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(Nānā,kaṛaṇa) Puggala Sutta 1

Paṭhama (Nānā,kaṛaṇa) Puggala Sutta

The First Discourse on (the Diversity in) Individuals | A 4.123

Theme: Rebirth according to dhyana but even the gods can be reborn in the hells

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1 Even the gods go to hell

There are two (Nānā,kaṛaṇa) Puggala Suttas (A 4.123-124), consecutively preserved in the Catukka Nipāta (the Book of Fours) of the Aṅguttara Nikāya.¹ The first Sutta (A 4.123, here) states that even heavenly beings of the form realm (*rūpāvacara*) are reborn in the suffering subhuman planes, except for those who are saints of the path. The second (A 4.124) relates how the practice of the form dhyanas² can lead to non-return.³

A similar sentiment, on the rarity of beings, having fallen from their erstwhile state, attaining the same or higher rebirth, is found in **the Apamattaka Vagga** (A 1.19) of the Aṅguttara Nikāya. They usually fall into a lower plane of existence.⁴

1.1 THE BUDDHA'S KNOWLEDGE. The (Nānā,kaṛaṇa) Puggala Sutta 1 (A 4.123) is a short but remarkable which simply states that even heavenly beings are reborn in the hells and other lower planes.⁵ Only the saints of the path reborn in the heavens do not fall into subhuman planes. In fact, these saints, after attaining celestial rebirth, go on to attain nirvana, no more to return to the world. What is the textual reference (locus classicus) for this?

In **the Mahā Sīha,nāda Sutta** (M 12), the Buddha declares to Sāriputta:

Sāriputta, there are these five destinations (*pañca gati*). What are the five?

Hell, the animal kingdom, the preta realm [the realm of the departed], human beings, and gods.⁶

...And, Sāriputta, I understand the gods, and the path (*magga*) and the way (*paṭipada*) leading to the world of the gods. And I also understand how one who has entered this path will, after death, with the body's breaking up, be reborn in a happy destination, in a heaven world.

(M 12.35/1:73), SD 49.1; qu at UA 140 f

1.2 THE PAÑCA PUBBA,NIMITTA SUTTA (IT 3.4.4) gives us the notion that devas know when they are going to die, and is perhaps the only canonical text that relates how they know this.

SD 23.8a(1.2)

Pañca Pubba,nimitta Sutta

The Discourse on the 5 Omens | It 83/76-78

Traditional: It 3.4.4 Khuddaka Nikāya, Iti,vuttaka 3, Tika Nipāta 4, Catuttha Vagga 4

Theme: How the gods know they are about to die

This was indeed spoken by the Blessed One, spoken by the Arhat [worthy one], thus have I heard.⁷

1 Bhikshus, when a deva is about to fall from the deva-host,⁸ 5 omens occur:⁹

¹ A 4.123-124/2:126-128 @ SD 23.8a+8b.

² On dhyana (*jhāna*), see **Bhāvanā**, SD 15.1(8) & **Nimitta**, SD 19.7.

³ See A 4.124/2:128 @ SD 23.8b.

⁴ See **Apamattaka Vg** (A 1.19/1:35-38), SD 57.8.

⁵ For a helpful intro to classical Buddhist cosmology, see **R Gethin** 1998:116 f (Table 2); for technical details, see Vbh 422-426, Vism 7.40-44, 13.29-65, Abhs 22-24.

⁶ Later Buddhism adds a sixth realm, the asuras (*asura*, anti-gods or titans embodying violence and appropriative-ness).

⁷ *Vuttam h'etaṃ bhagavatā. Vuttam arahatā' ti me sutam.* This is said to be spoken by the laywoman **Khujj'-uttarā**: see SD 16.14 (1).

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| (1) His garlands wither | (<i>mālā milāyanti</i>); |
| (2) His garments become soiled | (<i>vatthāni kilissanti</i>); |
| (3) His armpits exude sweat | (<i>kacchehi sedā muccanti</i>); |
| (4) His body gives a foul smell | (<i>kāye dubbaṇṇiyaṃ okkamati</i>); |
| (5) The deva delights not in his own celestial seat | (<i>sake devo devāsane nābhiramati</i>). |

2 Bhikshus, the devas, knowing that this devaputra is about to fall, encourage¹⁰ him with three statements:

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| (1) “Go hence, sir, to a happy destiny.” | (<i>ito bho sugatiṃ gaccha</i>) |
| (2) “Having gone to the happy destiny, [77] obtain the gain that is well obtained.” | (<i>sugatiṃ gantvā suladdha, lābham labha</i>) |
| (3) “Having obtained what is well obtained, be well established.” | (<i>suladdha, lābham labhitvā suppatiṭṭhito bhavāhi</i>) |

3 When this has been said, a certain monk said this to the Blessed One:

“But what, bhante, is regarded as the going to a happy destiny for the devas?

And what, bhante, is regarded as the obtaining of the gain that is well obtained for the devas?

And what, bhante, is regarded as the devas’ being well established?”

4 “The human state, bhikshus,¹¹ is regarded as the going to a happy destiny for the devas.

5 Being in the state of a human, he gains faith in the Dharma Vinaya [the teaching and the discipline] declared by the Tathagata—this, bhikshus, is regarded as the gain that is well obtained for the devas.

6 Furthermore, when that faith is settled in him, becoming rooted, established, strong and immovable by any recluse or brahmin or deva or Māra or anyone else in this world—this, bhikshus, is regarded as what is being well established for the devas.”

This is the meaning of what the Blessed One said. The meaning here is spoken thus:

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| 7 <i>Yadā devo deva, kāyā cavati āyu, saṅkhayā, Tayo saddā nīccharanti devānaṃ anumodataṃ:</i> | When a deva, from the deva-host falls due to ending of his lifespan, three sounds are announced, of the devas’ encouragement [rejoicing]: |
| 8 <i>Ito bho sugatiṃ gaccha manussānaṃ saḥavyatāṃ, manussa, bhūto saddhamme labha saddham anuttaraṃ.</i> | Go hence, sir, to a happy destiny, the communion of human beings. As a human being, the true Dharma supreme, obtain with faith. |
| 9 <i>Sā te saddhā niviṭṭhassa mūla, jātā patiṭṭhitā, yāva, jīvaṃ [78] asaṃhīrā saddhamme supavedite.</i> | With that faith settled in you, established, taking root, for all life long, immovable is the true Dharma that’s well declared. |

⁸ *Yadā bhikkhave devo deva, kāyā cavana, dhammo hoti*, lit “when, bhikshus, a deva is of the state of falling from the deva-body...”

⁹ The Pali phrases here do not have “his,” which has been added for the sake of idiomatic English.

¹⁰ *Anumodanti*, usu tr as “they rejoice (in),” but is here better rendered as “cheer him up” (It:W 171) or “encourage him (on)” (It:Th 64). It:M 69 however takes it almost literally “the devas... joyfully accept (same).” It can of course mean simply that the devas “rejoice” in the fact that the dying comrade is heading for a realm where he is able to practise the Dharma.

¹¹ *Bhikkhave*, some readings have *bhikkhu*. Obviously here, the Buddha, in reply to a monk, addresses the whole assembly.

- 10 *Kāya,duccaritaṃ hitvā
vacī,duccaritaṃ ca,
mano,duccaritaṃ hitvā
yañ c' aññaṃ dosa,sañhitaṃ.* Giving up bodily misconduct,
and misconduct through speech,
giving up mental misconduct,
and what else connected with hate;
- 11 *Kāyena kusalaṃ katvā
vācāya kusalaṃ bahuṃ
manasā kusalaṃ katvā
appamaṇaṃ nirūpadhiṃ.* having done the wholesome with the body,
much wholesomeness with speech,
having done the wholesome with the mind—
he is measureless, rid of life's substrate.¹²
- 12 *Tato opadhikaṃ puññaṃ
katvā dānena taṃ bahuṃ
aññe 'pi macce saddhamme
brahmacariye nivesaye.* Away from the substrate-made, the merit
he has made through generous giving,¹³
other mortals, too, in the true Dharma,
the holy life, are settled.
- 13 *Imāya anukampāya
devā devaṃ yadā vidū,
cavantaṃ anumodanti
ehi deva punappunan ti.* Through this compassion,
when the devas who know when a deva
is falling, encourage [rejoice in] him, thus:
Come, deva, again and again!

[This matter, too, was spoken by the Blessed One. Thus I have heard.¹⁴]¹⁵

— evaṃ —

1.3 THE INTRODUCTION TO THE KUSA JĀTAKA (J 531) relates an interesting, even humourous, case of a young Sāvathī monk who falls in love with a beautiful woman at first sight. Infatuated with love, he let his nails and hair grow long, and wore soiled robes, pining away and became quite sallow, with veins standing out of his limbs. In the deva world, too, says the Jātaka narrator, those about to fall from their celestial existence show 5 clear signs: *their garlands wither, their garments are soiled, their bodies smell foul, their armpits sweat, and they no longer find pleasure in their celestial seats*. Even so, in the case of the love-sick monk, the same 5 signs of impending death are apparent:¹⁶

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| (1) the flowers of faith wither | (<i>saddhā,pupphāni milāyanti</i>), |
| (2) the robes of moral virtue are soiled | (<i>sīla,vatthāni kilissanti</i>), |
| (3) his body, on account of discontent and ill-fame,
loses its colour | (<i>sarīre maṅkutāya c'eva ayasa,vasena ca
dubbaṇṇiyaṃ okkamati</i>), |
| (4) the sweat of defilements stream from him | (<i>kilesa,sedā muccanti</i>), |
| (5) the forest, the tree-root, or
an empty place delights him not | (<i>arañña,rukkha.mūla,
suññ'āgāresu nābhiramanti</i>) |
- (J 531/5:278)

¹² *Upadhi*, usu tr as “acquisition, remnant or belongings,” attachment to which leads to rebirth, but “substrate” fits better here. This term is often confused with *upādi* (“clinging,” from *upa + ā + dā* “to take”). Despite the subtle but important difference in meaning, most modern commentators regard them as synonymous, and do not try to explain how and why the difference arose (Norman 1995:215). See **The unconscious**, SD 17.8b (4.4) & **Brahma,deva S** (S 6.3), SD 12.4 (6.1).

¹³ Cf *attānaṃ eva paṭhamam / paṭirūpe nivesaye || ath' aññaṃ anusāsaye | na kilisseyya paṇḍito*, “Let one first settle oneself in what is proper || And then instruct others: the wise would not defile (another). (S 5:189; Dh 198)

¹⁴ *Ayam pi attho vutto bhagavatā. Iti me sutan ti.*

¹⁵ Not in Ee; found at the end of the Pali ch.

¹⁶ For another case of a lovesick monk, see **Why Some Marriages Fail** (DhA 11.2), SD 3.8(5) on “Sirimā body.”

2 Four reasons for the falling of the gods

The **Dhammapada Commentary** gives the following four reasons for the gods falling (*cuti*) from their heaven into a lower world (DhA 2.1), that is,

- (1) through exhaustion of their lifespan (*āyu-k,khaya*),
- (2) the exhaustion of merit (*puñña-k,khaya*),
- (3) the exhaustion of food (*āhāra-k,khaya*), and
- (4) anger (*kopa*).¹⁷

Let us examine examples of such heavenly fallings.

(1) We see an example a deva's falling on account of **the exhaustion of lifespan** (*āyu-k,khaya*) mentioned in the Cariyā,piṭaka, in the case of Phusaṭī, Shakra's chief queen in a previous life, who is reborn in the city of Jet'uttarā as Vessantara's mother (C 1.9).¹⁸ The Dhammapada Commentary, however, exemplifies a deva's passing away through exhaustion of lifespan by saying that "one who has accumulated much merit is reborn in a deva world and remains there for a lifespan, and is then reborn more and more."¹⁹

(2) The Dhammapada Commentary defines **the exhaustion of merit** (*puñña-k,khaya*) as a shortage of merit to sustain the deva's celestial life, so that he "dies in the midst" (*antarāva kalam karoti*), that is, prematurely (DhA 1:173). However, this statement may be problematic as all the superhuman realms have a fixed lifespan.²⁰ However, if we consider the universal characteristic of impermanence, it is possible that a deva may fall from his celestial life at any point even before his supporting karma is exhausted. The "fixed lifespan" (*āyu-p,pamāṇa*), in other words, is simply the longest he is able to exist therein.

(3) By **the exhaustion of food** (*āhāra-k,khaya*) is meant that the lack of physical nourishment, which of course refers to heavenly food. A celestial being, engrossed in his sense-pleasures, may forget to nourish himself so that his physical being is impaired.²¹ This would refer only to *the celestial realms of the sense-world*, as the higher realms are not sustained by physical food, but mostly by joy;²² and in the formless realms, the beings there may be said to comprise of pure energy.

(4) The fifth reason for a deva's falling from heaven is **anger** (*kopa*), that is, through being jealous of another deva's glory, he becomes angry and dies.²³ Understandably, as a divine being is mostly sustained by mental energy, any negative mental state adversely affects his being. Again, this reason for a deva's death applies only to those of the sense-world, as the devas of the form and the formless worlds are sustained by pure joy and by pure energy respectively.²⁴

¹⁷ DhA 2.1/1:173 f. The other Comys only mention only 2 reasons: the exhaustion of lifespan and of merit (DA 1:110 f; ItA 2:76).

¹⁸ C 1.9/67-73/7. According to the Jātakas, Vessantara is the Bodhisattva's last birth when he exemplifies his perfection of giving (*dāna,pāramī*) (J 547/6:479-593; Jtkm 9; Miln 113, 274; VA 245; DhA 1:84, 115, 3:164; VbhA 414; Mahv 30.88; Cūlv 42.5).

¹⁹ *Tattha yena bahum puñña,kammam kataṃ hoti, so deva,loke uppajjitvā yāvat 'āyukam thatvā uparūpari nibbatati. Evaṃ āyu-k,khayaena cavati nāma* (DhA 1:174). The word *uparūpari* ("more and more") can also tr as "higher and higher," as DhA:B 1:255 has done, but this is too literal and goes against the grain of the suttas. See UA 79,21, 227,16, & 357,11, where the sense of "more and more" is very clear.

²⁰ For cosmological tables, see R Gethin, *The Foundations of Buddhism*, 1998:116 f (Table 2), which is based on Vbh 422-426, Vism 7.40-44, 13.29-65, Abhs 22-24; & A:NB 1999:16 f (Table 1). See also **Kevaḍḍha S** (D 11), SD 1.7 Appendix.

²¹ The Dh Comy (DhA) here gives an interesting account of how the deva Ghosaka falls from his heaven on account of forgetting his heavenly meals! He is reborn as a courtesan's boy child and is cast away seven times due to his past karma, when he has done the same to his own son in a previous life (DhA 2.1/1:174).

²² See eg **Aggañña S** (D 27), where the Ābhassarā (streaming radiance) devas are described as follows: "There they dwell, mind-made, feeding on zest, self-luminous, moving about through the air, glorious—and they stay like that for a very long time." (D 27,10/3:84), SD 2.19.

²³ Dh A 2.1/1:173 f.

²⁴ For diags of the world cycle, see **Aggañña S** (D 27), SD 2.19.

3 The life and death of the devas

3.1 THE WORLD-CYCLE. The Suttas speak of **three kinds of aeon or world-period** (*kappa*; Skt *kalpa*), that is, an interim aeon, an incalculable aeon, and a great aeon. An interim aeon (*antara,kappa*) is the duration required for the human lifespan to rise from 10 years to the maximum of 100,000 years or more, and then fall back to 10 years.²⁵ Twenty such interim aeons make up one incalculable aeon (*asañ-kheyya kappa*), and four incalculables make up one great aeon (*mahā kappa*).²⁶

The “**great aeon**,” often referred to simply as an “aeon” (*kappa*), is *a world cycle*, that is, the lifespan of the universe. A famous simile in **the Pabbatta Sutta** (S 15.5) hyperbolically explains an aeon (ie a great aeon, *mahā kappa*) as follows:

Suppose, O monk, there were a great mountain of rock a fathom (*yojana*)²⁷ long, a fathom wide, a fathom high, without holes or crevices, one solid mass of rock. At the end of every hundred years, a man were to stroke it once with a piece of Kāsī cloth. That great mountain of rock might by this effort be worn away and eliminated but the aeon, O monk, would still not have ended. So long is an aeon, O monk.

And through such long aeons, we have wandered through so many of them, so many hundreds of aeons, so many thousands of aeons, so many hundreds of thousands of aeons.

What is the reason for this? Because, monk, this cycle of lives (*samsāra*) is without discoverable beginning... It is enough to be liberated from them. (S 15.5/2:181 f)²⁸

Evidently, an aeon is not a fixed number, since the life-cycle of the universe need not be fixed or cannot be accurately measured. After all, time is a relative conception.

3.2 THE LIFESPANS OF DEVAS. **The (Nānā,karaṇa) Puggala Sutta** (A 4.123) is divided up neatly into four main sections, one for each of the four form dhyana spheres. Each of the four form dhyanas is represented by a particular group of devas inhabiting *the highest realm of that sphere* (that is, except in the first case, the Brahma,kāyika brahmas, which is a generic name), thus:²⁹

	<u>Celestial sphere</u>	<u>Lifespan</u>
1 st dhyana heaven	Brahma,kāyika brahmas ³⁰	1 aeon
2 nd dhyana heaven	Ābhassara devas	2 aeons
3 rd dhyana heaven	Subha,kiṇha devas	4 aeons
4 th dhyana heaven	Veha-p,phala devas	500 aeons

An important point to note is that in the (Nānā,karaṇa) Puggala Sutta, although the names of the highest devas are mentioned, the lifespans mentioned are those of the lowest realm of those spheres (except for the brahma sphere). Let us examine this allocation of lifespan further.

3.2.1 The 1st-dhyana heavens are wholly inhabited by **the Brahma,kāyika (“perfect-bodied”) brahmas**,³¹ whose lifespan is said to be 1 aeon. The Sutta’s Commentary, however, adds that those who have cultivated the first dhyana to an inferior degree would have a lifespan of *a third of an aeon*; those whose 1st dhyana-attainment is intermediate, *half an aeon*; and only those fully accomplished in the 1st dhyana live *a full aeon* (AA 3:124).

²⁵ See esp **Cakka,vatti Siha,nāda S** (D 26.9-25/3:64-76), SD 36.10.

²⁶ V 3:4 = D 3:51, 111 = It 99; D 1:14; A 2:142.

²⁷ A “fathom” (*yojana*) is the distance travelled by a yoke of oxen, ie about 7 miles (11.3 km), and is divided into 3 *gāvutā* (DhA 2:13; cf DhA 1:108). See also Dh 60, J 5:37.

²⁸ See **Aggañña S** (D 27), SD 2.19 Appendix.

²⁹ For Skt cosmological names, see BHSD: *deva*.

³⁰ *Brahma,kāyika*, lit “one of perfect body,” ie a body of pure light. However, it is not clearly defined in the Suttas. It may generically refer to the 1st-dhyana sphere (Childers, DPL, sv), or even the whole form world (*rūpāvacara*), or even incl the formless world, “since they all inhabit the brahmalokas” (*arūpāvacara*) (BHSD: *deva*).

³¹ See prec n.

Traditionally, the longest lifespan of this sphere, an aeon (*kappa*, that is, a world-cycle), is that of Mahā Brahmā, the supreme being of the whole sphere. There are two lower realms of this sphere of a shorter lifespan, which as such, comprises the following realms:

The Great Brahma	(<i>mahā brahmā</i>)	1 aeon	(subtle dhyana)
Brahma's Ministers	(<i>brahma, purohita</i>)	½ aeon	(middling dhyana)
Brahma's Retinue	(<i>brahma, paisajja</i>)	⅓ aeon	(inferior dhyana)

3.2.2 The lifespan of form-dhyana beings. The time-scale in the 1st-dhyana sphere is problematic in that it is periodically destroyed when the universe collapses. The universe is destroyed through the instability of three of the four primary elements, that is, through “fire” (reaching up to highest of the 1st-dhyana sphere), through “water” (up to the highest of the 2nd-dhyana sphere), and through “wind” (up to the 3rd-dhyana sphere).³²

According to the Commentators, the “aeon” (*kappa*) referred to the in 1st-dhyana lifespan is the “interim aeon” (*asaṅkheyya kappa*) [3.1], while the “aeon” of the Limited-radiance devas (*paritt'ābha*) upwards is the “great aeon” (*mahā kappa*). This helpful note is found in *A Comprehensive Manual of Abhidhamma*, based on the Abhidhamm'attha, vibhāvinī (Sumaṅgala's commentary on Anuruddha's Abhidhamm'attha, saṅgaha):

Though the logic of the temporal sequence seems to imply that in the case of the Brahmā realms, too, the *mahākappa* is intended, the commentators base their interpretation upon another tradition (derived from the Suttas) which holds that the periodic destruction of the world by fire extends through the realm of Mahā Brahmās. Since this destruction takes place at the end of one *asaṅkheyyakappa* within the *mahākappa*, the conclusion follows that the Mahā Brahmā cannot live longer than a single *asaṅkheyyakappa*. The source for this other tradition are [**the Brahma-jāla Sutta**, D 1.2.2-6/1:17-19 & **the Aggañña Sutta**, D 27.10-12/3:84-86].

(Abhs:B 373, ch V n2; also at Abhs:WG 171 f)

3.2.3 The 2nd-dhyana heavens are represented in the (Nānā, karaṇa) Puggala Sutta by **the Ābhassara (“streaming radiance”) devas**, who are actually the highest inhabitants of the 2nd-dhyana sphere, whose lifespan is 2 aeons (according to the Sutta). The Sutta's Commentary, however, in its final cosmological scheme, says that those who have cultivated the second dhyana to an inferior degree would have a lifespan of 2 aeons; those whose 2nd-dhyana-attainment is intermediate live 4 aeons; and those fully accomplished in the 1st dhyana (that is, the Ābhassara devas), 8 aeons (AA 3:124 f).

Streaming-radiance devas	(<i>ābhassara</i>)	8 aeons	(subtle dhyana)
Boundless-radiance devas	(<i>appamāṇ'ābha</i>)	4 aeons	(middling dhyana)
Limited-radiance devas	(<i>paritt'ābha</i>)	2 aeons	(inferior dhyana)

By mentioning the most excellent devas of these three realms, all three are meant. The reason is that they all their bodies are identical in pervasion, that is, they emit a radiant light that blazes forth and flicker like the torch flames, and their bodies are all of the same size. Their perception, however, is diverse, in that some have rebirth-linking consciousness without initial application (*vitakka*) but with sustained application (*vicāra*), while some have rebirth-linking without either.

3.2.4 The 3rd-dhyana heavens are represented in the (Nānā, karaṇa) Puggala Sutta by **the Subha-kiṇha (“radiant glory”) devas**, who are actually the highest inhabitants of the 3rd-dhyana sphere, whose lifespan is 4 aeons (according to the Sutta). The Sutta's Commentary, in its developed cosmology, says that those who have cultivated the third dhyana to an inferior degree would have a lifespan of 15 aeons; those whose 2nd-dhyana-attainment is intermediate live 32 aeons; and those fully accomplished in the 1st dhyana, 64 aeons (AA 3:125).

³² See **R Gethin** 1998:116 f (Table 2); for details, see Vbh 422-426, Vism 7.40-44, 13.29-65, Abhs 22-24; Abhsv 128 f = Abhs:WG 171 f.

Radiant-glory devas	<i>(subha,kiṇha)</i>	64 aeons	(subtle dhyana)
Boundless-glory devas	<i>(appamāṇa subha)</i>	32 aeons	(middling dhyana)
Limited-glory devas	<i>(paritta subha)</i>	15 aeons	(inferior dhyana)

3.2.5 The 4th-dhyana heavens are represented in the (Nānā,kaṛaṇā) Puggala Sutta by **the Veha-p-phala** [“abundant fruit”) devas, who are actually the highest inhabitants of the 4th-dhyana sphere in a mundane sense,³³ and whose lifespan is 500 aeons. The Sutta’s Commentary says that the devas of the fourth dhyana have cultivated it to an excellent or “subtle” (*pañīta*) degree (AA 3:125).

The Suddh’āvāsa or “Pure Abodes” are a group of five of the highest form heavens populated only by non-returners (*anāgāmi*), and where they attain arhathood and nirvana.³⁴ The five spheres of the Pure Abodes and the other 4th-dhyana realms are:

Peerless devas	<i>(akaniṭṭha)</i>	16,000 aeons	} The Pure Abodes (Suddh’āvāsa): non-returners only
Clear-visioned devas	<i>(sudassī)</i>	8,000 aeons	
Beautifully-visible devas	<i>(sudassa)</i>	4,000 aeons	
Untroubled devas	<i>(atappa)</i>	2,000 aeons	
Non-declining devas	<i>(aviha)</i>	1,000 aeons	
Non-percipient beings	<i>(asañña,satta)</i>	500 aeons	
Abundant-fruit devas	<i>(veha-p,phala)</i>	500 aeons	

The non-percipient beings (*asañña,satta*) are those erstwhile meditators who have developed dispassion towards perception (*saññā,virāgam bhāvetvā*).³⁵ After death, they become non-percipient beings, where they continue to exist in a kind of cryonic hibernation. The moment any thought arises in such a being, he falls from that state.³⁶

The Abundant-fruit devas (*veha-p,phala*) inhabit the form world just “below” the Pure Abodes. They are said to be reborn there as a result of their attainment of the “fifth” dhyana.³⁷

3.3 DO ALL DEVAS FALL RIGHT INTO THE SUBHUMAN PLANES? While worldlings in the heavens fall into the subhuman planes when they die, the devas and brahmas who are “trainees” (*sekha*) or saints of the path do not. In fact, they go on to attain nirvana in the following or in the third life, or at the most, in the seventh life. All the four sections of the (Nānā,kaṛaṇā) Puggala Sutta also declare that

The worldling, having dwelled there for a whole lifespan, having exhausted the lifespan of the devas there, all go to hell, or to the animal kingdom, or to the preta realm. (A 4.123.1 etc)

The (Nānā,kaṛaṇā) Puggala Sutta, as such, gives the impression that *all* worldling devas of the form sphere (that is, those who are not saints of the path), after death, fall *immediately* from their celestial lives into the subhuman states.

According to the Abhidhamma tradition, however, the worldling deva or brahma might fall into a subhuman plane after a sequence of lives, but *not* immediately in the next life. Form existence, according to the Abhidhamma tradition, cannot be followed by rebirth in the subhuman planes of misery. Therefore,

³³ “In a mundane sense,” because there are higher 3rd-dhyana spheres, ie the Pure Abodes (*suddh’āvāsa*): see here below. However, saints of the path can be reborn here, too.

³⁴ See **Is rebirth immediate?** SD 2.17 (4.4+5).

³⁵ Abhsv 5.85/142 = Abhs:WG 200.

³⁶ See **Brahmajāla S** (D 1,2.31/1:28 f); **Pāṭika S** (D 24,2.20/3:33 f).

³⁷ Gethin: “Another example of a common innovation is the Abhidhamma system of five *jhānas* as opposed to the Suttanta system of four. The additional *jhāna* is achieved by distinguishing between *jhāna* that has both *vicāra* and *vitāka*, and *jhāna* that has only *vicāra*; the latter kind of *jhāna* corresponds to what is called the *dhyānāntara* to Sarvāstivādin Abhidharma literature, though *avitakko vicāra-matto samādhi* is distinguished at S 4:363.” (2001:14 n59). See Abhs:B 218. Effectively, the 5th dhyana of the Abhidhamma is the same as the 4th dhyana of the Suttas.

such a celestial being, on falling from the form realm, might be reborn in the human world, where he or she might then commit bad deeds that lead to rebirth in the subhuman planes.

In fact, this Abhidhamma tradition—that celestial beings fall to earth first before further rebirth—agrees with **the Pañca Pubba,nimitta Sutta** (It 83), where just this is said, that when the devas notice that one of their kind is facing impending fall (*cuti*), they remind him of three things: to take up birth in an earthly family, to practise the Dharma Vinaya, and have full faith in it.³⁸ [1.2]

The Abhidhammist rationale is that since the state of a celestial being is the result of good karma, it is difficult for such a being to have negative thoughts at the dying moment. Indeed, they may well be true of the form and the formless beings (brahmas), whose rebirth moment is immediate and without any physical remains.³⁹ However, in the case of the sense-world devas, insofar they are non-dhyanic beings and on account of their protracted indulgence in sensual pleasures, are more easily distracted by the fear of death. As such, the five signs of deva’s impending death [1.2] apply only to the sense-sphere celestial beings.

4 Choosing rebirth

4.1 The (Nānā,karaṇa) Puggala Sutta (A 4.123), in declaring that even the devas—except for the saints of the path—fall from their heavens into subhuman planes, imports that it is not really worth being reborn into the heavens. Surely not if we are still *worldlings*, that is, those not walking the path to awakening. For, as devas of *the lower heavens* (those of the sense worlds), we are so engrossed in sense-pleasures that we are unlikely to build up our spiritual energies, and in *the higher heavens* (of form dhyana and of formlessness), we are even less likely to do so since we are totally absorbed in mental bliss to even be aware that anything else exists. Anyway, if we understand the Buddha’s teachings, we do have the choice of our rebirth.

4.2 The Nikāyas have preserved discourses on the possibility of choosing our rebirth and how we can do so. In **the Saṅkhār’upapatti Sutta** (M 120) and **the Sāleyyaka Sutta** (M 41), for example, the Buddha gives almost identical teachings on the planes of existence and rebirth.⁴⁰ While the Saṅkhār’upapatti Sutta (M 120). **The Saṅkhār’upapatti S** (M 120) teaches on the fivefold noble growth (ariya,vaḍḍhi)—that is, the accomplishment in faith, moral virtue, spiritual learning, charity, and wisdom⁴¹—as the basis for empowering ourselves to choose our own rebirth. **The Sāleyyaka Sutta** (M 41), on the other hand, explains the ten courses of unwholesome actions (akusala kamma,patha) and the ten courses of wholesome actions (kusala kamma,patha) in some detail,⁴² and declares that the ten courses of wholesome actions, properly practised, empowers us to aspire to our own choice of a happy rebirth.⁴³

4.3 Both the Saṅkhār’upapatti Sutta and the Sāleyyaka Sutta, after stating the possibility of our choosing any happy or heavenly rebirth, close by declaring that, if we have been living a morally virtuous life, we could aspire for the best destiny, that is, **spiritual awakening**, thus:

“May I, by realizing for myself through direct knowledge, right here and now,
with **the destruction of the mental influxes**,⁴⁴

³⁸ It 83/3.4.4/76-78 @ SD 23.8a (1.2).

³⁹ “At the time of death, brahmas do not discard a body” (Abhsv 5.59/165 = Abhs:WG 252).

⁴⁰ M 120/3:99-103 @ SD 3.4.

⁴¹ M 120,3/3:99 @ SD 3.4. See also A 3:80 & SD 3.4 (3-4) for **Vaḍḍhi Ss**. See also **Naḷaka,pāna S** (M 68) @ SD 37.4 (1.1.2.3).

⁴² M 41/1:285-290 @ SD 5.7.

⁴³ However, as stated in **Iṭṭha S** (A 5.43), heavenly birth cannot be attained merely through prayer (*āyācana,hetu*) or wishing (*pathhāna,hetu*), but we “should rather follow a way of life that is conducive to rebirth in heaven” (A 5.43/3:47-49), SD 46.4. See **Brahma,deva S** (S 6.3), SD 12.4 (2) & **Sāleyyaka S** (M 41), SD 5.7 (3).

⁴⁴ *Āsavānaṃ khayā anāsavaṃ ceto,vimuttim paññā,vimuttim diṭṭhe va dhamme sayam abhiññā sacchikatvā upa-sampajja viharati*. This is stock, found throughout the 4 Nikāyas. *Āsava* (lit “inflow, outflow”) comes from *ā-savati* “flows towards” (ie, either “into” or “out” towards the observer). It has been variously translated (“deadly taints,” RD), corruptions, intoxicants, biases, depravity, misery, bad (influence), or simply left untranslated. The Abhidhamma lists **4 influxes**: of (1) sense-desire (*kāma’āsava*), (2) (desire for eternal) existence or becoming (*bhav’āsava*), (3)

attain and dwell in the influx-free⁴⁵ freedom of mind, freedom by wisdom.⁴⁶,
 It is indeed possible for him,
 by realizing for himself through direct knowledge, right here and now,
 with the destruction of the mental influxes,
 attains and dwells in the influx-free freedom of mind, freedom by wisdom.
 What is the reason for this? He is a Dharmafarer, one of harmonious conduct.”
 (M 41,43/1:289), SD 5.7 = (M 120,37/3:103), SD 3.4

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The First Discourse on (the Diversity in) Individuals

A 4.123

1 Bhikshus, there are these four kinds of individuals existing in the world. What are the four?

The 1st dhyana and the Brahma,kāyika devas

1.2 Here, bhikshus, a certain individual, quite secluded from sensual pleasures, secluded from unwholesome mental states, attains and dwells in **the first dhyana**, accompanied by initial application and sustained application, accompanied by zest and happiness, born of solitude.⁴⁷

He relishes it, longs for it, and finds joy in it. He remains therein, intent upon it, dwells much in it, without falling from it.

When he dies, he is reborn in the company of **the Brahma,kāyika devas** [the high gods].⁴⁸

Bhikshus, the life-span of the Brahma,kāyika devas is *an aeon* [a world cycle].

The worldling, having dwelled there for a whole lifespan, having spent all of the lifespan of devas there, goes to hell, or to the animal kingdom, or to the preta realm.⁴⁹

views (*ditṭh'āsava*), (4) ignorance (*avijjāsava*) (D 16,2.4, Pm 1.442, 561, Dhs §§1096-1100, Vbh §937). These 4 are also known as “floods” (*oghā*) and “yokes” (*yogā*). The list of 3 influxes (omitting the influxes of views) is prob older and is found more frequently in the suttas (D 33,1.10(20)/3:216; M 1:55, 3:41; A 3.59, 67, 6.63). The destruction of these influxes is equivalent to arhathood. See BDict: *āsava*.

⁴⁵ “Influx-free” (*anasava*), ie, free from being conditioned by the mental influxes (*āsavānaṃ apaccaya, bhūtaṃ*, SA 2:174).

⁴⁶ “The freedom of mind, freedom by wisdom,” *ceto, vimuttiṃ paññā, vimuttiṃ*. This is not a dvandva, but a single conjunct cpd that describes the same state, arhathood. Comy explains “the freedom of mind” (*ceto, vimutti*) as the attainment of the fruition of arhathood (*arahatta, phala, samāpatti*), and “the freedom by wisdom” (*paññā, vimutti*) as the wisdom of the fruition of arhathood (*arahatta, phala, paññā*) (SA 2:174). A common term for both aspects is “freed both ways” (*ubhato, bhāga vimutta*): see **Mahā, nidāna S** (D 15,36,2), SD 5.17. In the tenfold rightness (*sammatta*) of the path, *ceto, vimutti* is “right freedom” (*sammā vimutti*) and *paññā, vimutti* is “right knowledge” (*sammā ñāṇa*). Here, “freedom” refers to the 8 attainments (*attha, samāpatti*)—the 4 form dhyanas and the 4 formless attainments—mastered by the full-fledged arhat. The actual awakening is denoted by *sammā, ñāṇa*. See SD 10.16 (9+10). On the 2 kinds of freedom, see **Jhānābhiñña S** (S 16.9,29 n), SD 50.7. On *ceto, vimutti* as the mind’s freedom from the hindrances, see SD 38.5 (8.3).

⁴⁷ These are the dhyana factors: *vitakka vicāra pīti sukhaṣṣa ek’aggatā*, respectively. On the omission of “one-pointedness of mind” (*cittassa ek’aggatā*) and “concentration” (*samādhi*) here, see **The layman and dhyana**, SD 8.5.

⁴⁸ *Brahma, kāyika* lit tr “one of perfect body,” ie a body of pure light; alt tr “Brahma’s host,” a generic term for the whole of the 1st-dhyana brahma realm, which should not be confused with the more specific “Brahma’s Retinue” (*brahma, pārisajja*) [3.2].

But the Blessed One's disciple, having dwelled there for a whole lifespan, and having exhausted it all up, attains final nirvana in that very state.

This, bhikshus, is the distinction, this is the disparity, this is the difference, of the learned noble disciple from the unlearned worldling, that is to say, with regard to destination and rebirth.⁵⁰ [127]

The 2nd dhyana and the Ābhassara devas

2 THE SECOND-DHYANA BEINGS. And furthermore, bhikshus, with the stilling of initial application and sustained application, by gaining inner tranquillity and oneness of mind, he attains and dwells in **the second dhyana**, free from initial application and sustained application, accompanied by zest and happiness born of concentration.

He relishes it, longs for it, and finds joy in it. He remains therein, intent upon it, dwells much in it, without falling from it.

When he dies, he is reborn in the company of **the Ābhassara devas** [the devas of streaming radiance].⁵¹

Bhikshus, the life-span of the Ābhassara devas is *two aeons* [two world cycles].

The worldling, having dwelled there for a whole lifespan, having spent all of the lifespan of devas there, goes to hell, or to the animal kingdom, or to the preta realm.

But the Blessed One's disciple, having dwelled there for a whole lifespan, and having exhausted it all up, attains final nirvana in that very state.

This, bhikshus, is the distinction, this is the disparity, this is the difference, of the learned noble disciple from the unlearned worldling, that is to say, with regard to destination and rebirth.

The 3rd dhyana and the Subha,kiṇha devas

3 And furthermore, bhikshus, with the fading away of zest, he remains equanimous, mindful and clearly knowing, and experiences happiness with the body. He attains and dwells in **the third dhyana**, of which the noble ones declare, 'Happily he dwells in equanimity and mindfulness.'

He relishes it, longs for it, and finds joy in it. He remains therein, intent upon it, dwells much in it, without falling from it.

When he dies, he is reborn in the company of **the Subha,kiṇha devas** [devas of radiant glory].⁵²

Bhikshus, the life-span of the Subha,kiṇha devas is *four aeons* [four world cycles].

The worldling, having dwelled there for a whole lifespan, having spent all of the lifespan of devas there, goes to hell, or to the animal kingdom, or to the preta realm.

But the Blessed One's disciple, having dwelled there for a whole lifespan, and having exhausted it all up, attains final nirvana in that very state.

This, bhikshus, is the distinction, this is the disparity, this is the difference, of the learned noble disciple from the unlearned worldling, that is to say, with regard to destination and rebirth.

⁴⁹ *Tattha puthujjano yāvat'āyukam thatvā yāvatakam tesam devānam āyu-p.pamāṇam tam sabbaṃ khetvā nirayam pi gacchati, tiracchāna.yonim pi gacchati, petti.visayam pi gacchati.* This passage seems to suggest that worldling devas (that is, those who are not saints of the path), after death, *immediately* fall from their celestial lives into the subhuman states; see Intro (3.3).

⁵⁰ On one's choice of rebirth by aspiration, see Intro (4).

⁵¹ "Ābhassarā," a celestial world, one of the form worlds of the 2nd dhyana, is populated by luminescent beings who live on zest (*pīti*) and emanate lightning-like radiance. When the physical universe devolves or "contracts" (*samvaṭṭati*) due to "fire," it reaches up to Ābhassara (CpA 11; Vism 13.41/416 f). See **Aggañña S** (D 27.10/3:84 f), SD 2.19.

⁵² On the Subha,kiṇha brahmas, see Intro (3.2.4).

The 4th dhyana and the Vaha-p.phala devas

4 And furthermore, bhikshus, with the abandoning of pleasure and pain—and with the earlier disappearance of happiness and displeasure—he attains and dwells in **the fourth dhyana**, that is neither painful nor pleasant, and with mindfulness fully purified by equanimity.

He relishes it, longs for it, and finds joy in it. He remains therein, [128] intent upon it, dwells much in it, without falling from it.

When he dies, he is reborn in the company of **the Vaha-p.phala devas** [the devas of abundant fruit].⁵³

Bhikshus, the life-span of the Vaha-p.phala devas is *500 aeons* [500 world cycles].

The worldling, having dwelled there for a whole lifespan, having spent all of the lifespan of devas there, goes to hell, or to the animal kingdom, or to the preta realm.

But the Blessed One's disciple, having dwelled there for a whole lifespan, and having exhausted it all up, attains final nirvana in that very state.

This, bhikshus, is the distinction, this is the disparity, this is the difference, of the learned noble disciple from the unlearned worldling, that is to say, with regard to destination and rebirth.

These, bhikshus, are the four kinds of individuals existing in the world.

— evaṃ —

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