MN 130 — MN 130 The Deva Messengers | Devadūta Sutta

English translation by Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu.

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Completeness: ABBREVIATED. Every source-unit character is preserved, including introductions, notes and verse structure. Thanissaro's collection-level note explicitly states that repetitions were cut: https://www.dhammatalks.org/suttas/about.html. This is evidence about the translation method, not an assertion that every individual unit contains an omission; no repetitions reconstructed.

Text

The Deva Messengers

Devadūta Sutta (MN 130)

I have heard that on one occasion the Blessed One was staying near Sāvatthī in Jeta’s Grove, Anāthapiṇḍika’s monastery. There he addressed the monks, “Monks!”

“Yes, lord,” the monks responded to him.

The Blessed One said, “Monks, it’s as if there were two households with doors, and a man of good eyesight, standing there between them, would see people entering & leaving a house, wandering out & about. In the same way, I—by means of the divine eye, purified &

surpassing the human—see beings passing away & re-appearing, and I discern how they are inferior & superior, beautiful & ugly, fortunate & unfortunate in accordance with their actions: 'O, how these beings—who were endowed with good conduct of body, speech, & mind, who did not revile noble ones, who held right views and undertook actions under the influence of right views—with the break-up of the body, after death, have re-appeared in a good destination, a heavenly world. Or how these beings—who were endowed with bad conduct of body, speech & mind, who reviled noble ones, held wrong views and undertook actions under the influence of wrong views—with the break-up of the body, after death, have re-appeared in the realm of the hungry ghosts. Or how these beings—who were endowed with bad conduct of body, speech & mind, who reviled noble ones, held wrong views and undertook actions under the influence of wrong views—with the break-up of the body, after death, have re-appeared in the animal womb. Or how these beings—who were endowed with bad conduct of body, speech & mind, who reviled noble ones, held wrong views and undertook actions under the influence of wrong views—with the break-up of the body, after death, have re-appeared in a plane of deprivation, a bad destination, a lower realm, hell.'

"Then the hell-wardens, seizing (such a being) by the arms, present him to King Yama: 'This is a man, your majesty, with no respect for mother, no respect for father,1 no reverence for contemplatives, no reverence for brahmans, no honor for the leaders of his clan. Let your majesty decree his punishment.'

"Then King Yama interrogates & interpellates & castigates the man regarding the first deva messenger: 'My good man, didn't you see the first deva messenger that has appeared among human beings?'

"'I didn't, lord,' he says.

Then King Yama says, 'My good man, didn't you see among human beings a tender baby boy lying prone in its own urine & excrement?'

"'I did, lord,' he says.

Then King Yama says, 'My good man, didn't the thought occur to you—observant & mature: "I, too, am subject to birth, have not gone beyond birth. I'd better do good with body, speech, & mind"?'

"'I couldn't, lord. I was heedless, lord.'

Then King Yama says, 'My good man, through heedlessness you did not do what is good with body, speech, & mind. And of course, my good man, they will deal with you in accordance with your heedlessness. For that evil kamma2 of yours was neither done by your mother, nor done by your father, nor done by your brother, nor done by your sister, nor done by your friends & companions, nor done by your kinsmen & relatives, nor done by the devas. That evil kamma was done by you yourself, and you yourself will experience its result.'

“Then, having interrogated & interpellated & castigated the man regarding the first deva messenger, King Yama interrogates & interpellates & castigates him regarding the second: ‘My good man, didn’t you see the second deva messenger that has appeared among human beings?’

“‘I didn’t, lord,’ he says.

“Then King Yama says, ‘My good man, didn’t you see among human beings a woman or man eighty, ninety, one hundred years old: aged, roof-rafter crooked, bent-over, supported by a cane, palsied, miserable, broken-toothed, gray-haired, scanty-haired, bald, wrinkled, with limbs all blotchy?’

“‘I did, lord,’ he says.

“Then King Yama says, ‘My good man, didn’t the thought occur to you—observant & mature: “I, too, am subject to aging, have not gone beyond aging. I’d better do good with body, speech, & mind”?’

“‘I couldn’t, lord. I was heedless, lord.’

“Then King Yama says, ‘My good man, through heedlessness you did not do what is good with body, speech, & mind. And of course, my good man, they will deal with you in accordance with your heedlessness. For that evil kamma of yours was neither done by your mother, nor done by your father, nor done by your brother, nor done by your sister, nor done by your friends & companions, nor done by your kinsmen & relatives, nor done by the devas. That evil kamma was done by you yourself, and you yourself will experience its result.’

“Then, having interrogated & interpellated & castigated the man regarding the second deva messenger, King Yama interrogates & interpellates & castigates him regarding the third: ‘My good man, didn’t you see the third deva messenger that has appeared among human beings?’

“‘I didn’t, lord,’ he says.

“Then King Yama says, ‘My good man, didn’t you see among human beings a woman or man diseased, in pain, severely ill, lying in her/his own urine & excrement, lifted up by others, laid down by others?’

“‘I did, lord,’ he says.

“Then King Yama says, ‘My good man, didn’t the thought occur to you—observant & mature: “I, too, am subject to illness, have not gone beyond illness. I’d better do good with body, speech, & mind”?’

“‘I couldn’t, lord. I was heedless, lord.’

“Then King Yama says, ‘My good man, through heedlessness you did not do what is good with body, speech, & mind. And of course, my good man, they will deal with you in accordance with your heedlessness. For that evil kamma of yours was neither done by your mother, nor done by your father, nor done by your brother, nor done by your sister, nor done by your friends & companions, nor done by your kinsmen & relatives, nor done by the devas. That evil kamma was done by you yourself, and you yourself will experience its result.’

“Then, having interrogated & interpellated & castigated the man regarding the third deva messenger, King Yama interrogates & interpellates & castigates him regarding the fourth: ‘My good man, didn’t you see the fourth deva messenger that has appeared among human beings?’

“‘I didn’t, lord,’ he says.

“Then King Yama says, ‘My good man, didn’t you see among human beings kings—catching a thief, a criminal—having him tortured in many ways: flogging him with whips, beating him with canes, beating him with clubs; cutting off his hands, cutting off his feet, cut off his hands & feet; cutting off his ears, cutting off his nose, cutting off his ears & nose; subjecting him to the ‘porridge pot,’ the ‘polished-shell shave,’ the ‘Rāhu’s mouth,’ the ‘flaming garland,’ the ‘blazing hand,’ the ‘grass-duty (ascetic),’ the ‘bark-dress (ascetic),’ the ‘burning antelope,’ the ‘meat hooks,’ the ‘coin-gouging,’ the ‘lye pickling,’ the ‘pivot on a stake,’ the ‘rolled-up bed’; having him splashed with boiling oil, devoured by dogs, impaled alive on a stake; cutting off his head with a sword?’

“‘I did, lord,’ he says.

“Then King Yama says, ‘My good man, didn’t the thought occur to you—observant & mature: “It seems that those who do evil actions are tortured in these many ways in the here & now. And how much more in the hereafter? I’d better do good with body, speech, & mind”?’

“‘I couldn’t, lord. I was heedless, lord.’

“Then King Yama says, ‘My good man, through heedlessness you did not do what is good with body, speech, & mind. And of course, my good man, they will deal with you in accordance with your heedlessness. For that evil kamma of yours was neither done by your mother, nor done by your father, nor done by your brother, nor done by your sister, nor done by your friends & companions, nor done by your kinsmen & relatives, nor done by the devas. That evil kamma was done by you yourself, and you yourself will experience its result.’

“Then, having interrogated & interpellated & castigated the man regarding the fourth deva messenger, King Yama interrogates & interpellates & castigates him regarding the fifth: ‘My good man, didn’t you see the fifth deva messenger that has appeared among human beings?’

“‘I didn’t, lord,’ he says.

“Then King Yama says, ‘My good man, didn’t you see among human beings a woman or man, one day, two days, or three days dead: bloated, livid, oozing with lymph?’

“‘I did, lord,’ he says.

“Then King Yama says, ‘My good man, didn’t the thought occur to you—observant & mature: “I, too, am subject to death, have not gone beyond death. I’d better do good with body, speech, & mind”?’

“‘I couldn’t, lord. I was heedless, lord.’

“Then King Yama says, ‘My good man, through heedlessness you did not do what is good with body, speech, & mind. And of course, my good man, they will deal with you in accordance with your heedlessness. For that evil kamma of yours was neither done by your mother, nor done by your father, nor done by your brother, nor done by your sister, nor done by your friends & companions, nor done by your kinsmen & relatives, nor done by the devas. That evil kamma was done by you yourself, and you yourself will experience its result.’

“Then, having interrogated & interpellated & castigated the man regarding the fifth deva messenger, King Yama falls silent.3

“Then the hell-wardens torture (the evil-doer) with what’s called a five-fold imprisonment. They drive a red-hot iron stake through one hand, they drive a red-hot iron stake through the other hand, they drive a red-hot iron stake through one foot, they drive a red-hot iron stake through the other foot, they drive a red-hot iron stake through the middle of his chest. There he feels painful, racking, piercing feelings, yet he does not die as long as his evil kamma is not exhausted.

“Then the hell-wardens lay him down and slice him with axes. Then they hold him feet up & head down and slice him with adzes. Then they harness him to a chariot and drive him back & forth over ground that is burning, blazing, & glowing. Then they make him climb up & down a vast mountain of embers that is burning, blazing, & glowing. Then they hold him feet up & head down and plunge him into a red-hot copper cauldron that is burning, blazing, & glowing. There he boils with bubbles foaming. And as he is boiling there with bubbles foaming, he goes now up, he goes now down, he goes now around. There he feels painful, racking, piercing feelings, yet he does not die as long as his evil kamma is not exhausted.4

“Then the hell-wardens throw him into the Great Hell. And as to the Great Hell, monks:

It’s four-cornered & has four gates

set in the middle of each side.

It’s surrounded by an iron fortress wall

and roofed with iron.

Its floor is made of red-hot iron,

heated, fully blazing.

It stands always, spreading 100 leagues all around.

“The flame that leaps from the eastern wall of the Great Hell strikes the western wall. The flame that leaps from the western wall strikes the eastern wall. The flame that leaps from the northern wall strikes the southern wall. The flame that leaps from the southern wall strikes the northern wall. The flame that leaps from the bottom strikes the top. The flame that leaps from the top strikes the bottom. There he feels painful, racking, piercing feelings, yet he does not die as long as his evil kamma is not exhausted.

“There comes a time when, ultimately, with the passing of a long stretch of time, the eastern gate of the Great Hell opens. He runs there, rushing quickly. As he runs there, rushing quickly, his outer skin burns, his inner skin burns, his flesh burns, his tendons burn, even his bones turn to smoke. When (his foot) is lifted, he is just the same.5 But when he finally arrives, the door slams shut. There he feels painful, racking, piercing feelings, yet he does not die as long as his evil kamma is not exhausted.

“There comes a time when, ultimately, with the passing of a long stretch of time, the western gate of the Great Hell opens… the northern gate… the southern gate of the Great Hell opens. He runs there, rushing quickly. As he runs there, rushing quickly, his outer skin burns, his inner skin burns, his flesh burns, his tendons burn, even his bones turn to smoke. When (his foot) is lifted, he is just the same. But when he finally arrives, the door slams shut. There he feels painful, racking, piercing feelings, yet he does not die as long as his evil kamma is not exhausted.

“There comes a time when, ultimately, with the passing of a long stretch of time, the eastern gate of the Great Hell opens. He runs there, rushing quickly. As he runs there, rushing quickly, his outer skin burns, his inner skin burns, his flesh burns, his tendons burn, even his bones turn to smoke. When (his foot) is lifted, he is just the same. He gets out through the gate. But right next to the Great Hell is a vast Excrement Hell. He falls into that. And in that Excrement Hell needle-mouth beings bore into his outer skin. Having bored into his outer skin, they bore into his inner skin… his flesh… his tendons… the bone. Having bored into the bone, they feed on the marrow. There he feels painful, racking, piercing feelings, yet he does not die as long as his evil kamma is not exhausted.

“Right next to the Excrement Hell is the vast Hot Ashes Hell. He falls into that. There he feels painful, racking, piercing feelings, yet he does not die as long as his evil kamma is not exhausted.

“Right next to the Hot Ashes Hell is the vast Simbali Forest, (with trees) reaching up a league, covered with thorns sixteen fingerbreadths long—burning, blazing, & glowing. He

enters that and is made to climb up & down them. There he feels painful, racking, piercing feelings, yet he does not die as long as his evil kamma is not exhausted.

“Right next to the Simbali Forest is the vast Sword-leaf Forest. He enters that. There the leaves, stirred by the wind, cut off his hand, cut off his foot, cut off his hand & foot, cut off his ear, cut off his nose, cut off his ear & nose. There he feels painful, racking, piercing feelings, yet he does not die as long as his evil kamma is not exhausted.

“Right next to the Sword-leaf Forest is the vast Lye-water River. He falls into that. There he is swept downstream, he is swept upstream, he is swept downstream & upstream. There he feels painful, racking, piercing feelings, yet he does not die as long as his evil kamma is not exhausted.

“Then the hell-wardens pull him out with a hook and, placing him on the ground, say to him, ‘Well, good man, what do you want?’ He replies, ‘I’m hungry, venerable sirs.’ So the hell-wardens pry open his mouth with red-hot iron tongs—burning, blazing, & glowing—and throw into it a copper ball, burning, blazing, & glowing. It burns his lips, it burns his mouth, it burns his stomach and comes out the lower side, carrying along his bowels & intestines. There he feels painful, racking, piercing feelings, yet he does not die as long as his evil kamma is not exhausted.

“Then the hell-wardens say to him, ‘Well, good man, what do you want?’ He replies, ‘I’m thirsty, venerable sirs.’ So the hell-wardens pry open his mouth with red-hot iron tongs—burning, blazing, & glowing—and pour into it molten copper, burning, blazing, & glowing. It burns his lips, it burns his mouth, it burns his stomach and comes out the lower side, carrying along his bowels & intestines. There he feels painful, racking, piercing feelings, yet he does not die as long as his evil kamma is not exhausted.

“Then the hell-wardens throw him back into the Great Hell once more.6

“Once, monks, the thought occurred to King Yama: ‘Those who did evil actions in the world are tortured in these many ways. O that I might gain the human state! And that a Tathāgata—worthy & rightly self-awakened—might arise in the world! And that I might attend to that Tathāgata! And that he might teach me the Dhamma! And that I might understand his Dhamma!’

“I tell you this, monks, not from having heard it from another contemplative or brahman. On the contrary, I tell you this just as I have known for myself, seen for myself, understood for myself.”

That is what the Blessed One said. Having said that, the One Well-Gone, the Teacher, said further:

Warned by the deva messengers,

those youths who are heedless

grieve for a long, long time—

people entering a lower state.

But those here who are good,

people of integrity,

when warned by the deva messengers

aren't heedless

of the noble Dhamma—ever.

Seeing danger in clinging,

in the coming-into-play

of birth & death,

they are released from lack of clinging,

in the ending

of birth & death.

They, happy, arriving at safety,

fully unbound in the here & now,

having gone beyond

all animosity & danger

have escaped

all suffering & stress.

Notes

1. The word "no respect for father" (apetteyyo) does not appear in the Thai edition, but does appear in the Sri Lankan, Burmese, and PTS editions.

2. The Pali uses the word "kamma" in the singular here, as if it were an uncountable noun (like "water" or "information"). In other words, though singular in form, it could mean any number of actions. Because English does not have an equivalent uncountable noun for action, I have—in the translation of this discourse—kept the word "kamma" when it is in the singular in the Pali, and have used the word "actions" when "kamma" is in the plural or part of a compound where it could be either singular or plural.

3. In Asian Buddhist kingdoms, there was a custom that when a king was sentencing a criminal to death or to be tortured, he would not actually express the sentence, but would simply fall silent. The Commentary counsels that if a student asks not to hear the description of hell (which follows from this point), a teacher should teach the student

meditation and then wait until the student has reached stream-entry before returning to the description of hell.

4. In the Sri Lankan, Burmese, and PTS editions, the sentence, "There he feels painful, racking, piercing feelings, yet he does not die as long as his evil kamma is not exhausted," appears after each of the punishments listed in this paragraph. In the Thai edition, which I have chosen to follow here, it appears only at the end of the paragraph.

5. The Commentary does not explain the meaning of this ambiguous sentence. It could mean that when the hell-being's foot is lifted from the hot, burning floor, either (1) his skin, etc., continues burning or (2) his body returns to its original form. Either arrangement would be gruesome.

6. The Commentary notes that not everyone who falls into hell is tortured with all of these punishments: Some of the tortures are skipped; in some cases the hell-being's kamma is exhausted before the full round of tortures is completed, so that he dies and is reborn elsewhere; and not everyone undergoes repeated rounds. Also, we should note that punishment in hell is not for an eternity. As the discourse implies, when the hell-being's bad kamma is exhausted, he dies and is reborn elsewhere, in accordance with his remaining kamma.

Publisher references (not part of the sutta)

See also: MN 45; MN 97; MN 135; MN 136; SN 35:135; SN 42:8; AN 3:101