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(Pañcaka) Gati Sutta

The (Fives) Discourse on the Destinies | A 9.68
or, (Pañca) Gati Sutta The Discourse on the (Five) Destinies

Theme: The 5 realms of sentient existence

Translated by Piya Tan ©2003; rev 2010

1 The 5 realms

The (Pañca) Gati Sutta is the locus classicus for the canonical teaching of the 5 destinies (*pañca,gati*), that is, the popular view of 5 realms—those of the devas, humans, animals, pretas and hell-beings. This teaching is also accepted in Sanskrit works, such as Vasubandhu’s **Abhidharma,kośa**, which represents the Sarvāstī,vādin viewpoint, in keeping with the canonical view. The Divyāvadāna, too, says that it is the 5 destinies are incorporated into the “wheel of life” (Skt *bhava,cakra*) or more technically, the “five-sectored wheel” (Skt *pañca,gaṇḍaka cakra*).¹

The Great Commentary, however, notes, “The members of other schools [other than the Hīnayāna] added the *asura* to make 6 destinations of rebirth. This should not be done, for the sūtras teach only five destinations.” (T1545.868b)²

The 5 realms are explained in some detail in the following discourses: **the Mahā Sīha,nāda Sutta** (M 12)³ and **the Deva,dūta Sutta** (M 130).⁴ In the Mahā Sīha,nāda Sutta (M 12), the Buddha explains how he is able to know a being’s mental state through his power of mind-reading,⁵ and to know his destiny, through his divine eye. Interestingly, these realms are not described as distinct realms, but in parables. Most importantly, the Buddha also describes the way out of these realms.⁶

2 The 6 realms and 4 states of loss

2.1 THE 6 REALMS

2.1.1 The 6-realm model—with the addition of **the asuras**—had already become popular by the time Buddhism spread to China and East Asia. This new model was, in time, associated with the rise of the six-syllable mantra (*Om maṇi padme hūm*) of the Avalokiteśvara cult. It is also possible that the 6-realm model arose on account of this Mahāyāna development, where it was used as a framework for the cultivation of lovingkindness.⁷

The Commentary on the Great Perfection of Wisdom Sūtra (in Chinese translation), for example, says that the 6 realms are divided into 3 good and 3 bad, and further into superior, ordinary and inferior,

¹ Divy (ed Vaidya): Sahasōdgatāvadāna (ch 21): 185.25-26, 186.5, 18, 187.24; cf Rudrāyaṇāvadāna (ch 37): *sam-sāra,sakra* 468.31, 480.17; also 112.6, 174.20.

² T27.1545.868b.2-3 謂有餘部立阿素洛為第六趣。彼不應作是說。契經唯說有五趣故。(From 阿毘達磨大毘婆沙論卷第一百七十二, T27.1545.864b18). Akira Sadakata, *Buddhist Cosmology: Philosophy and origins*, tr Gaynor Sekimoru, Tokyo: Kosei, 1997:70, 197.

³ M 12.37-42/1:74-77 = SD 49.1.

⁴ M 130.2/3:178 f = SD 2.23.

⁵ On “mind-reading,” and the foll, “divine eye,” see **Miracles** = SD 27.5a (5), powers (3) & (5).

⁶ M 12.37-42/1:74-77 = SD 2.24 (excerpts), SD 49.1 (full sutta). See also SD 57.10 (6.1

⁷ See Alexander Studholme, *The Origins of Om Maṇipadme Hūm: A study of the Kāraṇḍavyūhas Sūtra*, Albany, NY: State Univ of New York Press, 2002.

thus:⁸

(1) devas	<i>deva</i>	superior	}	good (happy) destinies (<i>sugati</i>)
(2) humans	<i>manussa</i>	ordinary		
(3) asuras	<i>asura</i>	inferior	}	bad (suffering) destinies (<i>duggati</i>)
(4) animals	<i>tiracchāna</i>	superior		
(5) pretas	<i>peta</i>	ordinary		
(6) hell-beings	<i>nerayika</i>	inferior		

Diagram 2.1. The 6 realms (according to the Mahāyāna)



Fig 1. The 5 realms

<http://www.chezpaul.org.uk/buddhism/books/wheel/circle3.h...>

This is a philosophical systematization not attested in the early canon, where rebirth as a human is generally understood to be the best destiny in terms of spiritual cultivation.⁹

2.1.2 The later writers were clearly aware of this. The Commentary on the Great Perfection of Wisdom Sūtra (attributed to Nāgārjuna, c150-c250 CE),¹⁰ for example, says, “The Buddha did not state clearly that there are 5 destinations of rebirth. The idea of the 5 destinations is the theory of the Sarvāstivādins, whereas that of the six belongs to the Vāṣṭīputriyas.”¹¹ Here we can see that Nāgārjuna or the Commentary author is unaware of the (Pañca) Gati Sutta.

2.1.3 A painting of the 6-realm wheel is found in a cave in Ajañṭā, which probably go back to the 6th century. One of the earliest pictures of this model was said to have been brought to Tibet by a monk

named Bande Yeshe in the 8th century.¹²

For a further detailed study on “**Do the gods really exist?**” see SD 10.9 (8) especially section 8.3.

2.2 THE 4 STATES OF LOSS (*apāya*). The 4 states of loss (*cat’upāya*)¹³ are the subhuman world comprising the asura host (*asura, kāya*), the animal birth (*tiracchāna, yoni*), the preta realm (*peta, visaya*) and the hell-beings (*nerayika*). On account of the constant suffering and various negative emotions predominating such states, they are also called “suffering state(s)” (*duggati*), as opposed to the “happy states”

⁸ 大智度論 T25.1509.

⁹ “Difficult to gain is the human birth” (Dh 182). On the difficulty to attain human birth from the subhuman planes, see **Bāla Paṇḍita S** (M 129,24/3:169), SD 2.22. See also **The body in Buddhism**, SD 29.6a (4.1) & **Myth in Buddhism**, SD 36.1 (1.3.3).

¹⁰ Tr Kumārajīva (T25.1509.135c).

¹¹ Tr Akira Sadakata 1997:70.

¹² Ency Bsm 3:12: Bhavacakra. On an everyday psychological interpretation, see eg **Myth in Buddhism**, SD 36.1 (1.3.3) Momentary beings.

¹³ The term *apāya* is very common throughout the suttas (see CSCD: *apay**). The term *cat’upāya* is commentarial, found only, eg, in *Abhidhamm’āvatāra Nāma, rūpa, paricchedo, pariccheda* 1 verse 15 (Be 2; PTS 3).

(*sugati*), that is, the human world and the deva world. However, *sugati*, when used by itself usually refers to the deva or heavenly world as a whole.¹⁴

These “states of loss” (*apāya*) are so called because, on account of the predominance of suffering and other negative emotions there, it is impossible to learn, much less practise, the Dharma. Moreover, the lifespan in such states is indefinite, depending on our karma. Dying from such a state is likely to keep us in the loop of suffering states. Hence, it is very difficult to be free from such a state once we have fallen into it. It is thus even more difficult, indeed impossible, to attain the spiritual path from there.

(1) devas	<i>deva</i>	}	[good (happy) destinies (<i>sugati</i>)
(2) humans	<i>manussa</i>		
(3) asuras	<i>asura,kāya</i>	}	bad (suffering) destinies (<i>duggati</i>) or states of loss (<i>apāya</i>)
(4) animals	<i>tiracchāna,yoni</i>		
(5) pretas	<i>peta,visaya</i>		
(6) hell-beings	<i>nerayika</i>		

Diagram 2.2. The 6 realms & 4 states of loss¹⁵

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The (Fives) Discourse on the Destinies

A 9.68

1 Bhikshus, there are these **5 destinies** (of existence). What are the five?

- | | |
|---|---------------------------|
| (1) The suffering states [hells], | <i>niraya</i> |
| (2) the animal womb, | <i>tiracchāna,yoni</i> |
| (3) the pretas [the realm of the departed], | <i>petti,visaya</i> |
| (4) humans, and | <i>manussa</i> |
| (5) the gods. | <i>deva</i> ¹⁶ |

These, bhikshus, are the 5 destinies.

¹⁴ The 4 states of loss, ruin or suffering (*vinīpāta*) is another for the 4 woeful courses (*duggati*) or the 4 lower worlds (*apāya*), esp as *niraya,tiracchāna,pettavisaya,asurakāyā* (KhpA 189,12 = DA 2:496,11 (on D 2:55,27) = SA 2:97,5 (on S 2:92,16); Vism 13.92 f). Sometimes 5 courses (*pañca,gati*) (D 33,2.1(4)/3:234; A 9.68/4:459) are mentioned: the hells (*niraya*), the animal birth (*tiracchāna,yoni*), the ghost realm (*petti-* or *pitti,visaya*), the human world (*manussa*) and the heavenly world (*deva*). Of these, the first three are woeful, with the asura-demons (*asura,kāya*) as the fourth woeful course. The remaining two are “happy courses” (*sugati*). For a discussion, see A:ÑB 1999:14-19. On a late work, **Pañca,gati,dīpana**, ed L Feer (JPTS 1884:152 ff); tr Feer, *Annales du Musée Guimet* 5, 1883:514-528: sv Naraka,kaṇḍa, Tiracchāna~, Peta~, Manussa~, Deva~.

¹⁵ On the 5 realms, see SD 54.3a (Diagram 3.2).

¹⁶ In later Buddhist tradition, the *asurā* (asura demons, titans or “anti-gods”) are added as a separate realm to make the “6 realms,” graphically depicted on the Tibetan Wheel of Life. See **The body in Buddhism**, SD 29.6a (4.1.2).

2 Bhikshus, **the 4 focuses of mindfulness** (*sati'paṭṭhāna*)¹⁷ should be cultivated for the putting away of these 5 destinies. What are the four?

Here, bhikshus,

- (1) a monk¹⁸ dwells exertive, clearly aware, mindful, observing the body in the body, putting away covetousness and displeasure¹⁹ in the world;²⁰
- (2) a monk dwells exertive, clearly aware, mindful, observing feelings in the feelings, putting away covetousness and displeasure in the world;
- (3) a monk dwells exertive, clearly aware, mindful, observing the mind in the mind, putting away covetousness and displeasure in the world;
- (4) a monk dwells exertive, clearly aware, mindful, observing dharmas [mental objects] in the dharmas, putting away covetousness and displeasure in the world.

— evaṃ —

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¹⁷ On *sati'paṭṭhāna* as a practice, see **Mahā Satipaṭṭhāna S** (D 22), SD 13.2 or **Satipaṭṭhāna S** (M 10), SD 13.3.

¹⁸ Here “a monk” (*bhikkhu*) may refer to either an ordained monastic or anyone who is meditating (here, doing satipatthana) (DA 3:756; VbhA 216 f; cf SnA 251). See Dh 142; also Dh 362, 260-270. Cf Bhikkhu Vagga (ch 25) and Brāhmaṇa Vagga (ch 26) of Dh. See **Satipaṭṭhāna Ss**, SD 13.1 (3.1a).

¹⁹ “Covetousness and displeasure,” *abhijjhā,domanassaṃ*, alt trs: “desire and discontent,” “desiring and disliking,” or “longing and loathing.” Walshe (1995:335 & n632) renders it as “hankering and fretting [for the world].” See **Satipaṭṭhāna Ss**, SD 13.1(4.2e)

²⁰ “World” (*loka*). **Vibhaṅga** says: “This very body is the world, and the 5 aggregates of clinging (ie form, feeling, perception, formations and consciousness) are the world—this is called the world” (Vbh 195). However, in his amplified tr at Vibh 105, U Thittila has “world (ie, in ideational objects)” (*dhammā*, mental objects) (Vibh:T 139). See **Satipaṭṭhāna Ss**, SD 13.1 (4.2d).