unhappy with his singular task of interrogating the hell-fallen departed. In fact, in early Buddhist mythology, this is all that is recorded as his task. Since he is part of our world—the hells are a part of our universe (at least in the mythology)—Yama, too, finds his task unrewarding. Or perhaps, he is reminded that he is himself not free from such potential suffering because he is himself unawakened.<sup>54</sup>

Understandably, Yama **aspires to reborn as a human in the Buddha’s time**, so that he is able to be his disciple and attend to him so that he would be close to the Buddha and understand the Dharma [§28].<sup>55</sup> The Buddha dramatically announces that this remarkable event is “something that I have actually known, seen and discovered by myself.”<sup>56</sup> [§29]. Do we take them as the Buddha’s ipsissima verba (actual words), or are they the narrator’s didactic device, a skillful means that became more evident and contrived in later works, especially those of the Mahāyāna?<sup>57</sup>

**4.5 WHAT DOES THE BUDDHA MEAN?** Are to to take all these hellish gore and feudal violence as historically real? This is where we need to invoke **the Neyy’attha Nī’tattha Sutta** (A 2.3.5+6), where the Buddha declares that not to misrepresent him, we should properly read a sutta or teaching according to whether the meaning *has* been drawn out (*nī’tattha*) or the meaning *needs* to be drawn out (*neyy’attha*).<sup>58</sup> [1.1]

Teachings whose meanings are to be drawn out (*neyya*) are those given in worldly terms, using persons, stories, parables, figures and intentional language, such as the Jātaka stories, accounts of the gods and non-humans.<sup>59</sup> Those teachings whose meanings have been drawn out (*nīta*) are those spoken or communicated directly in terms of ideas and mental states, such as “impermanence,” “suffering,” “non-self,” “the 5 aggregates,” and “nirvana.”<sup>60</sup>

Clearly here, when the Buddha says that he has “actually know, seen and discovered by myself” [§28], he means that he has “directly known” these truths. This is the experiences of nature of suffering and ignorance, or karma and rebirth, and how these work on all unawakened beings. He describes them in a manner that is dramatic, at least in the literary idiom of his times, when many, if not all, of these tortures and violence were actually practised by the kings and those in power.

<sup>53</sup> Respectively, M 130 (SD 2.23) & A 3.35 (SD 48.10).

<sup>54</sup> According to the Chinese parallels—DĀ 30.4 @ T1.127a13 and EĀ 32.4 @ T2.676b21—Yama is not concerned with future wealth or a good family. Instead, he simply wishes to be reborn as a human being to go forth and undertake the path to awakening. A similar aspiration by Yama is recorded in T24 @ T1.330c8 and T25 @ T1.385c5.

<sup>55</sup> This aspiration is also found in **(Yama) Deva,dūta S** (A 3.35/1:142,5), SD 48.10.

<sup>56</sup> *Api ca yad eva me sāmāñ ñātāṃ, sāmāñ diṭṭhāṃ, sāmāñ viditāṃ, tam evāhaṃ vadāmīti.* Although this remark (M 3:186,32) is also found in the parallel **(Yama) Deva,dūta S** (A 3.35/1:142,12), SD 48.10, it is not found in any of the Chinese parallels.

<sup>57</sup> Such as the use of a blatant lie in the parable of the burning house (ch 3) and the long list of curses (some 6 pages long) upon those who slander the Lotus Sutra and other Mahāyāna Sutras: see eg *The Threefold Lotus Sutra*, tr Kato et al, Tokyo, 1975:103-108. See also Reflection, “**The Buddha one and only**,” R389, 2015.

<sup>58</sup> A 2.3.5+6/1:60 (SD 2.6b).

<sup>59</sup> On intentional language, see SD 26.11 (6.5): Words and meanings & **Dh 97**, SD 10.6 esp (5). See also Piya Tan, “Teaching methods of the Buddha,” Singapore, 2002 ch 18. Download from <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2010/02/Teaching-Methods-of-the-Buddha.pdf>.

<sup>60</sup> On these two levels of meanings, see SD 2.6b (1).

These accounts are not to invoke fear in us,<sup>61</sup> but to remind us the consequences of bad are really painful. We are to meditate on these sufferings—they constitute the practice of **the perception of suffering** (*dukkha,saññā*). They also constitute **the cultivation of compassion** (*karuṇā,bhāvanā*): seeing the painful possibility of the suffering as the fruit of our own badness and foolishness, we should be moved to teach others good and wisdom so that their bad karma would not catch up with them, that they would cease and desist from committing them.

## (Majjhima) Deva,dūta Sutta

### The Discourse on the Divine Messengers

M 130

1 Thus have I heard.

1.2 At one time the Blessed One was staying in Anāthapiṇḍika’s park in Jeta’s grove near Sāvathī. There the Blessed One addressed the monks thus,

“Bhikshus!”

“Bhante!” they replied in assent to the Blessed One.

#### Parable of the 2 buildings

The Blessed One said:

2 “Bhikshus, suppose there were **two buildings with doors** and a man with good eyesight standing there between them were to see people going in and out, and passing to and fro between them.<sup>62</sup>

THE DOERS OF GOOD

2.2 Even so do I, bhikshus, with the divine eye that is purified and surpassing the human eye, see beings passing away and reappearing, inferior and superior, fair and ugly, fortunate and unfortunate.

2.3 I understand how these beings fare according to their karma, thus:

‘Indeed, these worthy beings who

were accomplished in good conduct in body, in speech, and in mind,  
not revilers of the holy saints [aryas],

holding right views, effecting their right views in their actions.

With the body’s breaking up, after death,<sup>63</sup> they reappeared in a happy destination, in heaven.

2.4 ‘Or, these worthy beings who were

accomplished in good conduct in body, in speech, and in mind, [179]

not revilers of the holy saints, holding right views,

effecting their right views in their actions.

With the body’s breaking up, after death, they reappeared as human beings.

<sup>61</sup> If it does, we must mindfully question ourselves *why* we feel such fear, and build up our lovingkindness, to begin with. Then we should question wise and compassionate teachers, or diligently study the suttas for ourselves.

<sup>62</sup> *Seyyathā’pi bhikkhave dve āgārā sa,dvārā, tattha cakkhumā puriso majjhe thito passeyya manusse gehaṃ pavisante pi nikkhamante pi anusañcarante pi anuvarante pi.*

<sup>63</sup> “With the body’s breaking up, after death,” *kāyassa bheda param,marañā*. Buddhaghosa explains this phrase as foll: “With the body’s breaking up” (*kāyassa bheda*) means on abandoning the aggregates that are clung to; “after death” (*param,marañā*) means that in-between state (*tad-antaram*), in the grasping of the aggregates that have been generated (*abhinibbatta-k,khandha,gahaṇe*). Or, “with the body’s breaking up” means the interruption of the life-faculty, and “after death” means after the death-consciousness (*cuti,cittato uddham*). (Vism 13.91/427; cf NcA 69).

## THE DOERS OF BAD

2.5 ‘But these worthy beings who were accomplished in bad conduct in body, in speech, and in mind, revilers of the holy saints, holding wrong views, effecting their wrong views in their actions. With the body’s breaking up, after death, they reappeared in realm of departed beings [pretas].

2.6 ‘Or, these worthy beings who were accomplished in bad conduct in body, in speech, and in mind, revilers of the holy saints, ‘ holding wrong views, effecting their wrong views in their actions. With the body’s breaking up, after death, they reappeared in the animal womb.

2.7 ‘Or, these worthy beings who were accomplished in bad conduct in body, in speech, and in mind, revilers of the holy saints, holding wrong views, effecting their wrong views in their actions. With the body’s breaking up, after death, they reappeared in a state of misery, a bad destination, a lower realm, in hell.

THE 5 DIVINE MESSENGERS<sup>64</sup>Yama’s Hell

3 Now, bhikshus, the hell-wardens seize such a being by both arms<sup>65</sup> and present him to king Yama,<sup>66</sup> saying,

‘Sire, this man has ill treated his mother, ill treated his father, ill treated recluses, ill treated brahmins.<sup>67</sup> He has no respect for the elders of his clan. Let the king order his punishment!’

The 1<sup>st</sup> divine messenger

4 Then, bhikshus, king Yama questions, presses and parleys with him about **the 1<sup>st</sup> divine messenger**:

‘My good man, did you not see the 1<sup>st</sup> divine messenger appear amongst humans [in the human world]?’<sup>68</sup>

He says, ‘I did not, bhante.’

4.2 Then, bhikshus, king Yama says:

<sup>64</sup> For what is prob an older set of 3 messengers, see **(Yama) Deva,dūta S** (A 3.35/1:138-142), SD 48.10: see [3.2.4].

<sup>65</sup> “By both arms,” *nānā,bāhāsu*, lit “by various arms,” ie on different sides, left and right.

<sup>66</sup> Yama is the personification of the god of the dead who also fares according to his karma.

<sup>67</sup> Both the terms “recluse” (*samaṇa*) and “brahmin” (*brāhmaṇa*) do not refer to any *social class* of people, but to those “who abstain from intoxication and heedlessness, who bear all things with patience and restraint, each taming himself, each calming himself, each cooling himself” (A 5.41 @ SD 2.1) and who “keep away from bad and un-wholesome things” (*pāpake akusale dhamme bāhentī ti ... brāhmaṇā*) (D 27,22.2 @ SD 2.19). Further, see **Dh 388** on the true recluse and true brahmin, and **Dh 383-422** = ch 26, Brāhmaṇa Vagga, on how the Buddha’s “natural adaptation” [SD 39.3 (3.3.4)] of terms like “brahmin,” rejecting their “class” connotations.

<sup>68</sup> Three of these messengers—an old man, a sick man, a dead man—appeared to the Bodhisattva when he was still living in the palaces, leading him to renounce the household life for the recluse’s life to seek liberation. The source of this legend is found in **Sukhumāla S** (A 3.38/1:145 f). (Cf A 1:138 ff where there are only 3 divine messengers.) Such accounts later developed into the legend of the four sights (an old man, a sick man, a dead man, a holy man).

‘My good man, have you never seen amongst humans **a young tender infant**,  
lying prone, fouled in his own excrement and urine?’

He says, ‘Yes, I have, bhante.’

4.3 Then, bhikshus, king Yama says,

‘My good man, did it never occur to you—an intelligent and mature man—

“I too am subject to birth. I am not free from birth.

Surely I had better do good through body, speech and mind”?’

He says, ‘I was unable to, bhante, I was negligent.’

#### THE SELF-EFFORT KARMA REFRAIN

4.4 Then, bhikshus, king Yama says,

‘My good man, through negligence you have failed to do good deeds through body, speech and mind.

This, my good man, will surely work on you according to that negligence.

4.5 This bad deed was not done

by your mother or your father, [180]

by your brother or your sister, or

by your friends and companions, or

by your kinsmen and relatives, or

by recluses and brahmins, or

by the gods—

4.6 this bad deed was done by you yourself, and you yourself will feel its result.’<sup>69</sup>

### The 2<sup>nd</sup> divine messenger

5 Then, bhikshus, after questioning, pressing and parleying with him about the 1<sup>st</sup> divine messenger, king Yama questions, presses and parleys with him about **the 2<sup>nd</sup> divine messenger**:

‘My good man, did you not see the 2<sup>nd</sup> divine messenger appear amongst humans?’

He says, ‘I did not, bhante.’

5.2 Then, bhikshus, king Yama says:

‘My good man, have you never seen amongst humans **an old man or old woman**,

eighty, ninety or a hundred years old,

crooked as a rafter, bent double,

leaning on a stick,

trembling as he goes,

wretched, youth long gone,

with broken teeth,

with grey hair, with scanty hair or bald-headed,

with blotches all over the body?’<sup>70</sup>

He says, ‘Yes, I have, bhante.’

5.3 Then, bhikshus, king Yama says,

‘My good man, did it never occur to you—an intelligent and mature man—

“I too am subject to decay [old age]. I am not free from decay.

Surely I had better do good through body, speech and mind”?’

He says, ‘I was unable to, bhante, I was negligent.’

#### THE SELF-EFFORT KARMA REFRAIN

5.4 Then, bhikshus, king Yama says,

<sup>69</sup> *Tāya v’etaṃ pāpam kammaṃ kataṃ. Tvañ ñeva tassa vipākaṃ paṭsamvedissasīti.* See Intro (3.4.4).

<sup>70</sup> As in (Yama) Deva,dūta S (A 3.35,1/1:138), SD 48.10.

*‘My good man, through negligence you have failed to do good deeds through body, speech and mind. This, my good man, will surely work on you according to that negligence.*

5.5 *This bad deed was not done  
by your mother or your father, or  
by your brother or your sister, or  
by your friends and companions, or  
by your kinsmen and relatives, or  
by recluses and brahmins, or  
by the gods—*

5.6 *this bad deed was done by you yourself, and you yourself will feel its result.’*

### The 3<sup>rd</sup> divine messenger

6 Then, after questioning, pressing and parleying with him about the 2<sup>nd</sup> divine messenger, king Yama questions, presses and parleys with him about **the 3<sup>rd</sup> divine messenger**:

[181] ‘My good man, did you not see the 3<sup>rd</sup> divine messenger appear amongst humans?’

He says, ‘I did not, bhante.’

6.2 Then, bhikshus, king Yama says:

‘My good man, have you never seen amongst humans **a sick man or sick woman**, afflicted, suffering and gravely ill, lying fouled in their own excrement and urine, lifted up by some and set down by others?’

He says, ‘Yes, I have, bhante.’

6.3 Then, bhikshus, king Yama says,

‘My good man, did it never occur to you—an intelligent and mature man—

“I too am subject to disease. I am not free from disease.

Surely I had better do good through body, speech and mind”?’

He says, ‘I was unable to, bhante, I was negligent.’

#### THE SELF-EFFORT KARMA REFRAIN

6.4 Then, bhikshus, king Yama says,

*‘My good man, through negligence you have failed to do good deeds through body, speech and mind. This, my good man, will surely work on you according to that negligence.*

6.5 *This bad deed was not done  
by your mother or your father, or  
by your brother or your sister, or  
by your friends and companions, or  
by your kinsmen and relatives, or  
by recluses and brahmins, or  
by the gods—*

*this bad deed was done by you yourself, and you yourself will feel its result.’*

### The 4<sup>th</sup> divine messenger

7 Then, bhikshus, after questioning, pressing and parleying with him about the 3<sup>rd</sup> divine messenger, king Yama questions, presses and parleys with him about **the 4<sup>th</sup> divine messenger**:

‘My good man, did you not see the 4<sup>th</sup> divine messenger appear amongst humans?’

He says, ‘I did not, bhante.’

7.2 Then, bhikshus, king Yama says:

‘My good man,<sup>71</sup> have you never seen amongst humans<sup>72</sup> when **a robber, a criminal,** the fool sees kings inflicting various kinds of torture on him:  
 having him whipped, caned, clubbed,  
 his hands cut off, his feet cut off, his limbs cut off,  
 his ears cut off, his nose cut off, his ears *and* nose cut off;  
 having him subjected to ‘the porridge pot,’ to ‘the polished-shell shave,’ to ‘Rāhu’s mouth,’ to ‘the fiery garland,’ to ‘the flaming hand,’ to ‘the blades of grass,’ to ‘the bark dress,’ to ‘the black antelope’ [being strapped to the ground by an iron ring around each limb, beaten with iron spikes and then surrounded by fire],<sup>73</sup>  
 to ‘the meat hooks’ [having pieces of his flesh cut and hung on them], to ‘the coins’ [disc-slice], to ‘the lye pickling’ [immersed in strong alkaline solution],  
 to ‘the pivoting pin [where a spike is driven in his skull from ear to ear],  
 to ‘the rolled-up straw mat’ [beating him up until his body is like straw]; and  
 having him splashed with boiling oil, and  
 having him thrown to the dogs to be devoured,  
 having him impaled alive on stakes, and  
 having his head cut off with a sword?’

He says, ‘Yes, I have, bhante.’

7.3 Then, bhikshus, king Yāma says,

‘My good man, did it never occur to you—an intelligent and mature man—

“Those who do bad deeds have such diverse tortures inflicted on them here and now. [182]

So what about in the hereafter?

Surely I had better do good through body, speech and mind”?’

He says, ‘I was unable to, bhante, I was negligent.’

#### THE SELF-EFFORT KARMA REFRAIN

7.4 Then, bhikshus, king Yama says,

*‘My good man, through negligence you have failed to do good deeds through body, speech and mind. This, my good man, will surely work on you according to that negligence.*

7.5 *This bad deed was not done*

*by your mother or your father, or*

*by your brother or your sister, or*

*by your friends and companions, or*

*by your kinsmen and relatives, or*

*by recluses and brahmins, or*

*by the gods—*

*this bad deed was done by you yourself, and you yourself will feel its result.’*

### The 5<sup>th</sup> divine messenger

**8** Then, after questioning, pressing and parleying with him about the 4<sup>th</sup> divine messenger, king Yama, questions, presses and parleys with him about **the 5<sup>th</sup> divine messenger:**

‘My good man, did you not see the 5<sup>th</sup> divine messenger appear amongst humans?’

He says, ‘I did not, bhante.’

8.2 Then, bhikshus, king Yama says:

‘My good man, have you never seen amongst humans **a dead man or dead woman,**

<sup>71</sup> Hereon in this verse, as in **Bāla Paṇḍita S** (M 129,4/3:164), SD 2.22.

<sup>72</sup> Hereafter up to “having his head cut off with a sword,” as at **Mahā Dukkha-k,khandha S** (M 13,14/1:87), **Devadūta S** (M 129,4.1/3:163 f) & **Kamma Kāraṇa (or Vajja) S** (A 2.1/1:47-49). For other details (Comy) of the tortures, see nn in A:WH 1:42 f.

<sup>73</sup> NmA 278 ad Nm 154 = M 13,14 (1:87,15).

dead for a day, dead for two days, dead for three days,  
 bloated up, livid, and oozing with impurities?’  
 He says, ‘Yes, I have, bhante.’  
 8.3 Then, bhikshus, king Yama says,  
 ‘My good man, did it never occur to you—an intelligent and mature man—  
 “I too am subject to death.  
 I am not free from death.  
 Surely I had better do good through body, speech and mind”?’  
 He says, ‘I was unable to, bhante, I was negligent.’

#### THE SELF-EFFORT KARMA REFRAIN

8.4 Then, bhikshus, king Yama says,  
*‘My good man, through negligence you have failed to do good deeds through body, speech and mind.  
 This, my good man, will surely work on you according to that negligence.*  
 8.5 *Certainly they will deal with you according to your negligence.  
 This bad deed was not done by  
 your mother or your father, or  
 by your brother or your sister, or  
 by your friends and companions, or  
 by your kinsmen and relatives, or  
 by recluses and brahmins, or  
 by the gods—  
 this bad deed was done by you yourself, and you yourself will feel its result.’*

### King Yama’s silence

9 Then, after pressing and questioning and cross-questioning him about the fifth divine messenger,  
king Yama falls silent.<sup>74</sup>

10 Now, the hell-wardens [183] torture him with the fivefold pinion.<sup>75</sup>  
 They drive a red-hot iron rod through one hand and  
 then another red-hot iron rod through the other hand.  
 They drive (another) red-hot iron rod through one foot and  
 then another red-hot iron rod through the other foot.  
 They drive (another) red-hot iron rod through his belly.

#### THE BAD KARMA REFRAIN

10.2 There, he suffers sharp, piercing, racking pains.<sup>76</sup>  
 Yet, he does not die, so long as the result of that bad deed [bad karma] is not exhausted.<sup>77</sup>

11 Next, the hell-wardens throw him down and pare him with axes.

THE BAD KARMA REFRAIN. *There he suffers sharp, piercing, racking pains.*

*Yet, he does not die, so long as the result of that bad deed is not exhausted.*

<sup>74</sup> On the significance of silence, see **Silence and the Buddha**, SD 44.1 (1.2.1).

<sup>75</sup> The following description of hell (§10-16) is found in **Bāla,paṇḍita S** (M 129,10-16) & A 1:141 f; also mentioned at J 1:174.

<sup>76</sup> *So tattha dukkhā tippā kaṭukā vedanā vedeti.*

<sup>77</sup> *Na ca tāva kālaṃ karoti yāva na taṃ pāpaṃ kammaṃ vyanti,hoti.*

12 Next, the hell-wardens set him upside down and pare him with adzes.

THE BAD KARMA REFRAIN

*There he suffers sharp, piercing, racking pains.*

*Yet, he does not die, so long as the result of that bad deed is not exhausted.*

13 Next, the hell-wardens harness him to a chariot and drive him back and forth across fiery, blazing, glowing ground.

THE BAD KARMA REFRAIN

*There he suffers sharp, piercing, racking pains.*

*Yet, he does not die, so long as the result of that bad deed is not exhausted.*

14 Next, the hell-wardens make him climb up and down a great mound of fiery, blazing, glowing coals.

THE BAD KARMA REFRAIN

*There he suffers sharp, piercing, racking pains.*

*Yet, he does not die, so long as the result of that bad deed is not exhausted.*

15 Next, the hell-wardens seize him and plunge him head first into a fiery, blazing, glowing metal cauldron.

He is cooked therein in a swirl of froth.

And while he is there in a swirl of froth,

he is swept now up, now down, now across.

THE BAD KARMA REFRAIN

*There he suffers sharp, piercing, racking pains.*

*Yet, he does not die, so long as the result of that bad deed is not exhausted.*

## THE HELLS

### The great hell

16 Next, the hell-wardens thrown him down into the great hell (*mahā niraya*). Now as regards that great hell, bhikshus:<sup>78</sup>

16.2 *Catu-k,kaṇṇo catu,dvāro  
vibhatto bhāgasō mito  
ayo,pākāra,pariyanto  
ayasā paṭikujjito.*

It has four corners and four doors,  
one on each side, equally proportioned,  
walled up all around with iron  
and shut in with an iron roof.

16.3 *Tassa ayom,ayā bhūmi  
jalitā tejasā yutā  
samantā yojana,satam  
pharivā tiṭṭhati sabbadā'ti*

Its floor is made of iron,  
glowing through burning heat,  
spreading all around a hundred leagues,  
staying there all the time.

<sup>78</sup> These 2 verses recurs at (Yama) Deva,dūta S (A 3.35), SD 48.10; also at Goṇa Pv (Pv 8/70 f), Dhana,pāla Pv (Pv 19/240 f), Nandaka Pv (Pv 38/692 f), given in 3 neut (-am), except for bhāgasō.

17 <sup>79</sup>Now, bhikshus,  
the flames that surge out from the great hell's eastern wall dash against the western wall;  
the flames that surge out from its western wall dash against [184] the eastern wall;  
the flames that surge out from its northern wall dash against the southern wall;  
the flames that surge out from its southern wall dash against the northern wall;  
the flames that dash out from the bottom dash against the top;  
and the flames that dash out from the top dash down against the bottom.  
17.2 *There he suffers sharp, piercing, racking pains.  
Yet, he does not die, so long as the result of that bad deed is not exhausted.*

THE EASTERN DOOR IS OPEN

18 Bhikshus, some time or other, at the end of a long period of time, there comes a time when the great hell's eastern door is opened.

18.2 He runs towards it, treading quickly.

As he does so, his outer skin burns, his inner skin burns, his flesh burns, his sinews burn, his bones turn into smoke.

18.3 It is the same when his foot is lifted up.

At long last,<sup>80</sup> bhikshus, he reaches the door, but it is shut.

18.4 *There he suffers sharp, piercing, racking pains. Yet, he does not die, so long as the result of that bad deed is not exhausted.*

THE WESTERN DOOR IS OPEN

18.5 Bhikshus, some time or other, at the end of a long period of time, there comes a time when the great hell's western door is opened.

*He runs towards it, treading quickly.*

*As he does so, his outer skin burns, his inner skin burns, his flesh burns, his sinews burn, his bones turn into smoke.*

*It is the same when his foot is lifted up.*

18.6 *At long last, bhikshus, he reaches the door, but it is shut.*

*There he suffers sharp, piercing, racking pains. Yet, he does not die, so long as the result of that bad deed is not exhausted.*

THE NORTHERN DOOR IS OPEN

18.7 Bhikshus, some time or other, at the end of a long period of time, there comes a time when the great hell's northern door is opened.

*He runs towards it, treading quickly.*

*As he does so, his outer skin burns, his inner skin burns, his flesh burns, his sinews burn, his bones turn into smoke.*

*It is the same when his foot is lifted up.*

*At long last, bhikshus, he reaches the door, but it is shut.*

18.8 *There he suffers sharp, piercing, racking pains. Yet, he does not die, so long as the result of that bad deed is not exhausted.*

<sup>79</sup> From here on right to the end (§17-39), the sutta elaborates on the Buddha's statement in the preceding **Bāla Paṇḍita S** (M 129,17/3:167), SD 2.22.

<sup>80</sup> *Bahu, sampatta*, lit. "having attained much." MA 4:235 explains that it takes many hundred thousand years in Avīci to work of the results of his bad deed. The crucifixion of Devadatta is then described in the midst of the six fires of Avīci (a name that suggests there is no interval in the suffering).

**THE SOUTHERN DOOR IS OPEN**

18.9 Bhikshus, some time or other, at the end of a long period of time, there comes a time when the great hell's southern door is opened.

*He runs towards it, treading quickly.*

*As he does so, his outer skin burns, his inner skin burns, his flesh burns, his sinews burn, his bones turn into smoke.*

*It is the same when his foot is lifted up.*

18.10 *At long last, bhikshus, he reaches the door, but it is shut.*

18.11 *There he suffers sharp, piercing, racking pains. Yet, he does not die, so long as the result of that bad deed is not exhausted.*

**19** Bhikshus, some time or other, at the end of a long period of time, there comes a time when the great hell's eastern door is opened.

19.2 He runs towards it, treading quickly.

As he does so, he outer skin burns, his inner skin burns, his flesh burns, his sinews burn, his bones give out smoke.

19.3 It is just the same when he uplifts his foot.

19.4 He goes out through that door.

**The hell of excrement**

**20** Bhikshus, immediately next to the great hell [185] is the vast hell of excrement (*gūha,niraya*). He falls into that.

20.2 Bhikshus, in that hell of excrement needle-mouthed creatures

bore through his outer skin,

they bore through his inner skin,

they bore through his flesh,

they bore through his sinews,

they bore through his bones

and having bored through his outer skin,

and having bored through his inner skin,

and having bored through his flesh,

and having bored through his sinews,

and devour his marrow.

20.3 *There he suffers sharp, piercing, racking pains.*

*Yet, he does not die, so long as the result of that bad deed is not exhausted.*

**The hell of hot embers**

**21** Bhikshus, immediately next to the hell of excrement is the vast hell of burning embers (*kukkula,-niraya*). He falls therein.

21.2 *There he suffers sharp, piercing, racking pains.*

*Yet, he does not die, so long as the result of that bad deed is not exhausted.*

**The forest of simballi trees**

**22** Bhikshus, immediately next to the hell of burning embers is the vast forest of simballi trees (*simbala,vana*),

a league high, bristling with thorns sixteen finger-breadths long, burning, blazing and glowing.

22.2 They make him climb up and down these trees.

22.3 *There he suffers sharp, piercing, racking pains.*

*Yet, he does not die, so long as the result of that bad deed is not exhausted.*

### The forest of sword-leaf trees

**23** Bhikshus, immediately next to the forest of simbali trees is the vast forest of sword-leaf trees (*asi, patta, vana*).

He enters therein.

23.2 The leaves, stirred by the wind,

cut his hands and cut his feet, and cut his hands and cut his feet. They cut his ears and cut his nose, and cut his ears and cut his nose.

23.3 *There he suffers sharp, piercing, racking pains.*

*Yet, he does not die, so long as the result of that bad deed is not exhausted.*

### The river of caustic waters

**24** Bhikshus, immediately next to the forest of sword-leaf trees is a great river of caustic waters.<sup>81</sup>

He falls into that.

24.2 There he is swept with the current and against the current and both with and against the current.

24.3 *There he suffers sharp, piercing, racking pains.*

*Yet, he does not die, so long as the result of that bad deed is not exhausted.*

### The red-hot metal ball

**25** Bhikshus, next the hell-wardens pull him out with a fish-hook, [186] and placing him on the ground, they ask him,

‘My good man, what do you want?’

‘I’m hungry, bhante,” he says.

25.2 Then, bhikshus, the hell-wardens

prise open his mouth with red-hot iron tongs, burning, blazing and glowing,

and they throw into his mouth a red-hot metal ball, burning, blazing and glowing.

25.3 It burns his lips, it burns his mouth, it burns his throat, it burns his chest, too, and it passes out below taking with it his intestines and mesentery.

25.4 *There he suffers sharp, piercing, racking pains.*

*Yet, he does not die, so long as the result of that bad deed [bad karma] is not exhausted.*

### The red-hot molten copper

**26** Bhikshus, next the hell-wardens ask him,

‘My good man, what do you want?’

‘I’m thirsty, bhante,” he says.

26.2 Then, bhikshus, next the hell-wardens

prise open his mouth with red-hot iron tongs, burning, blazing and glowing,

and they pour into his mouth molten copper, burning, blazing and glowing.

26.3 *It burns his lips, it burns his mouth, it burns his throat, it burns his chest, too, and it passes out below taking with it his intestines and mesentery.*

26.4 *There he suffers sharp, piercing, racking pains.*

*Yet, he does not die, so long as the result of that bad deed is not exhausted.*

**27** Then the hell-wardens throw him back again into the great hell.

<sup>81</sup> *Khār’odaka nadī* called *Vetaraṇī* at MA 4:237. See Mahv:G 1:6 n1.

## Yama's aspiration

28 It occurred in the past, bhikshus, that king Yama thought:<sup>82</sup>

‘Those amongst humans who do bad unwholesome deeds indeed have all these diverse kinds of tortures inflicted on them.

29 Oh, that I might attain the human state,

that a Tathāgata [Thus Come], worthy and fully self-awakened, might appear amongst humans,  
that I might wait on that Blessed One,

that the Blessed One might teach me the Dharma,

and that I might come to understand that Blessed One's Dharma!’

30 Bhikshus, I tell you this not as something I've heard from another recluse or brahmin.

I tell you this as something that I've actually known for myself, seen for myself, discovered for myself.” [187]

## Concluding verses

30 The Blessed One said this. Then, the Sugata [Well-farer], the Teacher, added:<sup>83</sup>

31 *Coditā deva, dūtehi  
ye pamajjanti māṇavā  
te dīgha, rattam socanti  
hīna, kāyūpagā narā*

Though warned by the divine messengers,  
human beings are still negligent—  
long do they grieve  
as men fallen into lowly crowds [inferior worlds].

32 *Ye ca kho deva, dūtehi  
santo sappurisā idha  
coditā na-p, pamajjanti  
ariya, dhamme kudācanaṃ*

When warned by the divine messengers,  
the good people at peace here,  
are not heedless, but  
practise well the noble Dharma.

33 *Upādāne bhayaṃ divvā  
jāti, maraṇa, sambhave  
anupādā vimuccanti  
jāti, maraṇa, saṅkhaye.*

Seeing danger in clinging,  
for the birth and death it brings,  
by not clinging, they are freed  
through the end of birth and death.

34 *Te khema-p, pattā sukhino  
diṭṭha, dhammābhiniṃbutā  
sabba, vera, bhay'āītā  
sabba, dukkhaṃ upaccagun'ti*

They dwell happily, having attained the secure [nirvana],  
perfectly cooled here and now,  
beyond all hate and fear,  
having overcome all pain.

— evaṃ —

<sup>82</sup> *Bhūta, pubbaṃ bhikkhave yamassa rañño etad ahoṣi.* At this point, the sutta narrative turns from a mythical or symbolical language to a psychological one. Such passages clearly hint at the symbolic or instructive nature of such suttas as this. See **Myth in Buddhism**, SD 36.1 & **Mahā Sudassana S** (D 17) & SD 36.12.

<sup>83</sup> *Idam avoca bhagavā. Idam vatvā sugato athāparam etad avoca satthā.* These verses recur in **(Yama) Deva, dūta S** (M 130,31-34/3:187), SD 2.23; the last two verses recur in **(Kāma) Bhaya S** (A 6.23/3:311).

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