AN 3.36 — Devadūta Sutta (Divine Messengers)

English translation by Bhikkhu Candana.

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Text

36. Devadūta Sutta (Divine Messengers) Bhikkhus, these are the three Divine messengers. What three?

Here, Bhikkhus, someone who commits evil bodily actions, who commits evil actions through his speech and verbal communication, and who commits evil actions through his thoughts and ruminations, with the breakup of the body, after death, is reborn into a place of misery, within the lower realms, in hell.

Once there, the wardens of hell drag him by his limbs and show him to their king, Lord Yāma, and tell him:

“Lord, this one did not care for his mother or his father, nor for recluses that lead the Holy Life, nor for his elders. May your highness grant him the punishment he deserves.”

Then, King Yāma of the underworld cross questions him, asking about the reasons for his misbehavior in life:

“Good man, did you not see the first divine messenger appearing in your life among humans?”

“Lord, I did not see.”

Then, King Yāma of the underworld interrogates him further:

“Good man, did you not see a woman or a man among humans, eighty, ninety or a hundred years old, bent like the framework of an old roof, frail and weak, being supported on a stick and shivering, sick, with youthfulness gone, teeth broken and hair turned grey and most of it gone, and covered with wrinkles all over their body?”

Then he says, “That I did see, Lord.”

Then, King Yāma of the underworld asks him:

“Good man, you being intelligent, having already grown mature and even become old, did it not occur to you at any point –

‘I too am subject to ageing and decay; therefore, while there is still time and I have the ability, I should do good by body, speech, and mind?’”

Then he says, “Lord, I could not. I was simply carelessly negligent, and did not pay any attention.”

Then, King Yāma of the underworld says to him:

“On account of your careless negligence, you did not do what was right, by body, speech or mind. That demerit was not done by your mother, father, brother, sister, friends, associates, blood relations, by Devas, recluses or brahmins. No! It was done by you, and now you will have to experience the results and face their outcome!”

King Yāma of the underworld then cross questions him further, this time making queries about the second messenger:

“Good man, did you not see the second divine messenger appearing in your life among humans?”

“Lord, I did not see.”

Then, King Yāma of the underworld asks him:

“Good man, did you not see a woman or a man among humans, being gravely ill, afflicted and feeling pain, drowning in his own urine and feces; a sick and an ailing person, who could no longer take care of himself, where he needed the help and care of others to be raised and placed onto his bed?”

Then he says: “I did see, Lord.”

At that, King Yāma of the underworld asks him:

“Good man, you being intelligent, having already grown and become old, did it not occur to you at any point –

‘I too am subject to illness and afflictions; therefore, while there is still time and I have the ability, I should do good by body, speech, and mind?’

Then he says: “Lord, I could not. I was simply carelessly negligent.”

Then, King Yāma of the underworld says to him:

“On account of your careless negligence, you did not do what was right, by body, speech or mind. That demerit was not done by your mother, father, brother, sister, friends,

associates, blood relations, by Devas, recluses or brahmins. It was done by you, and now you will have to experience the results and face their outcome!"

King Yāma of the underworld then cross questions him further, this time making queries about the third messenger:

"Good man, did you not see the third divine messenger appearing in your life among humans?"

"Lord, I did not see."

Then, King Yāma of the underworld asks him:

"Good man, did you not see a woman or a man among humans who was dead, having been deceased for one day, two days, three days, or even having turned blue, bloated and festering?"

Then he says: "I did see, Lord."

Then, King Yāma of the underworld asks him:

"Good man, you being intelligent, having already grown and become old, did it not occur to you at any point –

'I too am subject to death and will eventually drop this broken body; therefore, while there is still time and I have the ability, I should do good by body, speech, and mind?'

Then he says: "Lord, I could not. I was simply carelessly negligent."

Then, King Yāma of the underworld says to him:

"On account of your careless negligence, you did not do what was right, by body, speech or mind. That demerit was not done by your mother, father, brother, sister, friends, associates, blood relations, by Devas, recluses or brahmins. It was done by you, and now you will have to experience the results and face their outcome."

Then, after cross-questioning him about the third messenger, King Yāma of the underworld falls silent and does not speak anymore.

Next, the wardens of hell grab that man and give him the fivefold punishment, whereby they fix a burning iron peg to each of his hands, and two others to each of his feet, and another that pierces his chest. On account of it, he feels terribly sharp and excruciatingly painful feelings, but he does not die, until the heavy results of the evil actions he had committed are exhausted.

Then, the wardens of hell drag him back and forth, and throw him down repeatedly, and proceed to cut him with knives as he feels sharp, excruciatingly painful feelings, but he still

does not die, until the heavy weight of the evil actions he had committed are exhausted.

Then, the wardens of hell hang him head down and slash him open with hatchets, as he feels sharp, excruciatingly painful feelings, yet no matter the intensity of the torture he is exposed to, he does not die, until the heavy weight of the evil actions he had committed are exhausted.

Then, the wardens of hell tie him down to a carriage and make him pull it after himself, while running on a ground that is ablaze with fire, where he feels sharp, excruciatingly painful feelings, but does not die, until the heavy weight of the evil actions he had committed are exhausted.

Then, the wardens of hell make him climb up and come down a giant and slippery rock which is blazing with fire, and there too, he feels sharp and excruciating pain, but does not die until the heavy results of the evil actions he had committed are exhausted.

The wardens of hell then take him by the feet and throw him to a very large boiling molten pot, where he cooks in its bubbling foam, experiencing the excruciating pain of being boiled, as he sometimes dives deep into it and then comes out of it, by swimming across it. As a result, he feels sharp, unimaginably excruciating pain but still does not die, until the heavy weight of the evil actions he had committed are exhausted.

Next, the wardens of hell put him in the Great Hell, which is known to be thus:

“It has four doors in the four cornered squares, Which are divided and then further subdivided. A place that is surrounded fully by an iron wall and an iron roof on top, And with iron floor that keeps burning, all the time. The Great Hell spreads for seven hundred miles and stands there, all the time.”

Bhikkhus, at one time it occurred to King Yāma of the underworld:

“While those born in the human realm do so many evil actions and then are subjected to these various punishments, I, on the other hand, wish to gain the opportunity to be reborn into the human realm at a time when a Tathāgata appears, an Arahant, a Perfectly Awakened Buddha, whereby I could gain the opportunity to attend to Him and listen, as He would teach me The Dhamma, so that I could learn and understand The Dhamma from Him!”

Bhikkhus, I am not repeating these words for you here as things that I heard from another recluse’s or brahmin’s lips!

I am describing for you what I personally have known, seen, and experienced myself.

Then, The Blessed spoke these words in verse:

‘Although, even while young, people meet the Divine Messengers face to face, They still remain negligent, and as a result, experience sorrow for a very long time, Once on their way to the lower realms of hell. But those good people still living here, When warned by the Divine messengers, Do not stay negligent but really practice The Noble Dhamma. And on having seen and understood that The dangers of having desire and grasping Are the very cause for birth and death, And by no longer clinging or grabbing onto anything, They become liberated, as their fires become extinguished, even while still living. Thus, fully contented, overcoming animosity and all dangers too, They are the ones who have attained, indeed, True freedom that is Nibbāna Supreme.’