

20

(Pañca) Gati Sutta

The Discourse on the (Five) Destinies | A 9.68/4:459

Theme: The five realms of sentient existence

Translated by Piya Tan ©2003; rev 2010

1 The 5 realms

The (Pañca) Gati Sutta is the locus classicus for the canonical teaching of the 5 destinies (*pañca, gati*), that is, the popular view of 5 realms—those of the devas, humans, animals, pretas and hell-beings. This teaching is also accepted in Sanskrit works, such as Vasubandhu’s **Abhidharma,kośa**, which represents the Sarvāstī, vādin viewpoint, in keeping with the canonical view. The Divyāvadāna, too, says that it is the five destinies are incorporated into the “wheel of life” (Skt *bhava, cakra*) or more technically, the “five-sectored wheel” (Skt *pañca, gaṇḍaka cakra*).¹

The Great Commentary, however, notes, “The members of other schools [other than the Hīnayāna] added the *asura* to make six destinations of rebirth. This should not be done, for the sūtras teach only five destinations.” (T1545.868b)²



Fig 1. The 5 realms

<http://www.chezpaul.org.uk/buddhism/books/wheel/circle3.htm>

ordinary and inferior, thus:⁸

¹ Divy (ed Vaidya): *Sahasōgatāvādāna* (ch 21): 185.25-26, 186.5, 18, 187.24; cf *Rudrāyaṇāvādāna* (ch 37): *sam-sāra, sakra* 468.31, 480.17; also 112.6, 174.20.

² T27.1545.868b.2-3 謂有餘部立阿素洛為第六趣。彼不應作是說。契經唯說有五趣故。(From 阿毘達磨大毘婆沙論卷第一百七十二, T27.1545.864b18). Akira Sadakata, *Buddhist Cosmology: Philosophy and origins*, tr Gaynor Sekimoru, Tokyo: Kosei, 1997:70, 197.

³ M 12.37-42/1:74-77 = SD 49.1.

⁴ M 130.2/3:178 f = SD 2.23.

⁵ On “mind-reading,” and the foll, “divine eye,” see **Miracles** = SD 27.5a (5), powers (3) & (5).

⁶ M 12.37-42/1:74-77 = SD 2.24 (excerpts), SD 49.1 (full sutta)

⁷ See Alexander Studholme, *The Origins of Om Mani Padme Hūm: A study of the Kāraṇḍavyūhas Sūtra*, Albany, NY: State Univ of New York Press, 2002.

⁸ 大智度論 T25.1509.

The 5 realms are explained in some detail in the following discourses: **the Mahā Sīha, nāda Sutta** (M 12)³ and **the Deva, dūta Sutta** (M 130).⁴ In the Mahā Sīha, nāda Sutta (M 12), the Buddha explains how he is able to know a being’s mental state through his power of mind-reading,⁵ and to know his destiny, through his divine eye. Interestingly, these realms are not described as distinct realms, but in parables. Most importantly, the Buddha also describes the way out of these realms.⁶

2 The 6 realms

The six-realm model—with the addition of the asuras—had become popular by the Buddhism spread to China and East Asia. This new model must have evolved with the rise of the six-syllable mantra (*Om maṇi padme hūm*) of the Avalokiteśvara cult.⁷

The Commentary on the Great Perfection of Wisdom Sūtra (in Chinese translation), for example, says that the six realms are divided into three good and three bad, and further into superior,

devas	superior	}	good destinies
humans	ordinary		
asuras	inferior	}	bad destinies
animals	superior		
pretas	ordinary	}	
hell-beings	inferior		

This is a philosophical systematization not attested in the early canon, where rebirth as a human is generally understood to be the best destiny in terms of spiritual cultivation.⁹

The later writers were clearly aware of this. The Commentary on the Great Perfection of Wisdom Sūtra (attributed to Nāgārjuna, c150-c250 CE),¹⁰ for example, says, “The Buddha did not state clearly that there are five destinations of rebirth. The idea of the five destinations is the theory of the Sarvāstivādins, whereas that of the six belongs to the Vāṣṭīputrīyas.”¹¹ Here we can see that Nāgārjuna or the Commentary author is unaware of the (Pañca) Gati Sutta.

A painting of the six-realm wheel is found in a cave in Ajañṭā, which probably go back to the 6th century. One of the earliest pictures of this model was said to have been brought to Tibet by a monk named Bande Yeshe in the 8th century.¹²

For a further detailed study on “**Do the gods really exist?**” see SD 10.9 (8) especially section 8.3.

— — —

The Discourse on the (Five) Destinies

A 9.68/4:459

1 Bhikshus, there are these 5 destinies (of existence). What are the five?

- | | |
|-----------------------------------|---------------------------|
| (1) The suffering states [hells], | <i>niraya</i> |
| (2) the animal womb, | <i>tiracchāna, yoni</i> |
| (3) the realm of the departed , | <i>petti, visaya</i> |
| (4) humans, and | <i>manussa</i> |
| (5) the gods. | <i>deva</i> ¹³ |

These, bhikshus, are the 5 destinies.

2 Bhikshus, **the 4 focuses of mindfulness** (*sati'paṭṭhāna*)¹⁴ should be cultivated for the putting away of these 5 destinies. What are the four?

Here, bhikshus,

- (a) a monk¹⁵ dwells exertive, clearly aware, mindful, observing the body in the body, putting away

⁹ “Difficult to gain is the human birth” (Dh 182). On the difficulty to attain human birth from the subhuman planes, see **Bāla Paṇḍita S** (M 129.24/3:169), SD 2.22. See also **The body in Buddhism**, SD 29.6a (4.1) & **Myth in Buddhism**, SD 36.1 (1.3.3).

¹⁰ Tr Kumārajīva (T25.1509.135c).

¹¹ Tr Akira Sadakata 1997:70.

¹² Ency Bsm 3:12: Bhavacakra. On an everyday psychological interpretation, see eg **Myth in Buddhism**, SD 36.1 (1.3.3) Momentary beings.

¹³ In later Buddhist tradition, the *asurā* (asura demons, titans or “anti-gods”) are added as a separate realm to make the “six realms,” graphically depicted on the Tibetan Wheel of Life. See **The body in Buddhism**, SD 29.6a (4.1.2).

¹⁴ On *sati'paṭṭhāna* as a practice, see **Mahā Satipaṭṭhāna S** (D 22), SD 13.2 or **Satipaṭṭhāna S** (M 10), SD 13.3.

¹⁵ Here “a monk” (*bhikkhu*) may refer to either an ordained monastic or anyone who is meditating (here, doing satipatthana) (DA 3:756; VbhA 216 f; cf SnA 251). See Dh 142; also Dh 362, 260-270. Cf Bhikkhu Vagga (ch 25) and

- covetousness and displeasure¹⁶ in the world;¹⁷
- (b) a monk dwells exertive, clearly aware, mindful, observing feelings in the feelings, putting away covetousness and displeasure in the world;
- (c) a monk dwells exertive, clearly aware, mindful, observing the mind in the mind, putting away covetousness and displeasure in the world;
- (d) a monk dwells exertive, clearly aware, mindful, observing dharmas in the dharmas, putting away covetousness and displeasure in the world.

— evaṃ —

110911 120702 130623 141119

Brāhmaṇa Vagga (ch 26) of Dh. See **Satipaṭṭhāna Ss**, SD 13.1 (3.1a).

¹⁶ “Covetousness and displeasure,” *abhijjhā,domanassam*, alt trs: “desire and discontent,” “desiring and disliking,” or “longing and loathing.” Walshe (1995:335 & n632) renders it as “hankering and fretting [for the world].” See **Satipaṭṭhāna Ss**, SD 13.1(4.2e)

¹⁷ “World” (*loka*). **Vibhaṅga** says: “This very body is the world, and the 5 aggregates of clinging (ie form, feeling, perception, formations and consciousness) are the world—this is called the world” (Vbh 195). However, in his amplified tr at Vibh 105, U Thittila has “world (ie, in ideational objects)” (*dhammā*, mental objects) (Vibh:T 139). See **Satipaṭṭhāna Ss**, SD 13.1 (4.2d).