

From preta to hungry ghost¹

Many of the early Buddhist teachings on death and afterdeath are better understood when we examine them against the prevailing belief-system of the brahmins in the Buddha's time. Teachings such as those on the pretas (Pali *petā*) and the conduct of the living to the dead, which directly concern the laity, are Buddhist **adaptations** of brahminical beliefs and practices.

The earliest Indian brahminical texts, the **Vedas** and **Brāhmaṇas**, rarely speculate on the fate of the dead, focusing almost exclusively on maintaining favourable living conditions in this world. Hence, there is little teaching here on the nature of the afterlife or the obligations of the living to the dead. It is only after the Buddha's time, we see ancient funeral rituals that are still practised in Indian society to this day.

Up to the Buddha's time, the prevalent brahminical conception of death centred around a class of beings known as ***pīṭara*** (pl), "the fathers, ancestors" (sg *pitr*). According to the Vedas, the newly dead has to take one of two paths, one leading to the realm of the gods (*deva*), the other to the Fathers. The latter is the prevalent one, that is, the path of the Fathers (*pitr, yāna*) to the world of the Fathers (*pitr, loka*; P *petti, visaya*).

According to brahminical mythology, when the newly dead arrived in the world of the Fathers, king Yama or sometimes Agni (the fire god) gave him a new body. He was bathed in radiant light and given divine food. The Fathers were depicted as willful beings with powers that would benefit their living relatives. To gain this, the relatives, especially the sons, had to offer ritual sacrifices to the Fathers. The family would then prosper and continue.

By the Buddha's time, with the introduction of karmic theories in **the Upaniṣads**, an ethical dimension began to pervade the belief in the Fathers (ancestors), whose status now resembled that of the three-tiered heavens of devas. Each generation of Fathers was believed to occupy one of these levels of heaven, which they ascended progressively until their eventual dissolution.

A complex system of ancestral worship rituals, known as ***śrāddha*** (P *saddha*), was introduced for the benefit of the Fathers. Essentially, the Vedic mythology of reciprocal exchanges between the living and the dead became more complex. Neither Yama nor Agni now assigned a new body to the *pitr* (sg, Father). This task was now that of the living relatives, especially the sons.

Upon dying and being cremated, the disembodied and liminal dead was then known as a *preta*, "departed one" (P *petā*). The primary task of the *śrāddha* was to transform the dead from a *preta* into a *pitr*, failing which the *preta* would haunt the living, posing a danger to them. For each of the 10 days following the death, a *piṇḍa* (rice-ball) was made, representing a vital part of the new body.

On the 11th day, after the *piṇḍa, pitr* (rice-body) was completed, a complex new series of rites followed. The ancestral Fathers and the newly dead, were represented by a group of 11 specialist priests. In a sense, this marked the end of mourning, because on the 12th day, a concluding rite, **the *sapiṇḍī, kāraṇa***, was said to transform the *preta* into a *pitr*. With the dead's release from limbo, the living, too, regained their social status.

¹ This reflection is based on **Karma and the afterlife**, [SD 48.1](#) (1.1).

The Buddha not only rejects the worship of the devas, widespread in ancient India, but he also rejects brahminical beliefs, especially those regarding social class and the eternal soul. Significantly absent from early Buddhism are the notions of the blissful world of the Fathers, or the path of the Fathers. Early Buddhism focuses more on family-centred social duties.²

Furthermore, early Buddhism has neither parallel to the brahminical *pitṛ* nor any ritual similar to the *śrāddha* or the *sapiṇḍī, karana*. Early Buddhist notions of ancestor veneration and related ideas are all based on the teaching of karma or personal accountability. The destiny of the dead, according to the Buddha is the direct result of how well he has conducted himself morally as a human. Karma, then, is the basis for all early Buddhist notions of the afterlife.

The pretas (*P peta*) are not regarded as potentially dangerous beings, stuck in the liminal haunt between human and *pitṛ*. Early Buddhism does not teach any *pitṛ* (ancestor) state. The term *peta* (anglicized as “preta”) simply and generically refers to one departed, even one recently dead, but is not reborn immediately as a human, deva, animal, or hell-being. There is no mention anywhere that they are intermediate beings, and they seem to be a class of their own.³

In early Buddhism, the preta is never depicted in any fixed form, but is a being who *has become* the negative and painful effects of his previous unwholesome karma (in other words, facing his past karma).⁴ **The (Saddha) Jāṇussoṇi Sutta** (A 10.177), for example, records the Buddha as saying that beings are reborn as pretas on account of habitually committing the 10 unwholesome courses of action.⁵

The Peta, vatthu (“Peta Stories”), a late canonical work, depicts an array of pretas, like a case-book of criminal who’s who, describing them and their past bad karma that shape their present forms. In other words, they *become* the bad karma they have been previously doing.

In at least 6 of the 51 Peta Stories, veneration of the dead, grieving over one’s loss, even prayers,⁶ are firmly discouraged.⁷ Despite this ancient sentiment reflecting an appreciation of the nature of impermanence, the Peta, vatthu also records a new development, something not found in the suttas of the 4 Nikāyas, that is, the dedication of merit by a living relative, which is shown to at once liberate the preta concerned. We have a total of 18 such Peta Stories.

Although **the preta world** (*petti, visaya*, “the range of the departed), or in later works and the Commentaries, *peta, loka*, are schematically located below the human, but above the animals and hell-beings, they can exist almost anywhere on account of their disembodied state. In that sense, they do not have their own world (*loka*), or specific location in the cosmos, like the divine beings or other subhuman beings.⁸

Like the other subhuman beings -- the titans (*asura*), the animals and the hell-beings -- the lifespan of pretas is undetermined, and depends on the being’s bad karma. In the case of

² D 31 @ [SD 4.1](#).

³ See eg **Sigāl’ovāda Sutta** (D 31), [SD 4.1](#); also see [SD 48.1](#) (3.1).

⁴ In later stories, their sufferings are more detailed: see eg the Skt work, Mvst 1:22-24.

⁵ A 10.177/5:269-273 @ [SD 2.6a](#).

⁶ See eg **Asi, bandhaka, putta Sutta** (S 42.6), [SD 39.9](#).

⁷ The 6 stories of mindfulness towards the dead are Pv 1.4, 5, 6, 12, 2.5 (= Vv 7.9), 6 (cf J 454).

⁸ For a schema of the 31 planes of the Buddhist cosmology, see [SD 1.7](#) (Table 1.7).

animals, for example, we may often have some idea of the average lifespan of the members of each species, it varies from species to species. However, in the case of pretas, despite their subhuman state, they are *each* as unique as humans are. Their lifespan is not fixed, often lasting infinitely longer than humans or animals.⁹

The current Asian notion of pretas as “hungry ghosts” and how they look probably comes from **the Avadāna,śataka** (“A Hundred Stories,” late 5th-early 6th century),¹⁰ attributed to the Mūla, -sarvāsti, vāda in northwest India, probably Bamiyan, in Afghanistan. In their preta stories (found in ch 5), they are depicted with faces like a mountain-peak, bellies like a mountain, and a mouth like the eye of a needle. They are naked, covered only with hair, so that they each look like a flame. They make mournful sounds, and so elicit pity from humans.¹¹

The Chinese Mahāyāna, basing their beliefs in such texts, characteristically depict pretas as suffering from extreme hunger and thirst. Hence, they termed them as “hungry ghosts,” *egui*, which is not a direct translation of the Sanskrit term. In popular Chinese lore, the hungry ghosts are sometimes conflated with the hell-beings, or regarded as being located in a particular realm of their own.

The Akkhaṇa Sutta (A 8.29) states that pretas are amongst those who would not be able to benefit from listening to the Dharma, because their state does not conduce to living the spiritual life. Nor is the preta any kind of liminal or transitional level to some higher state. It is a sort of dead-end state that we need to get out of as soon as possible, before we can make any spiritual progress.¹²

Religious ideas start somewhere, grow, and change according to the ideas and needs of society. Then, they are taught, interpreted and used by religious specialists and entrepreneurs of our times. We have a choice of blindly following such religious ideas and rituals, or of intelligently and compassionately investigating them, or at least questioning them. Only then, we are capable of properly shaping and practising meaningful ways of relating to our respected dead, and to do so with lovingkindness and wisdom for a healthy society.

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[an occasional re-look at the Buddha’s Example and Teachings]

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⁹ According to the Commentary to **Tiro,kuḍḍa Sutta** (Khp 7 = Pv 1.5), the pretas in the story attained their state in the time of the Buddha Phussa, the 18th buddha from Dīpaṅkara [B 19 etc] or the 7th past buddha from ours [SD 36.2 (3)], who lived 92 aeons ago (KhpA 201): see [SD 2.7](#) (2).

¹⁰ See The Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism, 2014, sv.

¹¹ See eg KhpA 207. King Bimbisāra only hears frightful noises in the night, but sees no shapes (PvA 22).

¹² For further reading, see **Karma and the afterlife**, [SD 48.1](#). On “Helping the dead to move on,” see [SD 48.1](#) (8).