

Abhisamaya

[Previously published as fb180824 piya]

Our first real step on the path of awakening is often described as a “breakthrough” (*abhisamaya*). Hence, it may be said that we should at least work to “break through” (*abhisameti*) into true reality in this life itself. This way we can avoid being reborn in the lower realms: the animal, the preta and the hell-being.

Although we see animals as inhabiting a wide range of places, the pretas are said to exist anywhere without a special realm of their own. Traditionally, as in the major world religions, the “hells” were believed to be subterranean. But no sane religious teacher would teach this today.

In fact, a careful study of all the “hell” suttas will show that they reflect the terrible tortures used by the kings of those days. When the “hell” stories reached China, the Chinese hells were lorded over by king Yama with 10 other “Chinese” kings of Hells under him, and the tortures reflected those familiar in China. These are amongst the fear-based devices used by the powerful to control the masses.

The early suttas regard all such lower states as being **mental states**. We have a human body, but the untrained mind can easily fall into the animal state (unrestrained lust, sex, etc), or the preta state (addiction to drugs, computer games, etc), or hell-being (excessively violent and destructive). To this list is added in later times the asura state (those who exploit others measuring them as “productive things” and as markets for profit, or simply the love for power). In fact, we see human bodies, say, at a crowded MRT station or a wild foam party, but very few there are really humans. The members of all the 4 lower realms are there in full force.

We don’t need to be streamwinners to be good. Keeping to the 5 precepts is the least we should do to be human. A healthy moral life with lovingkindness or any good meditation inspires the divine in us. We don’t need to go to “heaven” to live joyfully like gods or devas even here on earth.

But all this is only as good as it lasts. Even when we are reborn in the heavens, a very happy and comfortable life, but if we have not attained at least streamwinning, when our good karma ends, we will fall from that happy state (the gods always “fall,” *cavati*, from their state) into one of the lower realms, even the hells. The “Snakes-and-Ladders” game was invented in ancient India to reflect this truth of samsara.

As a **streamwinner**, we will never fall into the subhuman states. We are reborn each time either in the “heavens” (happy divine lives) or in a human state conducive to spiritual cultivation. This is because we will naturally keep the precepts and other good human qualities besides lovingkindness, compassion, gladness and equanimity.

As a start, we should understand that our mind decides our current state and existential destiny. It is simply unhelpful to say, “As long as I do good, I’ll be all right.” We have to define **good**, and actually put it into practice, not merely as a clever or lazy repartee. Doing

good is not enough; it is our intention that decides whether the “good” is wholesome or not. We can, for example, do good deeds for the sake of fame or even for other gains.

Our true journey to the path of awakening only begins when we see and accept the most common aspect of **true reality**: that all things in this world (or universe) is impermanent. When we constantly reflect on this reality, we are less likely to get caught up with lust, hate or delusion. We more easily let go of things when we realize they are caught in these 3 unwholesome roots.

Habitually reflecting on **impermanence** creates for us a healthy karmic momentum. We will become streamwinners in this life itself. If not, certainly at the moment of passing away—when the karmic momentum takes over. This is what is taught in all the 10 suttas of the Okkanta Samyutta (chapter 25 of the Samyutta Nikaya).

Hence, it makes good sense (the best, in fact) to aspire to be streamwinners in this life itself. Otherwise, we are caught up with the way we think about ourself (**self-identity view**). We fall for **rituals and vows** to attain some imaginary religious state or some imaginative paradise. We are caught up in **doubt** about our own state, and that’s when we easily fall for all kinds of fake teachings and gurus.

We have nothing to lose by aspiring to streamwinning right **now**.

Better than sovereignty over the earth,
Or even going to heaven,
Better than lordship over everything,
Is the blessing of the fruit of streamwinning. (Dh 178)

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

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