

Revisioning Buddhism 3

[a re-affirmation of the Buddha's Example and Teachings]

Who are the hungry ghosts?

One of the most profound and enduring problems addressed by religion is that of death. More exactly, what happens after death? For Buddhists educated in early Buddhism, the answer is clear: there are only dead bodies, not dead beings. We are all reborn when we die.

Our rebirth is initially decided by the momentum of our dying thought-process. If we hold on to negative thoughts, then our rebirth would be a negative one, in one of the subhuman realms—we would be reborn as an asura, a preta, an animal, or a hell-being. We know that the animal realm exists, but what about the other dimensions?

One helpful way to interpret such realms is to take them as psychological states that overwhelm us. An ASURA, as such, is a violent demon-like being who habitually measures others, intent on using them for what power, pleasure or satisfaction others can provide him (which reminds us of an exploitative callous bossy person).

An ANIMAL, psychologically, is one who leads a predictable cyclic life of eating, sleeping, hunting, mating, reproducing, and dying. He is gullible to baits and lures, and as such is easily trapped and tricked by others. He almost never thinks, and as such can be easily exploited, abused, even consumed, by others.

A HELL-BEING, psychologically, is one who lives in protracted violence, carnage, loss and pain. He is born into a war zone, a literally explosive environment, losing limbs, and then dying an early death, by being bombed, shot or murdered. Mass suicide bombers are likely to be in this realm.

A PRETA, psychologically, is one addicted to something, but like all addicts, he can never find satisfaction. (He is often represented in religious art as having a huge but flat leaf-life body, with a pin-head mouth.) Those addicted to sex, food, pleasure, drinks, cigarettes, or mindlessly collecting things would be denizens of this realm. (Those who collect and exchange stamps, and such like, do not usually fall into this category!)

The pretas are listed last because we will examine them for the rest of this reflection. A careful study of the early Buddhist sources shows two levels of development of preta belief. The first is simply that of the pre-existing brahminical notion of the “departed” (which is what the Pali word, PETA, originally means).¹ A more developed preta belief is found in the Tirokudda Sutta (Kh 7 = Pv 1.5).²

The (Saddha) Janussoni Sutta (A 10.177) tells us that there will always be “departed ones” who are our relatives (imagine our samsaric network of relatives), and that we may dedicate our acts of generosity and goodness to any of them. The Tirokudda Sutta explains how the preta is uplifted from his sufferings by our own spiritual joy (especially by lovingkindness), and that we may dedicate merits, not only to relatives, but to any such beings present.

¹ See eg (Saddha) Janussoni Sutta (A 10.177/5:270) = SD 2.6a:

<http://dharmafarer.googlepages.com/2.6aSaddhaJanussoniSa10.177piya.pdf>

² Tirokudda Sutta (Kh 7 = Pv 1.5) = SD 2.7: <http://dharmafarer.googlepages.com/2.7TirokuddaSkh7piya.pdf>

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Both these suttas show the vital importance that we should ourselves pray for the departed ones. The mechanical and jarring chants of the professional priests who lack moral virtue and lovingkindness are not helpful to them.

When Buddhism reached China beginning around the 1st century CE, such preta stories fascinated the Chinese, already steeped in Confucian filial piety and Daoist spirit beliefs. Such stories were often cited in response to others' criticism that Buddhism was a "foreign" religion that lacked filial piety.

The early Chinese Buddhists went on to create an enduring myth of Mulian (based on the story of Moggallana) to inspire filial piety. Mulian's mother, it is said, is reborn in hell as a hungry ghost on account of her bad karma. Mulian performs an act of giving to the Sangha (order of monks) and so liberates her.

Popular Chinese Buddhism seems to conflate two separate realms (the hells and the preta realm), and regards them as a kind of walled prison. During the seventh lunar month, the hell gates are opened and the pretas are free to wander the world for that period.

Chinese cosmology clearly mirrors the ancient imperial social system. In so doing, Chinese Buddhism branches away from its Indian roots. The pretas are consigned to the hells, but given an annual respite, thus betraying a notion of an enduring soul. The pretas, treated as living relatives, are even given posthumous funds in the form of hell-notes, looking like US Federal Reserve greenbacks, with denominations ranging from \$10,000 to \$1,000,000. In Singapore, it is common to find \$10 billion notes sold in joss-shops.

Apparently, there is a bad inflation in hell! On a more serious note, this is clearly against the teachings of the Tirokudda Sutta which says that there is "neither business...nor buying and selling with money" amongst the pretas (verse 7).

Educated young Chinese often have a serious difficulty with such simplistic beliefs and ask questions like:

- (1) Does this mean that when a Chinese dies, he goes straight to hell as a preta?
- (2) What can the pretas buy or need in hell with all the "money" that is burnt for them?
- (3) How do the pretas end up in hell, when they actually have no realm of their own?
- (4) Were these hungry ghost beliefs and stories promoted by money monastics so that they can live off the dead?

Let me close this reflection on a light note. In the years when I was a monk in Malaysia, it was reported to me that a young Chinese once left a wad of newly-designed one-ringgit notes on the table. His old mother, thinking that it was hell notes for their ancestors, piously burnt them as offerings! I fully endorse this practice as it is likely to encourage more discreet burning, and also probably raise the value of the country's money supply!

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