

HELL ROBOTS?

King Yama's role

In the early Buddhist stories of the hells – such as in the (Majjhima) Deva,dūta Sutta (M 130)¹ and the (Yama) Deva,dūta Sutta (A 3.35) – **Yama** does not judge the “dead” – the bad-doers – but simply question them about their moral conduct. He plays the role of a spiritual counsellor asking them why they have not realized the meaning of his “divine messengers”: a new born child, a sick person, an old person, a criminal being punished and a corpse. An older set comprises probably only the 3 messengers: an old person, a sick person and a corpse.

There is no record that Yama ever punishes anyone. He only asks them why they do not realize the true nature of life – impermanence – and do good. Because they do not do good, they now have to appear before him. The Suttas are clear that the hell-beings have brought the suffering upon themselves by their own “negligence.” Yama’s advice to the hell-beings – and to us – is not to be negligent, but to be diligent in our spiritual life, so that we do not have to meet him!

King Yama – like Māra – is not an eternal being, but a temporary position. In fact, **the (Yama) Deva,dūta Sutta** records that Yama, in due course, tires of seeing all those foolish beings coming before him. He aspires to be reborn as a human in the Buddha’s presence so that he is able to practise Dharma and be free of samsara, too.²

The hell wardens

Although **the hell-wardens** play a role secondary to that of Yama, they are the real keepers of the hells. They are the ones who actually mete out the painful sufferings upon the fallen beings. We must also imagine the countless millions of hell-wardens and the hell-beings torturing them. Even the size of such a realm is almost beyond our imagination.³

The Buddhist hell mythology became more fearsome in Chinese Buddhism. Yama became a permanent role, and he had 10 other “Kings of Hell” under him to punish the hell-beings. In fact, the Chinese notion of the hells reflected the imperial criminal system of punishing and torturing those who fail to keep to the traditional ways or work against the powerful, and has little to do with karma.

Crowded places

The hells are crowded places of violence and suffering. The hell beings are inflicted with all kinds of horrendous tortures, again and again – but they do not die as a consequence. If they have died, then the tortures would be meaningless. It also means that such sufferings are not

¹ (Majjhima) Deva,dūta Sutta (M 130): [SD 2.23](#) (3.4.3).

² See A 3.35,28-29 @ [SD 48.10](#).

³ (Yama) Deva,dūta Sutta (A 3.35): [SD 48.10](#) (1.2).

bodily but mental. We keep on suffering the kinds of pain we have contemplated or inflicted upon others.

This reminds us of the sufferings of the Titan **Prometheus** for bringing fire from the heavens to the humans in mythical times. He is then caught and punished by the gods who chained him to a mountain rock, where an eagle comes each dawn to tear him open, feast on his liver. He suffers hellish pains, but does not die. His liver regenerates in the night. The whole cycle of bodily suffering is reenacted everyday until he is released by Hercules.

Hell robots?

Surely, such actions bring on their own store of bad karma upon the hell-wardens themselves. In fact, it seems that the hell-wardens themselves are being punished, too, being caught up in repetitive actions of inflicting sufferings on the hell-beings.

Or, perhaps, they are what we today know as robots or androids, as suggested in **the Kathā,vatthu**. The phrase *yanta,rūpaṃ viya* can, in fact, be rendered as “in a mechanical manner,” that is, the karma works on its own, without any need of external agency.⁴

Karma works on its own

We must conclude that Yama, the hell-wardens and the hell-beings are also a powerful myth to remind us of the hellish sufferings of bad karma. In the **Kathā,vatthu**, a canonical book, it is said:

Neither Vessabhū nor the preta king is there,
nor Soma, nor Yama, nor king Vessavaṇa.
One’s own deeds [karma] punish one there,
who, driven from this world, attains to other worlds.
[Untraced, quoted at Kvu 20.3/598,7]

We may then surmise that those hapless hell-beings, on account of their karma, actually see these beings, and suffer the pains—like in a virtual computer game or as depicted in the science fiction movie, *Tron*!⁵

The teaching’s lesson

The point is clear: we cannot take such accounts of king Yama and the underworld as historical events but as a mythical allegory—as a reflection on the 3 great bads of decay, disease and

⁴ See [SD 2.23](#) (3.4.3.1).

⁵ See [SD 23.3](#) (1.2).

death, and of self-accountability or karmic responsibility. This is an example of a teaching whose meaning needs to be drawn out.⁶

One point must be made clear. Yama and the hell wardens may be mythical beings, and the hells may not be actual places – but hellish sufferings are REAL. We – our minds – create these sufferings, and they are more real than virtual-reality sufferings. Imagine the pains and fears we have suffered – we can suffer worse. It is not worth for us to mentally invite such pain. This is the message of the Deva,dūta Suttas.

A vital point behind the Yama story is our practice of **the perception of impermanence**⁷ and **the perception of suffering**.⁸ The benefits of these perceptions are at least twofold:

- (1) we learn to value life and to be motivated to live morally upright lives, and
- (2) we should cultivate compassion towards the sufferings of others.

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

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⁶ For details, see **Neyy'attha Nī't'attha Sutta** (A 2.3.5+6), [SD 2.6b](#).

⁷ For details, see **(Anicca) Cakkhu Sutta** (S 25.1), [SD 16.7](#).

⁸ See [SD 2.23](#) (3.5).