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(Yama) Deva,dūta Sutta

The (Yama) Discourse on the Divine Messengers | A 3.35 [A:Be 3.36]

Theme: The 3 realities of sentient existence

Translated & annotated by Piya Tan ©2014

1 Sutta summary and highlights

1.1 SUTTA SIGNIFICANCE

1.1.1 Karma and Yama

1.1.1.1 SUMMARY. The **(Yama) Deva,dūta Sutta** (A 3.35) is an allegorical text on how bad-doers face their desserts in the hereafter in the hells. [§1] The Sutta opens with the Buddha asking a question about the 3 “divine messengers” (*deva,dūta*). Interestingly, the Buddha gives no direct answer, but simply states that the fruits of our bad karma of body, speech and mind would ripen in the hells. **The 3 divine messengers**, in the form of an old man [§§3-8], a sick man [§§9-13], and a dead man [§§14-18], appear in the subsequent passages, by way of an indirect answer.

1.1.1.2 In Buddhist mythology, Yama is the king (*rāja*) of the hells (*niraya*), but his powers or lordship seems to extend over all the subhuman planes (the preta realm, the animal kingdom, the hells, and in later cosmology, the asuras).¹ In reality, however, Yama’s role seems to be very limited, as the suttas only depict him as instructing the hell-beings presented before him, asking them why they have not heeded any of the 3 divine messengers, in the case of the (Yama) Deva,dūta Sutta (A 3.35), or the 5 divine messengers, in the case of the (Pañca) Deva,dūta Sutta (M 130).

1.1.1.3 Yama is not even the “lord of death” (*maccu,rāja*), a role given to **Māra** as Death personified.² Like Māra, Yama is himself subject to karma, as they are regarded as “living beings,” so that Yama aspires to meet the Buddha and renounce the world.³ Clearly, both Yama and Māra are not “fixed” entities or eternal beings, but, like the gods themselves, are simply roles or rebirths into which deserving beings are reborn.⁴

1.1.2 Perception of suffering.

[§3] We are here introduced to **King Yama** and his hell-wardens (*niraya,pāla*). The hell-wardens drag and throw the fallen being before Yama for a summary judgement. They inform Yama that he has mistreated his parents, holy men, and clan elders, and that Yama is asked to give his judgement. This pro-

¹ The river Vetaranī is said to be the boundary of Yama’s kingdom (J 1:21, 2:317, 3:472; cf 2:318). Yama’s abode is called “the crowded hell” (*ussada,niraya*) (J 4:405). Yama’s world (*yama,loka*) is said to be the 4 lower worlds (*catu-b,bidham apāya,lokam*, DhA 1:334). Interestingly, in a late legend, Vessavaṇa, one of the 4 “great kings,” ruling the north (D 2:201), on account of Revatī’s bad karma, cast her into *ussada,niraya* (VvA 222-224, on **Revatī Vv**, Vv 5.2). Peta,vatthu says that Yama’s world is the preta realm (*yama,loko’ti peta,loko*, PvA 33; *yama,visaya = peta,loka*, PvA 107). On the various realms, see **(Majjhima) Gati S** (A 9.68), SD 2.20.

² See **Māra**, SD 61.8.

³ M 130,28-29 = A 3.35,28-29. See SD 48.1 (3.4).

⁴ The Bodhisattva (Buddha-to-be) is presented in the role of Magha and reborn as Sakka (DhA 1:65-72; J 31), and also in Kāmanīta J (J 228), Kelisīla J (J 202), Mahāpanāda (J 264) and Vaka J (J 300). The ancient teacher, Sunetta, was said to be Sakka 37 times (A 4:105).

cess seems to mirror that of the Indian feudal system for the punishment of criminals, where the king has absolute power of judgement. **The purpose** of such a narrative is to highlight the severity of karmic retribution for those creating bad karma.

We actually have accounts of terrible punishments, given in such discourses as **the Mahā Dukkha-khandha Sutta** (M 13), **the Cūḷa Dukkha-khandha Sutta** (M 14), and **the Deva,dūta Sutta** (M 130), which explain how, on account of negligence and sense-desires, people commit crimes, for which the authorities inflict various kinds of painful hell-like tortures.⁵ These tortures that the hell-wardens inflict upon the hell-beings are very similar, even identical, to these ancient tortures inflicted by ancient Indian kings upon enemies and criminals.

[§4] Yama begins by questioning the fallen being whether he has previously seen the first divine messenger, but he replies that he has not. [§5] Yama then graphically describes **the old man**—who is actually archetype or hypostasis⁶ (reification or thingifying) of old age—which is presented in a reflective way. This description, and those of the other two messengers, clearly show that they are meant to be the subject for the perception of suffering (*dukkha,saññā*).

[§6] The fallen being then admits that he *has* seen the first messenger. Yama then asks him why, knowing that he would decay with age, he did not make any effort to do good through body, speech and mind. He replies that he is negligent.

[§7] Yama retorts that he must then face the consequences of his bad actions. [§8] He reminds him that such karmic acts are his own doing, so that he has to face their fruits himself. This is the template or stock sequence for the passages on the other two messengers.

1.1.3 A repetitive task

[§9] Yama continues to question the fallen being, asking him if he has seen the second divine messenger, but he replies he had not. [§10] Yama then describes **the sick man** in the same graphic way as before (as a perception of suffering), and the fallen being replies that he had actually seen the second messenger. [§11] For a second time, Yama asks him why, seeing that he is himself subject to disease, he did not make any effort to do good. The being again replies that he is negligent.

[§12] For a second time, Yama declares that the being must then face the consequences of his bad actions. [§13] He again reminds him that such karmic acts are his own doing, so that he has to face the fruits himself.

1.1.4 Death

[§14] Finally, Yama questions the fallen being whether he has seen the third divine messenger, and he replies no. [§15] Yama then describes **the dead man** in the same graphic way (as a perception on suffering). The being admits that he has seen the third messenger. [§16] For a third time, Yama asks him why, seeing that he is himself subject to death, he did not make any effort to do any good. The being again replies that he is negligent.

⁵ Respectively, M 13,14/1:87 (SD 6.9), M 14,13/1:92 (SD 4.7), & M 130,16-27 (SD 2.23). These same tortures—such as the cutting off of limbs and live flaying—are also given in **Bāla Paṇḍita S** (M 129,4/3:164), SD 2.22 & **Kamma,kāraṇa (or Vajja) S** (A 2.1/1:47-49). For other details of such tortures, see AA 2:88-90 (for tr, see nn in A:WH 1:42 f).

⁶ Theologically, hypostasis means the substance or essential nature of an individual. In the Buddhist sense, this also applies to an event, process, or situation, incl a person (as a process), with any abiding essence.

[§17] For a third time, Yama declares that the being must then face the consequences of his bad actions. [§18] Yama again reminds him that such karma is his own doing, so that he has to face its fruits himself.

1.1.5 Yama’s silence

[§19] Interestingly, Yama does not actually pass any judgment at all. He merely questions the fallen being if he has seen the 3 divine messengers, and why he does not positively respond to their messages. At the end of the questioning, Yama falls silent.

[§20] Yama’s silence seems to be the signal for the hell-beings to begin their battery of terrible tortures upon the wretched being. [§§21-26] He undergoes various painful tortures for the duration of the power of his karmic fruits. [§27] Finally (it seems), he is brought to the great hell, one of the most terrible places in the hells.

1.1.6 Yama’s role

1.1.6.1 Yama’s role, according to both the (Yama) Deva,dūta Sutta (A 3.35) and the (Majjhima) Deva,dūta Sutta (M 130) is to question the hell-beings brought before him, as to why they had not heeded the various “divine messengers” [2] and done any good, so that they do not fall into hell [3.2.2]. Now, in realistic terms, we can imagine how many bad people die daily and have to come before Yama—and he alone must deal with millions of such beings every day. In a significant way, this seems to be Yama’s own karmic punishment—after all, he is himself living “permanently” in hell, and meeting with the fallen bad every day of his life! He is like a Buddhist version of Sisyphus,⁷ caught in the rut of cyclic activity, which he seems to enjoy at first.

1.1.6.2 [§28] The story now takes a new turn. Yama seems to realize that his is a boring job. He asks the same questions millions of times a day to millions of fallen beings, and they all give the same foolish answers. His job could well have been done by a questioning machine or computer! Apparently, he cannot quit—because of his own karma. [§29] So, he aspires to meet a future Buddha and learn the Dharma for his benefit.

[§30] The Buddha then declares that all this account is based on his personal direct knowledge of true reality. [§§31-33] The Sutta closes on a happy note with verses praising the good people who heed the divine messengers and enjoy the benefits of their good actions.

1.2 SUTTA HIGHLIGHTS

1.2.1 The karma of Yama and the hell-wardens

1.2.1.1 Although **Yama** is the chief interlocutor in the (Yama) Deva,dūta Sutta, he plays more of the roles of a spiritual counsellor rather than an underworld judge. There is records that he ever punishes anyone—and the Sutta is clear that the hell-beings have brought the suffering by their own “negligence.” Yama’s advice to the hell-beings, despite not mitigating any of their suffering, is really the Buddha’s own message to us not to fall into such a subhuman suffering state—not to be negligent, but to be diligent in our spiritual life. [3.2.2.1]

⁷ On Sisyphus, see SD 23.3 (1.1)

1.2.1.2 Although **the hell-wardens** play a role secondary to that of Yama, they are the real keepers of the hells. Their task is to mete out the painful hellish desserts of sufferings upon the fallen beings. We must also imagine the huge population of hell-wardens torturing and managing even more countless millions of hell-beings. Even the size of such a realm is almost beyond our imagination.

1.2.1.3 We are not told what kind of being Yama is. Is he a hell-being himself? Since his realms is the hells, and he counsels all those hell-beings, surely his life would be closely connected with those of the hell-beings. The only difference is, of course, Yama does not seem to suffer in the hells, nor is he there to incur suffering upon others. [3.4]

1.2.1.4 What is more troubling than Yama’s position in hell, is that of the hell-wardens themselves. Bad karma must have brought them rebirth in the hells, but they continue to torture and maim countless numbers of hell-beings, daily and even more by the day, doing daily routine actions of inflicting the most horrible sufferings imaginable.

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 mechanical robots or emotionless androids, as suggested in **the Kathā,vatthu**.⁸

1.2.2 The hell-beings’ karma

1.2.2.1 What about the hell-beings themselves? Are they disembodied? What sort of form do they have to suffer hellish tortures repeatedly and yet not die? They cannot be physical like us with our limits to pain—we would probably die at the very first touch of a hell-weapon or torture. If they are not physical, how do they suffer the pains? Clearly, the hell-beings are a karmic form that keeps them suffering, and yet not die. Perhaps, they do die, but then they return to life to suffer again.⁹

This reminds us, for example, of those suffering of the Titan **Prometheus** for bringing fire from the heavens to the humans in mythical times. He is then caught and punished by being chained 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 every day until he is released by Hercules.

But the story of Prometheus is a powerful Greek myth, which incidentally comes from the same Aryan roots as those of the Indian mythology, to which Buddhist mythology, too, belongs. 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.¹⁰

1.2.3 The teaching’s lesson

My point is that, clearly, 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 death

⁸ Kvu 20.3/598,7: see SD 2.23 (3.4.3.1).

⁹ The TV series, *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*, season 1, episode 13, entitled “Battle Lines” (25 Apr 1993) is about two races—the Ennis and the Non-Ennis—who inhabit a planet in the Gamma quadrant, where they battle and kill one another. Each time, they are restored to life by an extraterrestrial nanotechnology, only to resume their fighting and killing for centuries, doomed to die again and again. Their hope is to live normal lives and dies normal deaths.

¹⁰ On Prometheus, see SD 23.3 (2); SD 36.2 (8).

[2.1.1], and of self-accountability or karmic responsibility [§§7, 12, 17]. This is an example of a teaching whose meaning needs to be drawn out.¹¹

A vital point behind the Yama story of our practice of **the perception of impermanence**¹² and **the perception of suffering**.¹³ 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 are also moved to cultivating compassion towards the sufferings of others.¹⁴

2 The divine messengers

2.1 THE THREEFOLD PRIDE

2.1.1 Both the **(Yama) Deva,dūta Sutta** (A 3.35) and the **(Pañca) Deva,dūta Sutta** (M 130) centre upon the 3 divine messengers, that is, decay (old age), disease and death—the 3 D’s of life, or the 3 great bads of existence. Since the 3 divine messengers form the shortest set of such messengers, it is probably the oldest one. Moreover, this triad is based on an ancient account of the young Bodhisattva’s experience of the 3 bads in his final life.

2.1.2 In the **Sukhumāla Sutta** (A 3.38), the Buddha recounts how a powerful sense of spiritual urgency (*saṃvega*) overcame him as a bodhisattva when he reflected on the true nature of life, that is, the 3 great bads of life—decay, disease and death—and how he would himself be subjected to them. Through this reflection, his pride or intoxication (*mada*) with youth (*yobbana,mada*), with health (*ārogya,mada*) and with life (*jīvita,mada*), respectively, all dissolved away.¹⁵

(1) Bhikshus, amidst such splendour,¹⁶ and because of such an exceedingly delicate life, this thought arose in me:

“An ignorant ordinary person, though by nature would himself age [decay] and being unable to escape ageing [decay], feels distressed, ashamed, disgusted¹⁷ when seeing an old or aged person, being forgetful of himself [of his own situation].

Now I, too, by nature, will age and cannot escape ageing. If, bhikshus, when seeing an old or aged person, I were to feel distressed, ashamed, disgusted, that would not be proper for one like myself.”

When I reflected thus, bhikshus, all my **intoxication with youth** vanished. (A 3.38/1:145 f)¹⁸

Similarly, when he reflected that he would suffer disease, and unable to escape it, “all my **intoxication with health** vanished.” And when he reflected that he would himself die, and being unable to escape it,

¹¹ See **Neyy’attha Nī’tattha S** (A 2.3.5+6), SD 2.6b.

¹² See also **(Anicca) Cakkhu S** (S 25.1), SD 16.7 or any of the 10 suttas of the Okkanta Vagga (S 25).

¹³ See SD 2.23 (3.5).

¹⁴ On the perception of suffering (*dukkha,saññā*), see SD 2.23 (3.5). Cf SD 15.4 (6): The perception of suffering in the impermanent.

¹⁵ A 3.38/1:145 f @ SD 63.7; for an abridged version, see SD 5.16 (19.4.1). See also **Ariya Pariyesanā S** (M 26) @ SD 1.11(3.2).

¹⁶ “Splendour,” *iddhi*, here, in a mundane sense of “success” or “prosperity.”

¹⁷ “Would feel troubled, ashamed, disgusted,” *aṭṭiyeyyaṃ harāyeyyaṃ jeguccheyyaṃ*. For fuller analyses of these terms, see **Kevaḍḍha S** (D 11,5/1:213), SD 1.7 n, sv.

¹⁸ For full text, see A 3.38/1:145 f (SD 63.7). For further discussion, see **Dependent arising**, SD 5.16(19d).

“all my **intoxication with life** vanished” (A 3.38). This is how the 3 intoxications vanished from him, that is, he was disillusioned with youth, health and life even before he awakened as a buddha.

2.1.3 Similar passages reflecting the same sentiment appear in **the Māgandiya Sutta** (M 75)¹⁹ and the Sanskrit text, **the Mahā,vastu**.²⁰ In **the Vinaya**, the same story is also told of the young man Yasa, whose pre-awakening story parallels that of the Buddha himself (V 1:15).²¹

2.1.4 Beyond time

2.1.4.1 The threefold pride is the subject of **the Mada Sutta** (A 3.39), which follows the Sukhumāla Sutta, where the monks, intoxicated with youth, with health and with life, “give up the training and return to the low life,” but these intoxications lead us to be reborn in suffering states.²² Even in this life itself, they distract us from dedicating ourselves to the spiritual life, especially to meditation for the sake of happiness here and now, and awakening in due course.

2.1.4.2 If we are intoxicated with the threefold pride, then we are caught up with the past (our youth), missing what is present before us (disease and dis-ease), and speculating about the future (fear-ing death). But, the past is gone, the future yet to come, and even the present is only a moment that is rapidly passing by, even as we look at it. This is what we should really be observing and reflecting on.

2.1.4.3 In **the Atta,daṇḍa Sutta** of the Sutta Nipāta, the Buddha reminds us:

Let the past wither away.	let what comes later be nothing—	
if you grasp not at anything in between,	you will live [wander about] calmed.	(Sn 949/15.15)

The Dhammapada, too, records the simple yet penetrating wisdom of impermanence in these verses:²³

Let go of the front [future]!	Let go of the back [past]!	
Let go of the middle [the present]!	Cross over to the farther shore [nirvana]!	
With the mind released from everything,	suffer no more birth nor decay.	
		(Dh 348; DhA 24.6/4:62 f)

For whom there is nothing	in front, behind or in the middle,	
who has nothing, ungrasping,	him I call a brahmin.	(Dh 421)

2.2 THE 4 SIGHTS

2.2.1 The 3 great bads—decay, disease, and death—such as recorded in **the Sukhumāla Sutta** (A 3.38) [2.1.1.2]—were at first expressed only as a reflection and feeling of samvega. In due course, a story is told by the redactors or early elders of how the Bodhisattva sees them *personified* or *allegorized* as sights

¹⁹ M 75,10/1:504 (SD 31.5).

²⁰ Mvst 2:115.

²¹ In fact, there is a theory that this account of Yasa’s life was extrapolated into the Buddha’s own early life, for which we know very little. See **The great commission**, SD 11.2 & Piya Tan, *The Buddha and His Disciples*, Singapore, 2013, 1.14-16.

²² A 3.39/1:146 f (SD 42.13).

²³ See **Bhadd’eka,ratta S** (M 131) + SD 8.9 (5).

or signs (*nimitta*), on account of which the Bodhisattva renounces the world. The earliest account of these portents, **the 3 sights**—is given in **the (Yama) Deva,dūta Sutta** (A 3.35) [§§3-18].

While the first 3 sights evoke *samvega* or a sense of spiritual urgency—the meaning of life—in the young Siddhattha, *the fourth and last sight* inspires him with the purpose of life, and hope, evoking bright faith (*pasāda*). In renouncing the world that he is used to, he ventures into the brave new world of renunciation and awakening. It turns him into the fully self-awakened Buddha.

2.2.2 To account for the **renunciation**, a fourth sight or sign—that of a renunciant (*pabbajita*)—is added. In fact, such an account of **the 4 sights** is already found in **the Mahā’padāna Sutta** (D 14), in the story of the past Buddha Vipassī. There, we see reflective passages on the 3 great “bads” or the “3-D’s of life” (decay, disease, death) dramatized as a prelude to the vision of the renunciant. These famous **4 sights** of an old man, a sick man, a dead man and a renunciant [2.2.4], were seen by the bodhisattva prince, Vipassī.²⁴

The renunciant, of course, represents the way to liberation from the 3 great bads. What is true of a past Buddha, the ancient reciters must have thought, must also be true of all the other buddhas, including our own Gotama Buddha,²⁵ especially when there is very little biographical accounts found in the Pali Canon itself, but only in later works and the Commentaries.²⁶ And so the same epic tale is piously told of our own Buddha in popular Buddhism down to this day.²⁷

2.2.3 Interestingly, although in the last of of the 4 sights, we have “a shaven-headed man, a renunciant dressed in saffron robes” (*purisam bhaṇḍum pabbajitam kāsāya,vasanam*), it is not mentioned at all in the 5 sights of **the (Majjhima) Deva,dūta Sutta** (M 130) [2.3.1]. It is possible that the account of the 5 sights arise before the account of the 4 sights (which was late and commentarial, anyway).

Another possible explanation for this omission could be that **the M 130 story** is about worldly people who, having seen such “divine messengers” or manifestation of the universal realities of birth, decay, disease, suffering, and death, still fail to do any good, so that they justly taste the karmic fruits of their own making, personified or allegorized as falling into Yama’s underworld of hellish sufferings.

2.2.4 Clearly, the story of **the 4 portents** (*pubba,nimitta*)—the earliest account of which is given in **the Mahā’padāna Sutta** (D 14) evolved over time or was composed rather late (later than the story of the 3 signs or sights)—an old man or woman (*jiṇṇa*), a sick man or woman (*ābādhika*), the dead (*mata*) and a renunciant (*pabbajita*). It should be noted here that the third portent or sign is not a “person,” but a state or condition, that is, “the dead.”

The fullest accounts of the 4 sights are found in the Nidāna Kathā (intro) of the Jātakas and the Buddha,vaṃsa Commentary (J 1:57; BA 277). However, not all the reciters (*bhāṇaka*) agree on the details of these sights.

The Dīgha reciters, as noted in the commentaries (BA 280; J 1:59), for example, claim that the Bodhisattva sees all 4 signs *on the same day*. In the Dīgha story of Vipassī Buddha, recorded in **the Mahā’padāna Sutta** (D 14), however, the Bodhisattva sees each of the 4 signs *on 4 different days*—according to the Buddha,vaṃsa Commentary, *once every 4 months* (BA 280).

²⁴ D 14,2.1-15/2:21-29 (SD 49.8). Vipassī is the 6th past buddha from our Gotama Buddha: SD 36.2 (3)

²⁵ Also, which says that they were all seen on the same day, and that these “sights” are said to be enacted by the devas, ie, as epiphanies (J 1:58 f; BA 280).

²⁶ But see Vv 81; Buc bk 3 (The arising of samvega). See H Oldenberg, *Buddha: Sein Leben, seine Lehre, seine Gemeinde*, Berlin: W Hertz, 1881:114.

²⁷ On the 4 sights, see Nakamura 2000:95-99; Piya Tan 2004 2.6; Analayo 2006:104 f.

All the other Commentarial accounts generally follow or quote the Mahā'padāna Sutta account.²⁸ The Jātaka Commentary adds that they are visions seen only by the Bodhisattva and his charioteer, Channa, who explains the visions to him (J 1:59). After all, they are no ordinary visions, but "signs" (*ni-mitta*) projected or enacted by the devas, that is, as epiphanies (J 1:58 f; BA 280). In more contemporary terms, we can explain these signs as being psychological experiences or existential insights into true reality. They are so real, all appearing at once, or in close sequence, that they effectively pull the existential rug from under our feet.

Understandably, for someone like the intelligent and insightful young Siddhattha, who has lived such a protected and pleasurable life, such visions are like sharp pins pricking his floating balloons of youth, health and life. Since he has lost his footing in all that is familiar to him, and he has had practically everything any worldly youth would only dream of, he has to find some new meaning and purpose in life.

As he declares in **the Ariya Pariyesanā Sutta** (M 26), that the ignoble quest is one, when we realize that we are ourselves subject to birth, decay, disease, death, sorrow and defilement, we seek for what is similarly subject to these very same conditions. **The noble quest** (*ariya,pariyesana*), on the other hand, starts when, realizing that we are ourselves subject to birth, decay, disease, death, sorrow and defilement, and understanding their danger, we seek what is beyond these vagaries, that is, the security of nirvana. And for that, Siddhattha renounces the world, and awakens to be the Buddha.²⁹

2.3 THE 3 SIGHTS AND THE 5 SIGHTS

2.3.1 The 3 bads and 3 sights

2.3.1.1 Clearly, the Bodhisattva's reflections on the 3 bads, that he (and all of us) are subject to—decay, disease and death—evolved into the 3 sights of an old man, a sick man, and a dead man. An internal psychological insight within the young Siddhattha is externalized into a mythical vision of 3 kinds of people or personalization, graphically representing the 3 universal bads or the 3 D's of life.

This narrative development is clearly advantageous: the 3 sights are a graphic and palpable way of envisioning the samvega of the young Bodhisattva when he reflects on the 3 bads. It is easier for us to relate to such a story than to some dry doctrinal theory. Such a story is also easily appreciated by children and those who have difficulty with more abstract conceptions of spiritual truths.

2.3.1.2 That **the 3 bads and the 3 sights** are the earlier pair of ancient teachings is evinced by the fact that they are both the *smallest* in terms of numbers. Doctrines and accounts with smaller numbers are, as a rule, older than those with larger numbers. Redactors are more likely to add on to shorter lists of teachings and narrative details than to minus from longer lists.

Furthermore, both the 3 bads and the 3 sights are found in ancient discourses, namely, **the Sukhumāla Sutta** (A 3.38) [2.1.2] and **the (Yama) Deva,dūta Sutta** (A 3.35), respectively. Clearly, these two suttas form the urtexts or bases for the evolution of the 5 sights and the 4 sights. However, we seem to have an anomaly here: the account of the 5 sights (a larger number) is probably *older* than that of the 4 sights (a smaller number), as we have noted [2.2.4; 2.4.2].

2.3.2 The 5 sights

Although the account of **the 5 sights** has a larger number than the account of the 4 sights, it is likely that the former that is older. The evidence for this is clear enough: the account of the 5 sights is found in a canonical text, **the (Pañca) Deva,dūta Sutta** (M 130), while the account of the 4 sights is found in the late

²⁸ Eg BA 279 f; J 1:59, 31 f

²⁹ M 26,5-13/1:161-163 @ SD 1.11.

Mahā’padāna Sutta (D 14), in connection with a past Buddha, Vipassī [2.2.2], not in connection with our Buddha. It is only in the commentarial accounts of the 4 sights, we see them attributed to our Buddha himself [2.2.3].

The (Pañca) Deva,dūta Sutta (M 130) has a dramatic account of the 5 divine messengers—a tender infant, an old person, a sick person, a criminal being punished for his crimes, and a dead person—and king Yama, the lord of the dead, admonishes one newly fallen into his realm, thus:

Did it never occur to you, an intelligent and mature person,
that ‘I too am subject to birth ...
subject to decay [old age] ...
subject to disease ...
subject to suffering [punishments] ...
subject to death ...
surely, I had better do good through body, speech and mind’?
(Abridged, M 130,3-8 @ SD 2.23; A 3.36 @ SD 48.10)³⁰

2.3.3 Renunciation

2.3.3.1 The 5 divine messengers presented here are those of *birth, decay, disease, suffering, and death*—the 5 bads. These are the 5 universal realities that all living beings, awakened or not, will experience in this world. Only in renouncing the world will we be truly free from its traps and fetters. In **the renunciation pericope**, we see this remark:

The household life is stifling, a dusty path.³¹ The life of renunciation is like the open air. It is not easy living in a house to practise the holy life fully, in all its purity, like a polished conch-shell.

What if I were to shave off my hair and beard, put on the saffron robes, and go forth from the household life into homelessness?”

Then, after some time, he abandons all his pile of wealth, little or great,³² and circle of relatives, small or large, shaves off his hair and beard, puts on the saffron robes, and goes forth from the household life into homelessness.
(D 2,41/1:62 f), SD 8.10

2.3.3.2 Renunciation is possible and necessary for the laity, too. This is **a spiritual renunciation**, that also underpins the monastic training. Indeed, the whole of the Buddha Dharma is about renunciation: the renouncing of the 3 unwholesome roots, that is, *greed, hate and delusion*,³³ and being diligent in the 3 trainings, that is, *the cultivation of moral virtue, mental stillness and insight wisdom*.³⁴

The key difference between monastic training and lay training is that the former is meant to be a direct path to awakening, especially in arhathood, or at least non-return, in this life itself, while as lay practitioners, we should aspire to attain at least streamwinning, if not once-return, in this life itself.³⁵ The spirit and practice of lay discipleship is clearly given in, for example, **the Sambādh’okāsa Sutta** (A 6.26), where the arhat Mahā Kaccāna declares:

³⁰ See **(Majjhima) Deva,dūta S** (M 130), SD 2.23, esp (2). Cf DhA 1:107, AA 1:36, Makha,deva J (J 9).

³¹ *Sambādhō gharavāso rajā,patho*. There is a wordplay on *sambādhā*, “crowded, stifling, narrow, full of hindrances,” which also refers to the sexual organ, male (V 1:216, 2:134) or female (V 4:259; Sn 609; J 1:61, 4:260). *Rajā,patha*, “a dusty path,” here refers to “the dust of passion,” and to “the path of returning” (*āgamana,patha*), ie rebirth (DA 1:180,17 = MA 2:179,20; UA 237,27).

³² On the accumulation of wealth, cf **Mahā Parinibbāna S** (D 16.1.23-24/2:85 f).

³³ On the 3 unwholesome roots, see **Mūla S** (A 3.69), SD 18.2 & **(Kamma) Nidāna S** (A 3.33), SD 4.14 (1.5).

³⁴ On the 3 trainings, see **Sīla samādhi paññā**, SD 21.6.

³⁵ See **(Anicca) Cakkhu S** (S 25.1), SD 16.7.

It is wonderful, avuso! It is marvellous, avuso!

How the attaining of “the opening” (*okāsa*) in the closed [the confined] (*sambādha*)³⁶ has been discovered by the Blessed One, who knows, who sees, the arhat, the fully self-awakened one,³⁷

for the purification of beings, for overcoming sorrow and lamentation,

for the disappearance of physical and mental pain,³⁸

for gaining the right way,³⁹

for realizing nirvana—that is to say, the 6 bases⁴⁰ of recollection.⁴¹

(A 6.26,2/3:314), SD 15.6

2.3.3.3 The 6 “bases of recollections” (*cha anussati-ṭṭhāna*) are the 6 inspirational meditations, that is, the recollections on each of the 3 jewels, on moral virtue, on charity, and on the devas. The last method is especially significant, as it addresses the needs of those who are drawn to the Buddha Dharma, but are not yet ready to fully let go of their belief or faith in God or gods.⁴² The god recollection is helpful in inspiring joy in such people, upon whose strength they are then propelled on to the Dharma of true self-reliance and self-awakening.

In other words, these recollections are useful as introductory meditations for those who are new to Buddhism or to meditation. However, for the effective practice and full benefits of any meditation, we need the guidance and spiritual friendship of a wise, compassionate and capable meditation teacher. The practice itself remains our own personal efforts, as would be its fruits, too.

2.4 OVERVIEW

2.4.1 The 3 sights and the 5 sights

Here, we will recapitulate the connections between the 3 sights given in **the (Yama) Deva,dūta Sutta** (A 3.35) and the 5 sights of **the (Pañca) Deva,dūta Sutta**. From the table below [Table 2.4.1], it is evident that the 3 sights, being shorter, are an older set. From this ancient triad evolved the set of 5 sights, which opens with the sight of “a young tender infant,” representing birth, and the insertion of “a criminal being punished,” representing the bitter fruit of bad karma, inserted after “the sick man.”

(Yama) Deva,dūta Sutta (A 3.35), SD 48.10

- (1) An old man [§§3-8] ----->
- (2) A sick man [§§9-13] ----->
- (3) A dead man [§§14-18] ----->

(Pañca) Deva,dūta Sutta (M 130), SD 2.23

- (1) A young tender infant [M 130,4]
- (2) An old man [M 130,5]
- (3) A sick man [M 130,6]
- (4) A criminal being punished [M 130,7]
- (5) A dead man [M 130,8]

Table 2.4.1. A comparison of the divine messengers in the two Deva,dūta Suttas

³⁶ *Sambādhe okāsādhigamo* (Skt *sambādhe avakāśe viśeśādhigamā*), “the realization of a distinctive opening in the closed” (2.3.2). Here, *sambādha*, “the closed” or “the confined” refers to the household life. See (2.3.3).

³⁷ *Yāvañ c’idaṃ tena bhagavatā jānatā passatā arahatā sammā,sambuddhena sambādhe okāsādhigamo anubuddho.*

³⁸ *Dukkha,domanassa*, sometimes tr as “pain and sadness.” See Walshe 1996 (D:W 589 n627). For a broader sense of *domanassa*, see §3 n on *abhijjhā,domanassa*.

³⁹ “For gaining the right way,” *ñāyassa adhigamāya*. See Intro (3.3) above.

⁴⁰ *Ṭhāna*, alt tr, “stations.”

⁴¹ *Cha anussati-ṭṭhāna*: see SD 15.6 (1).

⁴² A 6.26/3:314-317 (SD 15.6).

The rationale for the 5 sights is obvious enough. While the basic 3 sights point to the existential realities of life, the 5 sights give a more comprehensive vision of the social realities that we all must face if we are not diligent in doing good, meaning, cultivating moral virtue and mental stillness. Immoral conduct and a defiled mind would surely bring upon us hellish pains and sufferings that are graphically described in the Deva,dūta Suttas and related discourses, such as **the Bāla Paṇḍita Sutta** (M 129) [3.2.2.2].

2.4.2 Summary: An evolutionary table

To sum up our discussions thus far, here is a list of the teachings, texts and stories listed according to what is likely to be their place in the sequence of their development in the early Buddhist tradition, beginning with the earliest:

(1) The 3 bads, the 3 prides and Siddhattha's samvega	Sukhumāla Sutta (A 3.38)	[2.1.2]
(2) The 3 intoxications (<i>mada</i>)	Mada Sutta (A 3.39)	[2.1.4]
(3) The 3 divine messengers (<i>deva,dūta</i>)	(Yama) Deva,dūta Sutta (A 3.35)	[2.3.1]
(4) The 4 sights	Mahā'padāna Sutta (D 14)	[2.2]
(5) The 5 divine messengers	(Majjhima) Deva,dūta Sutta (M 130)	[2.3.2] ⁴³

3 King Yama and related figures

3.1 MYTHOLOGY IN THE SUTTAS

3.1.1 In an important way, every successful living religion has some kind of **mythology**, that is, narratives of cultural and sacred beginnings, especially based on accounts of heroes, villains and actors that in some way reflect teachings and meanings that define a culture or religion. Although based on historical events, the myths or stories that constitute such a mythology are mostly, if not always, in themselves *not* historical, but symbolic or didactic accounts of the beginnings, struggles, successes, values, ways and visions of that culture or religion.

3.1.2 Mythology is a natural way of inculcating society with ancient and universal truths, values and visions, and preserving them for posterity. Although the myths themselves may be entertaining, their real purpose is to present those vital truths, values and visions in a broad and complete way. **Buddhist mythology** preserves stories of Buddhist beginnings, spiritual quests, universal values and visions of awakening. Many such myths are of deep psychological significance that has to be teased out by a skilled teacher or sharp student.

3.1.3 In the absence of proper instruction, especially on a popular level, an audience or individuals might take such myths *literally*, as if they are actual historical events. Then, their value would be severely limited to being mere religious tenets, or even as a means of social control. Such a tendency often degenerates into folk beliefs and superstitions that characterize much of popular and ethnic Buddhism today.

However, when properly understood on a deeper level, the psychological and spiritual significance of myths would enrich our lives and empower our vision of personal development and spiritual awakening. We are then inspired to practise the true teachings so that we will be able to personally and directly see true reality for ourselves, and so attain some level of awakening even here and now.⁴⁴

⁴³ For a similar **chronology** of the development of the teachings on the signs and portents, see SD 50.9 (2.2.34.6).

⁴⁴ See **Entering the stream**, SD 3.3.

3.1.4 A key text on Buddhist mythology is **the Neyy’attha Nīt’attha Sutta** (A 2.3.5+6),⁴⁵ where the Buddha differentiates between teachings that are explicit, whose meaning and purpose *have* been “drawn out” (*nīt’attha*), and those that are implicit, whose meaning and purpose *need* “to be drawn out” (*neyy’attha*). **The explicit teachings** are those using words and ideas that directly express a fact, value or vision, which form the basis for our Dharma practice for the sake of personal development and spiritual awakening.

The implicit teachings employ stories, figures (such as parables and allegories), wordplay and literary devices that are vehicles for deeper and liberating realities and truths. Mythology is a key tool of instruction that employs implicit teachings to convey timeless and liberating teachings.

Myths, as an aspect of mythology, are powerful stories that portrays a greater and deeper reality than ordinary stories or even history as commonly known. They allow us to have a sense of reality of the mythical experiences, or a vision of possible states that often directly relate to us. Culturally, a myth is a universal narrative widely known in a society or civilization, and works to benefit the masses, or at least restrain it from negative actions.⁴⁶

3.2 EVOLUTION OF YAMA IN THE SUTTAS

3.2.1 The “hell” suttas

3.2.1.1 The oldest of the suttas dealing with Yama and the hell states is probably **the (Yama) Deva,-dūta Sutta** (A 3.35). Important clues to its earliness are that it only mentions 3 messengers (decay, disease, and death), and treats the hell states only briefly. These ideas are apparently expanded in **the (Pañca) Deva,dūta Sutta** (M 130), where 5 messengers (birth, decay, disease, pain, and death) are mentioned, and the hell states are described in much greater detail. Both texts give an almost identical description of Yama, the central figure of the suttas.

3.2.1.2 Next in age is **the (Pañca) Deva,dūta Sutta** (M 130), where we see more elaborate and graphic descriptions of the hells, with the Yama account introduced wholesale from the (Yama) Deva,-dūta Sutta, and with identical verses [§27; §§30-33]. Clearly, **M 130** expands on the briefer details given in **A 3.35**.

3.2.1.3 The latest of this triad of “hell” suttas is clearly **the Bāla Paṇḍita Sutta** (M 129), which not only gives the most graphic accounts of the hells, but also highlights the sufferings of bad karma against the pleasures of good karma, represented by the world monarch. The Yama story is omitted here so that our attention is more fully drawn to the blessings of the world monarch as an exemplar of a good and noble person.⁴⁷

3.2.2 Heedfulness

3.2.2.1 The (Pañca) Deva,dūta Sutta is an elaborate statement on the practice of **heedfulness** (*appamāda*).⁴⁸ This is clear from the Sutta theme of the 5 “divine messengers” (*deva,dūta*), employed figura-

⁴⁵ SD 2.6b.

⁴⁶ A 2.3.5+6 (SD 2.6b).

⁴⁷ A summary of this section is at SD 2.23 (4.1).

⁴⁸ Heedfulness essentially entails mindfulness in avoiding bad (being morally virtuous), doing good (cultivating the mind), and purifying the mind (abandoning the mental hindrances) (Dh 183), a training that is rooted in sus-

tively as the personifications of birth [§4], decay [§5], disease [§6], suffering [§7], and death [§8].⁴⁹ Yama, playing the role of an instructor, asks each hell-being or shade who appears before him, “Have you not seen any of these 5 signs?” The beings answer that they have not seen them, but after Yama explains, they reply that they have actually seen the signs, but they have been heedless (*pamāda*), so that they all failed to fully see the true meaning (to avoid bad) and the purpose of life (to do good).

3.2.2.2 Evidently, from the suttas, this is King Yama’s only role, that of an infernal instructor (not even that of a “judge”). We can notice that in the suttas, the descriptions of the hells are very rare, and the most elaborate depictions are found in **the (Pañca) Deva,dūta Suttas** (M 130)⁵⁰ and **the Bāla Paṇḍita Sutta** (M 129).⁵¹

Only a brief description of the hells is given in **the (Yama) Deva,dūta Sutta** (A 3.35). It is, in fact, the shortest of the suttas relating to Yama and the hells. As such, it is probably the oldest of the three suttas. [2.4.2]

3.3 YAMA-RELATED MYTHS

3.3.1 Greek mythology

3.3.1.1 The story of King Yama is a central myth in early Buddhism. He is the Buddhist counterpart of **Hades**, the god of the underworld, the realm of shades. People dislike saying his name, so he is popularly called Pluto (the giver of wealth). He sits on his throne with his consort, Persephone, by his side. He has greater powers than Yama (Hades, for example, allows certain shades to leave hell), but is not a truly moral figure, as he is fierce and inexorable, and an unfaithful husband.

Like the Mahāyāna Bodhisattva **Kṣiti,garbha** (literally, “earth-womb”), he has a staff, with which he drives the shades, like cattle, into the nether world. Kṣiti,garbha, on the other hand, uses his monastic staff (*kakkhara*), an alarum staff, to warn away animals and insects from his path for their own safety.⁵² The *Hymn to Dizang* (地藏讚 *Dizàng zàn*) says, “His golden staff pries open the gates of hell” (金錫敲開地獄門 *jīn xī qiāo kāi dìyù mén*).⁵³ [3.3.2]

3.3.1.2 Greek mythology is a well developed and complicated network of celestial relationships that reflect closely, but more dramatically, the human relationships in the ancient Greek world. Often enough, Greek mythology reflects the immorality and caprice of the gods, and humans are shown to be more moral than they are, but are ultimately mere pawns of the gods of Olympus. Greek mythology strongly hints of predestination.

tained wise attention (*yoniso manasikāra*) and spiritual friendship. See **Kalyāṇa,mitta Appamāda S** (S 3.18), SD 34.3 & **Viveka,nissita**, SD 20.4 (1.4).

⁴⁹ An older set is clear that of the 3 divine messengers, ie, of disease, decay and death. In fact, it is this triad that we find in an older parallel, **(Yama) Deva,dūta S** (A 3.35), SD 48.10.

⁵⁰ M 130/3:178-187 (SD 2.23).

⁵¹ M 129/3:163-178 (SD 2.22).

⁵² On Hades, see *Smith’s Smaller Classical Dictionary*, London, 1937 sv. On Kṣiti,garbha, see *Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism*, Princeton, 2014, sv & *khakkhara*; also Ng Zhiru, *The Making of a Savior Bodhisattva*, Honolulu, 2007; on the *khakkhara*, 3f, 123 f.

⁵³ Xuzangjing vol 65, no 1277: X65n1277.21a21(05); quoted in Ng, op cit 2007:5, but slightly differently worded. Cf X65n1277.21a24(06) (目連讚 *Mùlián zàn*, Hymn to Maudgalyāyana): 金錫振時開地獄 *jīn xī zhèn shí kāi dìyù*, “When he shakes his golden staff, hell opens.”

3.3.1.3 In Buddhist mythology, neither the gods nor the non-humans have any real power over humans. Indeed, they are often the agents of morality, reminding humans of proper conduct,⁵⁴ and proper worship,⁵⁵ and often honour humans who are morally virtuous or spiritually cultivated. In the case of Yama, he reminds us to diligently heed his 3 messengers (decay, disease and death) or 5 messengers (birth, decay, disease, suffering and death).

If Māra tries to distract and delay our efforts towards awakening by enticing us to seek heavenly rebirths, or to remain in this sense-world, Yama works to instruct us to do good so that we suffer no delay, but speedily move on in our journey to awakening. At least, he seems to say, we should not be side-tracked into his hells. Apparently, this makes his huge burden even heavier. [3.4.1]

3.3.2 Chinese Mahāyāna developments

3.3.2.1 Yama is taken more literally as **the “judge” of the dead** in the Chinese Buddhism and east Asia where it has deep religious and cultural influence. In the Chinese Buddhist Sutras, Yama, called Yánmó Wáng (閻摩王) or Yánluó Wáng (閻羅王), interrogates the hell-beings about their deeds, and assigns them to the appropriate form of punishment. In fact, his role was expanded in Chinese Buddhism, where he oversaw an essentially Chinese infernal bureaucracy.

Yama, in Chinese Buddhism, is said to have organized the complex structure of “earth prisons” (地獄 *dìyù*; Skt *naraka*) into a streamlined system of 10 infernal courts, each presided over by its own king (also called Yama) who would judge hell-beings who have come before him. These infernal judges are known as **the “10 kings of hell”** (十王 *shí wáng*), as described in the *Shíwáng jīng* (十王經), an apocryphal Chinese sutra.⁵⁶

3.3.2.2 If Yama (Yánmó Wáng or Yánluó Wáng) is the Chinese infernal judge of hell-beings, then the Chinese Bodhisattva **Kṣiti,garbha** or *Dizàngwáng púsà* (地藏王菩薩) is their liberator. The term 地藏 *dì-zàng*, literally means “earth-womb,” symbolic of the subterranean hells of Chinese mythology. Although Yama is known throughout Buddhist Asia, it is only in east Asia that he is widely worshipped and invoked on his own. His popularity began no earlier than the 5th century, with the translation of the Mahāyāna Mahāsaṃnipāta Sūtra on Kṣiti,garbha and the Ten Wheels (*Dàshèng dàjī dìzàng shí lún jīng*, 大乘大集地藏十輪經).⁵⁷

His best known text is the eponymous *Kṣiti,garbha Sūtra* (*Dìzàng púsà jīng* 地藏菩薩經),⁵⁸ translated at the end of the 7th century. It specifically relates the Bodhisattva’s vow to liberate all beings in the 6 realms (devas, humans, asuras, pretas, animals, and hell-beings) before he would attain Buddhahood himself. It also relates his well known past-life story as a young woman whose filial piety after the death of her heretical mother, saved her from falling into the lowest of the hells, Avīci.⁵⁹

3.3.2.3 *Kṣiti,garbha* was introduced into **Japan** as Jizō during the Heian period (794-1185). There, he took on a new significance, becoming very popular as the protector of children, patron of travellers, and

⁵⁴ As eg in the case of Sakra and his 7 vows, in **Vata,pada S** (S 11.11/1:228), SD 54.12; abridged at SD 15.13(4).

⁵⁵ As eg Brahma, instructing a devotee of his to offer alms to an arhat, in **Brahma,deva S** (S 6.3/1:140-142), SD 12.4.

⁵⁶ See Stephen F Teiser, *The Scripture of the Ten Kings of Hell*, Kuroda Institute, Honolulu: Univ of Hawaii Press, 1994.

⁵⁷ The first is called *Dàfāngguǎng shílún jīng*, 大方廣十輪經 (“The Fabulously Great Tenfold Wheels Sutra,” T410), by an unknown translator and listed in the *Běilíng lù*, 北涼錄 “The Records of Northern Liang,” 397-439), and then again by Xuánzàng 玄奘 in 651-652 (T411.13.722-776). See Ng, *The Making of a Savior Bodhisattva*, 2007:29-36.

⁵⁸ T85.2909.1455.

⁵⁹ See *Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism*, 2014: *Kṣitigarbha & Kṣitigarbha Sūtra*.

guardian of the community thresholds. As in China, in Japan, too, he is typically depicted as a monk, holding a monastic staff in his left hand and a chaplet or rosary in his right—the only Bodhisattva to be depicted so [3.3.1.1].

In later times, he was looked upon by fishermen as their protector. In modern Japan, he continues to be regarded as the special protector of children, including the stillborn and aborted.

Tibetan iconography represents Kṣiti,garbha as being seated on a lotus, holding a wish-fulfilling gem (*cintā,maṇi*) in his right hand, and his left in the gesture of giving a blessing (*varada,mudrā*).⁶⁰

3.3.3 Later developments

The Theravāda counterpart of Kṣiti,garbha in southeast Asia, especially in Thailand, is Māleyya Thera, locally called “**Phra Malai**.”⁶¹ He is a folk arhat, one of the most beloved figures in Thai Buddhism and literature. According to legend, he lived on an island off Sri Lanka, and was known for his compassion and psychic powers.

Among his special powers was his ability to fly or transport himself to any realm of the Buddhist universe. On his visit to the hells, he alleviated the sufferings of the beings there. Then, he returned to the human realm to advise their relatives to make merit on their behalf. Here, in popular Buddhism, we see more latitude towards karma, even diluting its natural and self-acting nature, taking it as something negotiable, even measurable, as in popular Buddhism.

Phra Malai was also said to have visited Tāvātimsa heaven (of the 33 gods), where Bodhisattva Metteyya, the future Buddha, visited him. Metteyya, the story goes, advised him to tell those who wish to meet him to bring along the appropriate offerings to the monastics and listen to the recitation of the Vessantara Jātaka (J 547) within a single day and night.⁶² This is clearly a story to legitimize and popularize a more ritualized form of ethnic Buddhism.

3.4 SIGNIFICANCE OF YAMA

3.4.1 Since **karma** functions as a natural law, with suffering arising from immoral and unwholesome actions, and happiness from virtuous and wholesome actions, the conditional process of moral causes and effects should proceed without any need of a judge to mete out rewards and punishments. However, in the Buddhist texts, especially in east Asian Buddhism, Yama is presented as the judge of the dead, who appear as hell-beings or shades before him.

It should be noted throughout the Pali suttas that Yama is never seen as actually judging the hell-beings. He merely interrogates them in an instructive way. In fact, the didactic purpose of the Yama myth is obvious. Yama acts as *an instructor to the living* (that is, we, the practitioners, listeners, and readers), warning us on the dangers of karmic retributions for bad deeds.

3.4.2 Another related mythical figure is **Māra**, the bad one (*pāpimā*), the Buddhist personification of death (*maccu,māra*), who holds sway over all of the sense-world and its sentient beings. He is also the tempter and distractor who works to ensure that we remain in the sense-world, under the sway (*ādhipateyya*) of our senses (the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind). Indeed, Māra *owns* all our senses and related functions, as pointed out, for example, in **the Kassaka Sutta** (S 4.19).⁶³

⁶⁰ See *How Buddhism Became Chinese*, SD 40b (1.3.3).

⁶¹ On Māleyya Thera, see B P Brereton, *Thai Tellings of Phra Malai*, Arizona, 1995.

⁶² See *Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism*, Princeton, 2014: Phra Malai.

⁶³ S 4.19/1:114-116 @ SD 43.9.

More exactly, Māra is the lord of all that is external to us. That is, when we are *drawn* to the pleasures of the sense-objects, including thoughts, or even when we *dislike* their unpleasant aspects. As long as we allow these external sense-objects to rule our lives, we are effectively under Māra's sway. Māra incessantly works to distract us, especially by arousing terror, fear and dismay in us, so that we hesitate to do good or give up our spiritual efforts.⁶⁴ Māra force-feeds us when we are caught up with sensual pleasures and negative emotions.

Understandably, then, Māra loses his grip upon us when we are mindful, especially when we *know* that he is behind it. Many such occasions are recorded in the accounts of, for example, **the Māra Saṃyutta** (S 4/1:103-127). And when we are in the bliss of meditation, especially in dhyana, Māra is completely *blinded* from us. Once we walk on the noble path, even as a streamwinner, Māra may still try us, but he has no real power over us any more.

3.4.3 If **Māra** is the archetypal distractor who tries to keep us back from all that is good and liberating, then **Yama** is our archetypal instructor in all that is good, so that we at least remain as wholesome humans, not falling into his realms (the subhuman planes as a whole). In a sense, the Buddhist hells and subhuman planes are like cosmic hospitals or asylums, under the charge of Yama. When we are unhealthy and sick, we need to be hospitalized or incarcerated, so as to purge our ill health (bad karma), as it were.

The purging, however, often takes an inordinately long time because there is almost no way we can perform any good deed, or even think wholesomely, in the subhuman planes. Yama's presence, in fact, gives us a glimmer of hope that we could have avoided his realms. The myths, then, are reminders for us, the living, that we should heed his 5 messengers—birth, decay, disease, suffering, and death—that are ever present in our world.

We should then avoid all bad, that is, we should train ourselves in the moral virtue of body and speech; do good by practising the 10 wholesome courses of actions; and purify the mind, so that it is blissfully calm and clear, and becomes a vehicle for awakening (Dh 183). Even Yama himself sets a **personal example**, by aspiring to meet the future Buddha to listen to the Dharma for himself so that he will awaken to nirvana. [§§28-29]

— — —

(Yama) Deva,dūta Sutta

The (Yama) Discourse on the Divine Messengers

A 3.35

The fruits of bad karma

- 1 Bhikshus, there are these **3 divine messengers**.⁶⁵ What are they?

⁶⁴ Such as loosing the 9 storms upon the meditation Bodhisattva (J 1:72 f).

⁶⁵ Comy: This is the meaning of the words here. In the phrase, "divine messenger" (*deva,dta*), "divine" (*deva*) means death, and the god is its messenger. As such, it is as if the divine messengers are telling, "Here, you were in the presence of death," for decay, disease and death have the effect of generating samvega [spiritual urgency]. The messengers are like the gods, so they are divine messengers. (*Ayam pan'ettha vacan'attho – devo'ti maccu, tassa dūtāti deva,dūtā. Jiṇṇa,vyādhi,matā hi samvega,janan'aṭṭhena "idāni te maccu,samīpaṃ gantabban'ti codenti viya, tasmā deva,dūtāti vuccanti. Devā viya dūtāti'pi deva,dūtā*, AA 2:226). See (2).

Here, bhikshus, someone
 conducts himself badly through the body,
 conducts himself badly through speech,
 conducts himself badly through the mind.

2 He, having conducted himself *badly through the body, through speech, through the mind*, with the body's breaking up, after death, is reborn in a plane of misery, a bad destination, a lower realm, **in hell**.⁶⁶

The 1st divine messenger⁶⁷

3 Now, bhikshus, **the hell-wardens** seize such a being by both arms⁶⁸ and present him to **king Yama**,⁶⁹ saying,

'Sire, this man has ill treated his mother, ill treated his father, ill treated recluses, ill treated brahmins. He has no respect for the elders of his clan. Let the king order his punishment!'⁷⁰

4 ⁷¹Then, bhikshus, **king Yama** questions, interrogates, cross-questions him about **the first divine messenger**:⁷²

'My good man, did you not see the first divine messenger appear amongst humans?'
 He says, 'I did not, bhante.'

5 Then, bhikshus, king Yama says this to him:

'My good man, have you never seen amongst humans **an old man or old woman**,
 80, 90 or 100 years old,
 crooked as a rafter, bent double,
 leaning on a stick,
 trembling as he goes,
 wretched, youth long gone,
 with broken teeth,
 with grey hair, with scanty hair or bald-headed,
 with blotches all over the body?'⁷³

He says, 'Yes, I have seen, bhante.'

⁶⁶ Notice that here "hell" is mentioned last. Apparently, the preceding states may refer to other subhuman realms. In fact, comy on Sn 231 (*catuhi apāyehi*, "the 4 states of deprivation") glosses it as *cattāro apāyā nāma niraya, tiracchāna, petti. visaya, asura. kāyā*, "the 4 states of misery [deprivation] are hell, the animal-birth, the ghost realm, the demon world" (KhpA 189). See SD 2.22 (1.7).

⁶⁷ This account of the 1st divine messenger recurs, in almost identical words, as the 2nd messenger, in (**Majjhima Deva, dūta S** (M 130,5), where the 1st messenger is that of a "young tender infant" (M 130,4), SD 2.23. See (2.3.2).

⁶⁸ "By both arms," *nānā, bhāsu*, lit "by various arms," ie on different sides, left and right.

⁶⁹ On **king Yama** (*yama, rāja*), see (1.1.1.1).

⁷⁰ *Ayaṃ deva puriso amatteyyo apetteyyo asāmañño abrahmañño, na kule jeṭṭhāpacāyī. Imassa devo daṇḍaṃ paṇetūti*. It is interesting that despite this statement, Yama has never been recorded, in early Buddhist mythology, to have ever issued any such order. He is merely a witness (acting on our behalf, as it were) at the painful fruits of our own actions when we could have averted while we yet live.

⁷¹ On the 1st divine messenger, see header n here.

⁷² *Taṃ enaṃ bhikkhave yamo rājā paṭhamāṃ deva, dūtaṃ samanuyuñjati samanugāhati samanubhāsati*.

⁷³ *Ambho purisa na tvaṃ addasa manussesu itthiṃ vā purisaṃ vā āsītikaṃ vā nāvutikaṃ vā vassasatikaṃ vā jātiyā jinṇaṃ gopāna, sivaṅkaṃ bhoggaṃ daṇḍa, parāyaṇaṃ pavedhamānaṃ gacchantaṃ āturaṃ gata, yobbanāṃ khaṇḍa, dantaṃ palita, kesāṃ vilūnaṃ khallita, sirāṃ, valitaṃ tilakā, hata, gattan'ti?*

1st SELF-REFLECTION: ON DECAY

6 Then, bhikshus, king Yama says this to him:

‘My good man, did it never occur to you—an intelligent and mature man—

“**I, too, am subject to decay [old age].** I am not free from decay.

Surely I had better do good through body, speech and mind”?’ [139]

He says, ‘I was unable to, bhante, I was negligent.’

SELF-ACCOUNTABILITY REFRAIN

7 Then, bhikshus, king Yama says this to him:

‘My good man, through negligence you have failed to do good through body, speech and mind.

This, my good man, will surely work on you according to that negligence.⁷⁴

8 This **bad deed** was

not done by your mother, nor by your father,

nor by your brother, nor by your sister,

nor by your friends and companions,

nor by your kinsmen and relatives,

nor by recluses and brahmins,

nor by the gods—

this bad deed was done by you yourself, and *you yourself* will feel its result.’

The 2nd divine messenger⁷⁵

9 Then, *after questioning, interrogating, cross-questioning him about the first divine messenger*, king Yama questions, interrogates, cross-questions him about **the second divine messenger**:

‘My good man, did you not see the second divine messenger appear amongst humans?’

He says, ‘I did not, bhante.’

10 Then, bhikshus, king Yama says this to him:

‘My good man, have you never seen amongst humans **a sick man or sick woman**,

afflicted, suffering and gravely ill,

lying fouled in their own excrement and urine,

lifted up by some and set down by others?’⁷⁶

He says, ‘Yes, I have seen, bhante.’

2ND SELF-REFLECTION: ON DISEASE

11 Then, bhikshus, king Yama says this to him,

‘My good man, did it never occur to you—an intelligent and mature man—

“**I, too, am subject to disease.** I am not free from disease.

Surely I had better do good through body, speech and mind”?’

He says, ‘I was unable to, bhante, I was negligent.’

⁷⁴ *Taggha tvaṃ ambho purisa tathā karissanti, yathā taṃ pamattaṃ.*

⁷⁵ This account of the 2nd divine messenger recurs, in almost identical words, as the 3rd messenger, in (**Majjhima**) **Deva,dūta S** (M 130,6), SD 2.23. See (2.3.1).

⁷⁶ *Ambho purisa, na tvaṃ addasa manussesu itthiṃ vā purisaṃ vā ābādhikaṃ dukkhiṭaṃ bālha,gilānaṃ, sake mutta,karīse palipannaṃ semānaṃ* [V 1:301,34 *sayamānaṃ*], *aññehi vuṭṭhāpiyamānaṃ, aññehi sarivsiyamānaṃ*’*ti*? For a similar description of a monk, sick with dysentery, see V 1:301,33-34.

SELF-ACCOUNTABILITY REFRAIN

12 Then, bhikshus, king Yama says,

*‘My good man, through negligence you have failed to do good through body, speech and mind.
This, my good man, will surely work on you according to that negligence.*

13 This **bad deed** was

*not done by your mother, nor by your father,
nor by your brother, nor by your sister,
nor by your friends and companions,
nor by your kinsmen and relatives,
nor by recluses and brahmins,
nor by the gods—*

this bad deed was done by you yourself, and you yourself will feel its result.’

The 3rd divine messenger

14 ⁷⁷Then, after questioning, interrogating, cross-questioning him about *the second divine messenger*, king Yama *questions, interrogates, cross-questions him about the third divine messenger:*

‘My good man, did you not see the third divine messenger appear amongst humans?’

He says, ‘I did not, bhante.’

15 Then, bhikshus, king Yama says this to him:

*‘My good man, have you never seen amongst humans **a dead man or dead woman**,
dead for a day, dead for two days, dead for three days,
bloated up, livid, and oozing with impurities?’⁷⁸*

He says, ‘Yes, I have seen, bhante.’

3RD SELF-REFLECTION: ON DEATH

16 Then, bhikshus, king Yama says this to him,

‘My good man, did it never occur to you—an intelligent and mature man—

“I too am subject to death.

I am not free from death.

Surely I had better do good through body, speech and mind”?’

He says, ‘I was unable to, bhante, I was negligent.’⁷⁹

SELF-ACCOUNTABILITY REFRAIN

17 Then, bhikshus, king Yama says this to him:

*‘My good man, through negligence you have failed to do good through body, speech and mind.
This, my good man, will surely work on you according to that negligence..*

18 This **bad deed** was

*not done by your mother, nor by your father,
nor by your brother, nor by your sister,*

⁷⁷ This account of the 3rd divine messenger recurs, in almost identical words, as the 5th messenger, in (**Majjhima**) **Deva,dūta S** (M 130,8), which has a 4th messenger as that of a criminal being punished (M 130,7), SD 2.23. See (2.3.1).

⁷⁸ *Ambho purisa, na tvaṃ addasa manussesu itthiṃ vā purisaṃ vā ekāhamataṃ vā dvīha,mataṃ vā tīha,mataṃ vā uddhu,mātakam vinīlakam vipubbaka,jātan’ti?*

⁷⁹ *Nāham sakkhissam bhante pamādessam bhante’ti.*

*nor by your friends and companions,
nor by your kinsmen and relatives,
nor by recluses and brahmins,
nor by the gods—*

this bad deed was done by you yourself, and you yourself will feel its result.'

King Yama's silence

19 Then, *after questioning, interrogating, cross-questioning him about the third divine messenger, king Yama falls silent.*⁸⁰ [141]

20 Now, the hell-wardens [M 130/3:183] torture him with the fivefold pinion.⁸¹

They drive a red-hot iron rod through	one hand and
then another red-hot iron rod through	the other hand.
They drive (another) red-hot iron rod through	one foot and
then another red-hot iron rod through	the other foot.
They drive (another) red-hot iron rod through	his belly.

THE BAD KARMA REFRAIN

21 There, he suffers sharp, piercing, racking pains.⁸²

Yet, he does not die, so long as the result of that bad deed [bad karma] is not exhausted.⁸³

22 Next, the hell-wardens throw him down and pare him with axes.⁸⁴

THE BAD KARMA REFRAIN

There he suffers sharp, piercing, racking pains.

Yet, he does not die, so long as the result of that bad deed is not exhausted.

23 Next, the hell-wardens set him upside down and pare him with adzes.⁸⁵

THE BAD KARMA REFRAIN

There he suffers sharp, piercing, racking pains.

Yet, he does not die, so long as the result of that bad deed is not exhausted.

24 Next, the hell-wardens harness him to a chariot and drive him back and forth across fiery, blazing, glowing ground.⁸⁶

⁸⁰ On the significance of Yama's silence, see **Silence and the Buddha**, SD 44.1 (1.2.1).

⁸¹ The following description of hell (§10-16) is found in **Bāla,paṇḍita S** (M 129.10-16) & A 1:141 f; also mentioned at J 1:174.

⁸² *So tattha dukkhā tibbā* kharā* kaṭukā vedanā vedeti.* Ce M 130/3:183,5 *tippā*; Ee Se *tibbā*. *Kharā* appears in Be Ee Se buy Ce omits it.

⁸³ *Na ca tāva kālaṃ karoti yāva na taṃ pāpaṃ kammaṃ vyanti,hoti.* "Yet, he does not die": This refrain suggests that the hellish sufferings are *not* physical but mental in nature. The suffering recurs in a cyclic manner, as a mental torture. In other words, the suffering is *real*—just as we would imagine the worst pains that we can suffer. This is karmic suffering.

⁸⁴ *Tam enaṃ bhikkhave niraya,pālā saṃvesetvā* [Be:Ka *saṃkaḍḍhitvā*] *kuṭhārīhi* [M 3:184,7 so; Be *kuṭhārīhi*] *tacchanti.*

⁸⁵ *Tam enaṃ bhikkhave niraya,pālā uddhaṃ,pādaṃ adho,siraṃ gahetvā vāsīhi tacchanti.*

THE BAD KARMA REFRAIN

There he suffers sharp, piercing, racking pains.

Yet, he does not die, so long as the result of that bad deed is not exhausted.

25 Next, the hell-wardens make him climb up and down a great mound of fiery, blazing, glowing coals.⁸⁷

THE BAD KARMA REFRAIN

There he suffers sharp, piercing, racking pains.

Yet, he does not die, so long as the result of that bad deed is not exhausted.

26 Next, the hell-wardens seize him and plunge him head first into a fiery, blazing, glowing metal cauldron.⁸⁸

He is cooked therein in a swirl of froth.⁸⁹

And while he is there in a swirl of froth,

he is swept now up, now down, now across.⁹⁰

THE BAD KARMA REFRAIN

There he suffers sharp, piercing, racking pains.

Yet, he does not die, so long as the result of that bad deed is not exhausted.

THE GREAT HELL

The great hell⁹¹

27 Next, the hell-wardens throw him down into **the great hell** (*mahā niraya*). Now as regards that great hell, bhikkhus:⁹²

*Catu-k,kaṇṇo catu,dvāro
vibhatto bhāgasō mito
ayo,pākāra,pariyanto
ayasā paṭikujjito.*

It has four corners and four doors,
one on each side, equally proportioned,
walled up all around with iron
and shut in with an iron roof. **[142]**

*Tassa ayom,ayā bhūmi
jalitā tejasā yutā*

Its floor is made of iron,
glowing through burning heat,

⁸⁶ *Tam enaṃ bhikkhave niraya,pālā rathe yojetvā ādittāya bhūmiyā sampajjalitāya sajoti,bhūtāya* [Ke Se sañjoti,-bhūtāya] sārenti'pi paccā,sārenti'pi.

⁸⁷ *Tam enaṃ bhikkhave niraya,pālā mahantaṃ aṅgāra,pabbataṃ ādittaṃ sampajjalitaṃ sajoti,bhūtaṃ āropenti'pi oropenti'pi.*

⁸⁸ *Tam enaṃ bhikkhave niraya,pālā uddhaṃ,pādaṃ adho,siraṃ gahetvā tattāya loha,kumbhiyā pakkhipanti, ādittāya sampajjalitāya sajoti,bhūtāya.*

⁸⁹ *So tattha phen'uddehakaṃ paccamāno sakimpi uddhaṃ gacchati, sakim'pi adho gacchati, sakim'pi tiriyaṃ gacchati.*

⁹⁰ *So tattha dukkhā tibbā kharā kaṭukā vedanā vediyati, na ca tāva kālaṃ karoti yāva na taṃ pāpakammaṃ vyantīhoti* [Be Ce Ee byantīhoti].

⁹¹ See SD 2.23 (3): Are the hells real places?

⁹² These 2 verses recur in **(Majjhima) Deva,dūta S** (M 130,16), SD 2.23; also at **Goṇa Pv** (Pv 8/70 f), **Dhana,pāla Pv** (Pv 19/240 f), **Nandaka Pv** (Pv 38/692 f), given in 3 neut (-aṃ), except for *bhāgasō*.

samantā yojana,sataṃ spreading all around a hundred leagues,
pharivā tiṭṭhati sabbadā'ti staying there all the time.⁹³

Yama's aspiration⁹⁴

28 It occurred in the past, bhikshus, that king Yama thought:⁹⁵

'It's said that, sir, those amongst humans who do bad unwholesome deeds indeed have all these diverse kinds of tortures inflicted on them.'⁹⁶

29 Oh, that I might attain the human state,

that a Tathāgata [Thus Come], worthy and fully self-awakened, might appear amongst humans,
 that I may wait on that Blessed One,

that the Blessed One might teach me the Dharma,

and that I may come to understand that Blessed One's Dharma!

30 Bhikshus, I tell you this not as something I've heard from another recluse or brahmin.

I tell you this as something that I've actually known for myself, seen for myself, discovered for myself."⁹⁷

Concluding verses⁹⁸

30 *Coditā deva,dūtehi*
ye pamajjanti māṇavā
te dīgha,rattam socanti
hīna,kāyūpagā narā

Though warned by the divine messengers,
 human beings are still negligent—
 long do they grieve
 as men fallen into lowly crowds [inferior worlds].

31 *Ye ca kho deva,dūtehi*
santo sappurisā idha
coditā na-p,pamajjanti
ariya,dhamme kudācanam

When warned by the divine messengers,
 the good people at peace here,
 are not heedless, but
 practise well the noble Dharma.

32 *Upādāne bhayaṃ disvā*
jāti,marañā,sambhave
anupādā vimuccanti
jāti,marañā,saṅkhaye.

Seeing danger in clinging,
 for the birth and death it brings,
 by not clinging, they are freed
 through the end of birth and death.

⁹³ (**Majjhima**) **Deva,dūta S** (M 130) hereafter give a description of the hells (M 130/3:183,29-186,22), SD 2.23.

⁹⁴ This whole closing section, as in (**Majjhima**) **Deva,dūta S** (M 130/3:186,23-187,10), SD 2.23.

⁹⁵ *Bhūta,pubbam bhikkhave yamassa rañño etad ahoṣi*. At this point, the sutta narrative turns from a mythical or symbolical language to a psychological one. Such passages clearly hint at the symbolic or instructive nature of such suttas as this. See **Myth in Buddhism**, SD 36.1 & **Mahā Sudassana S** (D 17) & SD 36.12.

⁹⁶ *Ye kira bho loke pāpakāni kammāni karonti te eva,rūpā vividhā kamma,kāraṇā kariyanti*.

⁹⁷ *Api ca kho bhikkhave yad eva me sāmam ñātam sāmam diṭṭham sāmam viditam tadevāham vadāmīti*. On the meaning of the Buddha's statement, see SD 2.23 (4.5).

⁹⁸ Here (introducing these closing verses), (**Majjhima**) **Deva,dūta S** (M 130) adds: *Idam avoca bhagavā. Idam va-tvā sugato athāparam etad avoca satthā*, "The Blessed One said this. Having said this, the Sugata [Well-farer], the Teacher, added." These verses recur in (**Majjhima**) **Deva,dūta S** (M 130,31-34/3:187), SD 2.23; the last two verses recur in (**Kāma**) **Bhaya S** (A 6.23/3:311).

33 *Te khema-p,pattā⁹⁹ sukhitā¹⁰⁰
 diṭṭha,dhammâbhinibbutā
 sabba,vera,bhay'ātītā
 sabba,dukkhaṃ upaccagun'ti*

Happy are they who have attained the secure [nirvana],
 perfectly cooled here and now,
 beyond all hate and fear,
 having overcome all pain.

— evaṃ —

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⁹⁹ Ke Ee Se M 3:187,9 *te khema-p,pattā* (preferred); Be *te appamattā*; Ce *te kho-p,pamattā*.

¹⁰⁰ Be Ee *sukhino*; Ce Se *sukhitā*. The best reading is *te khema-p,pattā sukhitā*.