

MN 130
Devaduta Sutta
“The Divine Messengers,” i.e. “On the Great Hell”
Translated by Bhikkhu Candana

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I have personally heard this.

At one time, the Blessed One was living in the monastery offered by Anāthapindika at Jeta's Grove in the City of Sāvattthi.

Then, the Blessed One addressed the Bhikkhus gathered there.

“Bhikkhus, just as a man with good eyesight, standing between two houses with doors leading inside each, would clearly see people entering, leaving, and roaming in and out of the two houses, likewise, with the Divine Eye, that is pure and far superior to that of the human, I see beings disappearing and appearing, as they are reborn into inferior and superior states, beautiful and ugly, reappearing in good heavenly realms and in miserable hell realms.

“I see clearly and know how beings are reborn as they undergo various experiences all according to their actions thus: *‘These beings having done good-intentioned actions with their body, speech, and mind, did not disrespect nor spoke ill or blamed the Noble Ones; also, by having and developing Right View, they have committed actions based on Right View. As a result, once their physical bodies break down, after death, they reappear in a good destination, whether being reborn in the heavenly realms or among humans.*

Meanwhile, these other beings having done evil-intentioned actions with their body, speech, and mind, did not respect and further spoke ill of, while blaming the Noble Ones; instead of developing right view, they committed actions stemming from their wrong view. As a result, once their physical bodies break down, after death, they reappear in a bad destination, whether being reborn in the ghost realms, the animal realms, or in far lower realms, in utter misery, in the hells.’

Once there, Bhikkhus, the wardens of hell will grab him by his hands and feet, dragging him to meet the King Yāma of the underworld, as they declare: *‘Lord, this person did not honor nor pay any respects to their mother and father; he was disrespectful towards recluses and brahmins or any of the elders, for he was discourteous and inconsiderate; living a life that sought to separate people from each other, being unkind and selfish. May your Highness assign to him the punishment he deserves.’*

Then, King Yāma of the underworld cross-questions him, as he interrogates him by asking: *‘You sir, did you not see the first divine messenger that showed up among you humans?’*

And the man says, *‘Sir, I did not see any messengers!’*

Then, King Yāma of the underworld would ask him, *‘Did you not see a toddler or a baby, who has to learn how to stand and walk, and keeps falling down meshed in his own urine and feces?’*

Then he replies, *‘Yes Sir, I did see.’*

And King Yāma of the underworld tells him, *‘Well then, being much older and mature than that little child, with some common sense, did it not occur to you, ‘Being liable to being born myself, seeing that I also am not immune from further rebirth, I should now start doing good actions, whether by body, speech, and mind?’*

And he would say, *‘Sir, I could not do such actions. I was too busy and negligent.’*

King Yāma of the underworld then says, *‘Well, because of your negligence you did not commit any good actions and instead, you engaged in evil actions by body, speech, and mind. Now, as a result, you will most certainly be punished for these evil actions, which you can see were not committed by your mother, father, brother, sister, friends, companions, or blood relatives. Similarly, these evil acts were not done by recluses, brahmins or the devas. No, they were all done by you and you alone, and therefore, you alone will face their negative results!’*

Bhikkhus, next, King Yāma of the underworld proceeds to interrogate him about the second divine messenger, by asking him, *‘You sir, did you not see the second divine messenger that showed up among you humans?’*

And the man replies, *‘Sir, I did not see the second messenger.’*

Then King Yāma of the underworld would ask him, *‘Did you not see among your fellow humans a woman or a man, eighty, ninety, or a hundred years old, decayed and bent over like the old framework of a roof, going about supporting himself while leaning on a stick, shivering, ill, with all signs of youth having left him, with no teeth, grey hair, covered all over with spots on his shriveled old skin?’*

Then he replies, *‘Yes Sir, I did see.’*

And King Yāma of the underworld tells him, *‘Well then, while already a mature person yourself with some common sense, did it not occur to you how: ‘Being liable to old age and decay myself, seeing that I also am not immune from getting old, I should now start doing good actions, whether by body, speech, and mind?’*

To which he responds, *‘Sir, I could not do such actions. I was too busy and negligent.’*

King Yāma of the underworld then says, *‘Well, because of your negligence you did not commit any good actions and instead, you engaged in evil actions by body, speech, and mind. Now, as a result, you will most certainly be punished for these evil actions, which you can see were not committed by your mother, father, brother, sister, friends, companions, or blood relatives. Similarly, these evil acts were not done by recluses, brahmins or the devas. No, they were all done by you and you alone, and therefore, you alone will face their negative results!’*

Next, Bhikkhus, King Yāma of the underworld again interrogates him about the third divine messenger, by asking, *'You sir, did you not see the third divine messenger that showed up among you humans?'*

And the man replies, *'Sir, I did not see the third messenger.'*

Then King Yāma of the underworld asks him, *'Did you not see among your fellow humans a very sick woman or a man; someone who is covered with a foul odor, drenched in their own feces and urine, helplessly dependent on others for care and attention; no longer self-reliant nor able to move freely anymore, but entirely dependent on others whether in being lifted or placed down?'*

And he responds, *'Yes Sir, I did see.'*

Then King Yāma of the underworld tells him, *'Well then, while already a mature person yourself with some common sense, did it not occur to you how: 'Being liable to getting sick myself, seeing that I also am not immune from being struck down with some illness, I should now start doing good actions, whether by body, speech, and mind?'*

To which he responds, *'Sir, I could not do such actions. I was too busy and negligent.'*

King Yāma of the underworld then says, *'Well, because of your negligence you did not commit any good actions and instead, you engaged in evil actions by body, speech, and mind. Now, as a result, you will most certainly be punished for these evil actions, which you can see were not committed by your mother, father, brother, sister, friends, companions, or blood relatives. Similarly, these evil acts were not done by recluses, brahmins or the devas. No, they were all done by you and you alone, and therefore, you alone will face their negative results!'*

Then, Bhikkhus, King Yāma of the underworld interrogates him further, this time about the fourth divine messenger, by asking, *'You sir, did you not see the fourth divine messenger that showed up among you humans?'*

As the man replies, *'Sir, I did not see the fourth messenger.'*

Then King Yāma of the underworld asks him, *'Did you not see among your fellow humans how, once the authorities caught a criminal or a thief, they would expose them to all kinds of punishments, such as flogging them with lashes, beating with various kinds of sticks and clubs; by cutting off their hands or feet, cutting both hands and feet; by cutting the ears or cutting the nose, cutting both ears and the nose; by putting them in the porridge of boiling pot, giving them the polished-shell shave, putting them in Rahu's mouth, garlanding them with wet flames, burning their hands with a torch, beating them until the body is like straw, hanging them up and stretching them out like an antelope's hide, suspending them on meat hooks, cutting squares out of their flesh, burning them in acid, driving a spike from ear to ear and then rotating it, having them squat over a blazing straw foot stool, sprinkling boiling oil all over the body, throwing them to the hungry and vicious dogs to be devoured, or impaling them on a pole until death, or cutting off their head with a sword?'*

And the man responds, *'Yes Sir, I did see.'*

Then King Yāma of the underworld tells him, *'Well then, while already a mature person yourself with some common sense, did it not occur to you how: 'If someone who does evil actions in their present life could receive such harsh punishments, then what kind of horrific consequences must be waiting for them once they leave this body? So, let me now start doing good actions, whether by body, speech, and mind?'*

And he replies, *'Sir, I could not do such actions. I was too busy and negligent.'*

King Yāma of the underworld then says, *'Well, because of your negligence you did not commit any good actions and instead, you engaged in evil actions by body, speech, and mind. Now, as a result, you will most certainly be punished for these evil actions, which you can see were not committed by your mother, father, brother, sister, friends, companions, or blood relatives. Similarly, these evil acts were not done by recluses, brahmins or the devas. No, they were all done by you and you alone, and therefore, you alone will face their negative results!'*

Furthermore, Bhikkhus, King Yāma of the underworld interrogates him once more, this time about the fifth divine messenger, by asking, *'You sir, did you not see the fifth divine messenger that showed up among you humans?'*

As the man replies, *'Sir, I did not see the fifth messenger.'*

Then King Yāma of the underworld asks him, *'Did you not see among your fellow humans someone who died, or a corpse that is one, two, or three days' old, bloated, turned black and blue, or festering with worms?'*

And the man responds, *'Yes Sir, I did see.'*

Then King Yāma of the underworld tells him, *'Well then, while already a mature person yourself with some common sense, did it not occur to you how: 'Being subject to death myself, seeing that I also am not immune from dying as my body turns into such a corpse, I should now start doing good actions, whether by body, speech, and mind?'*

And he replies, *'Sir, I could not do such actions. I was too busy and negligent.'*

King Yāma of the underworld then says, *'Well, because of your negligence you did not commit any good actions and instead, you engaged in evil actions by body, speech, and mind. Now, as a result, you will most certainly be punished for these evil actions, which you can see were not committed by your mother, father, brother, sister, friends, companions, or blood relatives. Similarly, these evil acts were not done by recluses, brahmins or the devas. No, they were all done by you and you alone, and therefore, you alone will face their negative results!'*

Bhikkhus, at this point, King Yāma of the underworld, having finished his cross-questioning, done with his interrogation about the fifth divine messenger, suddenly falls silent and speaks no more.

This is immediately followed by the wardens of hell beginning to inflict unimaginable pain on him by punishing him through the “fivefold torture.” Thus, they start by driving two hot iron spikes through his two palms, and two other hot spikes through his two feet and a fifth hot iron spike through the middle of his chest. But, although he experiences excruciating pain throughout, that is so severe and unbearably more than the mind and the body could ever stand, he still *does not* die from it. That is, until the severity of evil actions committed by him is fully dissipated and finished.

Next, the wardens of hell repeatedly hit and strike him, throwing him around as they hammer him with heavy blows and start cutting and slashing him up with their large blades. But, although he experiences excruciating pain throughout, that is so severe and unbearably more than the mind and the body could ever stand, he still *does not* die from it. That is, until the severity of evil actions committed by him is fully dissipated and finished.

Next, the wardens of hell hang him upside down and ruthlessly start cutting him up with hatchets. But, although he experiences excruciating pain throughout, that is so severe and unbearably more than the mind and the body could ever stand, he still *does not* die from it. That is, until the severity of evil actions committed by him is fully dissipated and finished.

Next, the wardens of hell tie him up to a chariot and drag him repeatedly back and forth over an uneven ground that is ablaze, as he burns constantly with their unrelenting flames. But, although he experiences excruciating pain throughout, that is so severe and unbearably more than the mind and the body could ever stand, he still *does not* die from it. That is, until the severity of evil actions committed by him is fully dissipated and finished.

Next, the wardens of hell force him to ceaselessly climb up and down an immense mountain that is completely covered with blazing red-hot coals. But, although he experiences excruciating pain throughout, that is so severe and unbearably more than the mind and the body could ever stand, he still *does not* die from it. That is, until the severity of evil actions committed by him is fully dissipated and finished.

Next, the wardens of hell pull and drag him by his feet and throw him face down into a massive red-hot copper pot, where he is boiled in its molten scum. While there, he is pushed down to its bottom, pulled up again, and churned around in the molten pot. But, although he experiences excruciating pain throughout, that is so severe and unbearably more than the mind and the body could ever stand, he still *does not* die from it. That is, until the severity of evil actions committed by him is fully dissipated and finished.

This is followed by the wardens of hell dragging and tossing him into the Great Hell, which has four sides, with four immense gates and is divided into two massive sections.

The Great Hell is surrounded by giant iron walls and is covered with a huge iron lid as its roof. Even its ground is made of iron, and spreads for seven hundred miles, as it blazes and burns with flames continuously, without any rest.

There are flames that gush out from within these massive iron walls, whereby a fire shoots out from the eastern wall of the Great Hell that reaches out to and scorches the western wall. A fire shoots out from the western wall that reaches out to and scorches the eastern wall. A fire shoots out from the northern wall that reaches out to and scorches the southern wall. A fire shoots out from the southern wall that reaches out to and scorches the northern wall. A fire shoots out from the bottom that reaches out to and scorches the iron ceiling above, and a fire shoots out down from the top, raining down and scorching the vast iron floor, at the bottom. But, although he experiences excruciating pain throughout, that is so severe and unbearably more than the mind and the body could ever stand, he still *does not* die from it. That is, until the severity of evil actions committed by him is fully dissipated and finished.

Bhikkhus, after a vast amount of time has elapsed, suddenly he notices how finally the Great Hell's Eastern Gate opens. Seeing this, he rushes towards it with great speed, but as he does so he burns his outer skin, his inner skin, his flesh, ligaments, and tendons all burn in the flames, where even his bones begin releasing smoke, burning alive as he does on his mad dash for escape. Yet, although having suffered so much to have gotten that far, even if he gets close to it, the immense gate is again slammed shut, as he finds himself yet again trapped inside the Great Hell. But, although he experiences excruciating pain throughout, that is so severe and unbearably more than the mind and the body could ever stand, he still *does not* die from it. That is, until the severity of evil actions committed by him is fully dissipated and finished.

Further, Bhikkhus, after a vast amount of time has elapsed, suddenly he notices how finally the Great Hell's Western Gate opens. Seeing this, he rushes towards it with great speed, but as he does so he burns his outer skin, his inner skin, his flesh, ligaments, and tendons all burn in the flames, where even his bones begin releasing smoke, burning alive as he does on his mad dash for escape. Yet, although having suffered so much to have gotten that far, even if he gets close to it, the immense gate is again slammed shut, as he finds himself yet again trapped inside the Great Hell. But, although he experiences excruciating pain throughout, that is so severe and unbearably more than the mind and the body could ever stand, he still *does not* die from it. That is, until the severity of evil actions committed by him is fully dissipated and finished.

Further, Bhikkhus, after a vast amount of time has elapsed, suddenly he notices how finally the Great Hell's Northern Gate opens. Seeing this, he rushes towards it with great speed, but as he does so he burns his outer skin, his inner skin, his flesh, ligaments, and tendons all burn in the flames, where even his bones begin releasing smoke, burning alive as he does on his mad dash for escape. Yet, although having suffered so much to have gotten that far, even if he gets close to it, the immense gate is again slammed shut, as he finds himself yet again trapped inside the Great Hell. But, although he experiences excruciating pain throughout, that is so severe and unbearably more than the mind and the body could ever stand, he still *does not* die from it. That is, until the severity of evil actions committed by him is fully dissipated and finished.

Further, Bhikkhus, after a vast amount of time has elapsed, suddenly he notices how finally the Great Hell's Southern Gate opens. Seeing this, he rushes towards it with great speed, but as he does so he burns his outer skin, his inner skin, his flesh, ligaments, and tendons all burn in the flames, where even his bones begin releasing smoke, burning alive as he does on his mad dash for escape. Yet, although having suffered so much to have gotten that far, even if he gets close to

it, the immense gate is again slammed shut, as he finds himself yet again trapped inside the Great Hell. But, although he experiences excruciating pain throughout, that is so severe and unbearably more than the mind and the body could ever stand, he still *does not* die from it. That is, until the severity of evil actions committed by him is fully dissipated and finished.

But eventually, Bhikkhus, after a vast amount of time has elapsed, suddenly he notices how finally the Great Hell's Eastern Gate opens again. Seeing this, he rushes towards it with great speed, but as he does so he burns his outer skin, his inner skin, his flesh, ligaments, and tendons all burn in the flames, where even his bones begin releasing smoke, burning alive as he does on his mad dash for escape. This time, however, he finds himself outside the enormous gate of the Great Hell.

But right next to the Great Hell, he quickly notices that, although now being outside of it, he finds himself within the vast Hell of Feces, which he falls into. He quickly discovers how he is overwhelmed by countless beings that are ferociously digging into his flesh with their needle-like mouths, piercing his outer skin, his inner skin, and after ravaging his flesh, going for the ligaments, tendons, nerves, and even tearing into his bones as they reach into and start devouring his bone marrow. But, although he experiences excruciating pain throughout, that is so severe and unbearably more than the mind and the body could ever stand, he still *does not* die from it. That is, until the severity of evil actions committed by him is fully dissipated and finished.

Now Bhikkhus, parallel to and together with the Hell of Feces is found the Hell of Hot Coals and Ashes as they rain upon him. This is where he falls into next. But, although he experiences excruciating pain throughout, that is so severe and unbearably more than the mind and the body could ever stand, he still *does not* die from it. That is, until the severity of evil actions committed by him is fully dissipated and finished.

Further, Bhikkhus, parallel to and together with the Hell of Hot Coals, where hot ashes rain, is found the Simbali Forest, the Hell Forest of Red Silk-Cottonwood, where each tree is more than seven miles in height. They are covered with sharp, flesh-tearing thorns that extend out to sixteen inches, burning and ablaze with flames. And as the wardens continuously force him to climb up these trees, he suffers much while being mangled by these thorns from all sides. But, although he experiences excruciating pain throughout, that is so severe and unbearably more than the mind and the body could ever stand, he still *does not* die from it. That is, until the severity of evil actions committed by him is fully dissipated and finished.

Further, Bhikkhus, parallel to and together with the Simbali forest is the Hell Forest of Sword-Leaf Wood. And as soon as he rushes into it, the sharp sword-like leaves blown by the wind fall upon his body from all sides, cutting his feet, cutting his hands, both his feet and hands together, his ears, his nose, both his ears and nose together. But, although he experiences excruciating pain throughout, that is so severe and unbearably more than the mind and the body could ever stand, he still *does not* die from it. That is, until the severity of evil actions committed by him is fully dissipated and finished.

Further, Bhikkhus, parallel to and together with the Simbali forest is the Great River of Acid Hell, which he falls into next. There, he is carried mercilessly upstream and downstream, as he is

swept by the currents within it, burning alive in its caustic waters. But, although he experiences excruciating pain throughout, that is so severe and unbearably more than the mind and the body could ever stand, he still *does not* die from it. That is, until the severity of evil actions committed by him is fully dissipated and finished.

Then, the wardens of hell reach in and pull him out with a hook, and after dropping him onto dry ground they ask him, *‘You there, what is it you desire?’*

And he cries out, *‘Sir, I’m hungry!’*

At this, the wardens of hell forcefully pry his mouth wide with hot iron spikes as they shove into his mouth burning red-hot and flaming iron balls. These burn his lips, his whole mouth, throat, chest, stomach, the intestines, the lower intestines, and finally burrow and burn their way out of his body, dragging behind them his entrails. But, although he experiences excruciating pain throughout, that is so severe and unbearably more than the mind and the body could ever stand, he still *does not* die from it. That is, until the severity of evil actions committed by him is fully dissipated and finished.

Then, the wardens of hell ask him further, *‘You there, what is it you desire?’*

And he cries out to them, *‘Sir, I’m thirsty!’*

And again, the wardens of hell forcefully pry his mouth wide with hot iron spikes as they pour burning and blazing molten copper into his mouth. This burns his lips, his whole mouth, throat, chest, stomach, the intestines, the lower intestines, and finally gushes out as it burns its way out of his body, dragging his entrails behind it. But, although he experiences excruciating pain throughout, that is so severe and unbearably more than the mind and the body could ever stand, he still *does not* die from it. That is, until the severity of evil actions committed by him is fully dissipated and finished.

Afterwards, the wardens of hell drag him and eventually toss him back into the Great Hell.

Some time ago, Bhikkhus, King Yāma of the Under World began reflecting: “Those who do horrible and evil actions in the world, inevitably do face their consequences in the form of all these punishments. Oh! My wish is that I may be reborn one day as a human being, and I wish that during that lifespan, a Tathāgata may appear, a Perfectly Awakened One, into the world! Oh, I so wish that I may encounter and pay my respects to such a Buddha, attending to Him, as He teaches me and I learn from Him, as I come to know and directly understand the Dhamma He teaches.

“Bhikkhus, you must know this full-well, that I do not say this having heard it from another source, or as some other recluse or brahmin’s account.

This, Bhikkhus, is what I have personally witnessed; having known it myself by seeing and realizing it directly that I now speak these words to you.”

Having spoken thus about the hells, the Blessed One continued by adding these words:

*“Those heedless human beings living in negligence,
Despite being repeatedly warned by the divine messengers
Grieve for such a long time, as they reappear in lower births
Finding only punishment and torture
In one miserable realm after another.*

*But those heedful human beings who live peacefully within themselves
The worthy ones who leave ignorance behind,
Heeding the warnings of the divine messengers,
Live with diligence, never neglecting the Noble Dhamma.*

*They see danger in the drive to grab and hold,
For those are the source of birth, death and becoming,
And as a result, release themselves by giving up and relinquishing
While destroying both birth and death.*

*They are the ones who live appeased and contented,
They rest secured, while being extinguished here, in this very life.
Finally safe, and gone beyond the reach of all terrors and dangers,
Never to be touched by suffering, ever again.”*

Sadhu Sadhu Sadhu