

25

Pātāla Sutta

The Discourse on the Bottomless Abyss | S 36.4¹

Chinese Āgama SĀ 469 (T2.119)

S 4.2.1.4 = Saṃyutta Nikāya 4, Saḷāyatana Vagga Saṃyutta 2, Vedanā Saṃyutta 1, Saḡāthā, vagga 4

Theme: On the psychological nature of “hell”

Translated by Piya Tan ©2003; rev 2010

1 Introduction

1.1 SUTTA HIGHLIGHTS

1.1.1 The Pātāla Sutta (S 36.4) records an important statement by the Buddha on the nature of other worlds. Although the Buddha makes this statement specifically regarding “a bottomless abyss” (*pātāla*),² we can safely surmise that it also applies to the other states, including the various hell-states.

Bhikshus, when the untutored ordinary person makes the statement:

“In the great ocean there is a **bottomless abyss** (*pātāla*),” he makes such a statement about something that is non-existent and false.

4 This “bottomless abyss,” bhikshus, is rather a designation (*adhivacana*) for painful bodily feelings. (S 36.4/4:206), SD 2.25

Here, the Buddha states that the “abyss” (*pātāla*) is not a hell in the great ocean. To the ancient Indians, this is a whirlpool mid-ocean, an entrance to a subterranean watery abysmal hell. Or, like other pre-scientific ancient cultures, they, too, believed that the world was flat and if we went too far, we would fall off into the abyss.³

1.1.2 The Buddha would have none of this, and declares that “abyss” (*patāla*) as meaning something more close and more real to us (psychologically, at least), that is, it is “a term (*adhivacana*)” for painful bodily feelings.⁴ In other words, hell is not a place we go to, but a suffering state of mind that can arise any time, anywhere.

If “hell” is a mental state, then “heaven,” too, is a mental state. It is *how* we think, feel, and live that keep us happy and empowers to make others happy, too. Furthermore, we should understand how our senses and sense-experiences tend to define our lives. When we fail to see the impermanence of such experiences—that they must also change and become other—we see them as “things” to collect: we desire to *have* more and more pleasures.⁵

1.1.3 Such a reinterpretation of a term, from a mythical or imaginative level to a more psychological, ethical or practical level, is known as **demythologization**. On a broader scale, we can say that such an interpretation suggests that the Buddha sees the hells states—and even the gods and heavens—in a mythical way. These were beliefs and narratives of the old society which the Buddha naturally adapted

¹ S 147d*, 517b*, 759c*. On the hells as allegories, see **Deva, dūta S** (M 130) @ SD 2.23 (3).

² On *pātāla* as the entrance (*mukha*) to a bottomless abyss, see S 1:129, 4:206, 207; J 3:530; Miln 286.

³ See SD 57.10 (3.2.3.2 f).

⁴ S 36.4/4:206 f (SD 2.25). On the hells as metaphors, see **Bāla, paṇḍita S** (M 129), SD 2.22 Intro.

⁵ Further, see SD 10.9 (8.4): Is it wrong view not to believe in gods?

to his teachings, to convey the Dharma. An important statement on the two levels of language of the suttas is found in **the Neyy’attha Nīt’attha Sutta** (A 2.3.5+6).⁶

1.2 MEANINGS AND USAGES OF PĀTĀLA

The Pātāla Sutta (S 36.4) takes the word *pātāla* is a literal meaning of a place [1.1]. In **the Eka Mūla Sutta** (S 1.44), it has a metaphorical sense,

SD 2.25(1.2)

Eka,mūla Sutta

The Discourse on the One Root | S 1.44/1:32,25

Theme: The wise have overcome suffering

*Eka,mūlaṃ dvi-r-āvaṭṭaṃ
timalaṃ pañca,pattharaṃ
samuddarṃ dvā,das’āvaṭṭaṃ
pātālam atarī isi*

With its one root, two whirlpools,
its leviathan [timala], five rocks,
the ocean with its twelve currents—
the sage has crossed over the abyss.

— evaṃ —

1.2.1 Eka,mūla as ignorance

This is a playful little poem where marine terms are used in a spiritual way, a point which seems to have been missed by other translators. The “one root” (*eka,mūla*) is clearly the bottomless submarine abyss (*pātāla*) of ancient Indian imagination, regarded as the source of the two whirlpools.⁷

Metaphorically, we can say that the “single root” of suffering is ignorance (*avijjā*), but curiously the Commentary (SA 1:85) glosses its as “ignorance and craving, but here craving is meant” (*eka,mūlan’ti avijjā taṇhāya mūlaṃ, taṇhā avijjāya. Idha pana taṇhā adhippetā*). Ignorance here of course refers to the 4 noble truths.⁸

1.2.2 Eka,mūla as contact

1.2.2.1 Nāṇananda suggests that we take *eka,mūla* as referring to contact (*phassa*), in keeping with **the Phassa,mūlaka Sutta** (S 36.10), which teaches that all feelings are rooted “contact” (*phassa*), that is, sense-stimuli. When there is a sense-contact—whether it occurs through the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body or mind—their respective feeling, whether pleasant, painful or neutral, arises. When there is no sense-contact, the feeling also ceases.⁹

The arhat has crossed over all such feelings, represented by the “3 stains” [1.2.3], which work together to bring suffering upon us, represented by the “abyss” (*pātāla*) [1.2.6]. **The Sakalika Sutta 1** (S 1.38), for example, relates how the Buddha withstands the excruciating pains arising as a result from his foot being cut a rock splinter to the admiration even of the gods.¹⁰

⁶ A 2.3.5+6 (SD 2.6b). On natural adaptation, see SD 39.3 (3.3.4). On demythologization, see SD 4.1 (3).

⁷ On 2 giant whirlpools in the Atlantic off the coast of Guyana and Suriname, see http://english.pravda.ru/science/earth/12-04-2011/117547-ocean_whirlpools-0/.

⁸ On the 4 noble truths, see **Dhamma,cakka Pavattana S** (S 56.11,5), esp SD 1.1 (5+6).

⁹ S 36.10/4:215 = SD 91.8.

¹⁰ S 1.38/1:27-29 = SD 61.4.

1.2.2.2 The (Vedanā) Samādhi Sutta (S 36.1) states that when we fully understand the nature of feelings, we attain nirvana.¹¹ This understanding is attained through mental concentration, that is, the attainment of dhyana so that we are able to rise above all bodily feelings and enjoy suprasensory pleasure.¹²

1.2.2.3 The Mahā Saccaka Sutta (M 36) gives further details on how the Buddha overcomes the effects of feelings. When pleasant feelings arise in him, he is not mentally distracted by it because of his cultivated body (*bhāvita.kāya*); painful feelings do not invade his mind because of his cultivated mind (*bhāvita,citta*).¹³

1.2.2.4 The arhat, in attaining the “freedom of mind” (*ceto,vimutti*) and “freedom by wisdom” (*paññā,vimutti*) that are “influx-free” (*anāsava*)—that is, having uprooted the influxes of sense-desire (*kām’āsava*), of existence (*bhav’āsava*), and of ignorance (*avijjāsava*)¹⁴—are untroubled by feelings the way the unawakened are. According to **the Mahāli Sutta** (D 6), by way of his “unshakable freedom of mind” (*akuppa ceto,vimutti*), the arhat is free from being troubled by bodily suffering, and through his “freedom of mind,” he is unsusceptible to the wiles of pleasant feelings.

In short, an arhat is “freed both ways” (*ubhāto,bhāga,vimutta*), as stated in **the Pacalā S** (A 7.58).¹⁵ **The Māgandiya Sutta** (Sn 4.9) closes poetically on this same note:

There are no bonds for one without perception;	no delusions for one released by wisdom.
But those who have grasped perception and view	wander about conflicting with the world.
	(Sn 847)

The “one without perception” (*saññā,viratta*) is the one “mentally freed” (*ceto,vimutta*), while to be “released by wisdom” (*paññā,vimutta*) has been defined above. Here the arhat “freed both ways” is meant.

1.2.3 Dvi-rāvatta. The two whirlpools (*dvi-r-āvatta* or *dv’āvatta*) that powerfully suck vessels and beings down into the watery depths are glossed as the two extreme views of eternalism and of annihilationism (SA 1:85). Essentially, eternalism (*sassata,ditṭhi*) is the view that there is some kind of eternal essence such as an eternal God or abiding entity such as an eternal soul. Annihilationism, on the other hand, is the view that this is our only life, rejecting all notions of morality (karma) and the hereafter (rebirth).¹⁶

1.2.4 Timala

1.2.4.1 The most tricky word here is *timala*, on which the Commentary is silent. In Buddhist doctrine, this would of course read *ti,mala*, “the three stains or spots of dirt.” But this simply does not fit the context of this sea shanty. Clearly, in the poem, it is *timala*, some kind of leviathan or gigantic sea-monster. Although *timala* is not found in any Pali dictionary, it is clearly a play on *timi*, “a kind of whale or fabulous fish or enormous size” (SED) or “a fabulous fish or enormous size” (DP).

¹¹ S 36.1.4:204 = SD 61.4(2).

¹² On this kind of pleasure, see **Mahā Saccaka S** (M 36,21-32/1:236 f), SD 1.12.

¹³ M 36,9/1:239 f = SD 49.4.

¹⁴ **Saṅgīti S** (D 33,1.10(20)/3:216,9; **Sammā Ditṭhi S** (M 9.70/1:55,10), SD 11.14; **Cūḷa Suññata S** (M 121,11/3:108,-18), SD 14.11); MA 1:86,10, 3:41,25 (ad M 1:361,24); **Āsava S** (S 38.8/4:256,4 = 45.163/5:56,15 = 47.50/189,29); **Ti,kaṇṇa S** (A 3.58/1:165,16), (**Te,vijja**) **Jāṇussoṇi S** (A 3.59.4/1:167,22), **Nibbedhika Pariyāya S** (A 6.63/3:414,11); **Vbh 914/384,13**.

¹⁵ A 7.58 & SD 4.11 (2).

¹⁶ On the 2 extreme views, see **Dhamma,cakka Pavattana S** (S 56.11,2+3) & SD 1.1 (3.1).

Perhaps, the Buddha or the sutta poet or the ancient poem (the first three lines could have come from a popular sea shanty) could have used *timira*, but this would not have worked so well as *timala*. *Timira* is from *timira,piṅgala*, “a great ocean fish. Anyway, based on *timi*, we have *timiṅgala* (literally, “timi swallower”),¹⁷ which gives us an idea of its size, and *timi,timiṅgala* (Skt *timi,timiṅgila*), a similar fish.¹⁸

1.2.4.2 Doctrinally, we of course take the word as *ti.mala*, “the 3 stains,” that is, greed (*lobha*), hate (*dosa*) and delusion (*moha*). Commentary notes that delusion is conascent with these two, while greed and hate (being opposites) are supportive conditions (*upanissaya*) of delusion.¹⁹

1.2.5 Pañca,pattharā. The 5 rocks or rocky shoals (*pañca,pattharā*) are the five cords of sensual pleasures (SA 1:85).²⁰ They arise and flourish on account of the three unwholesome roots.²¹ Like the ocean (*samudda*), they are “instiable” (*apūraṇīya*): like the great ocean that never overflows no matter how many rivers flow into it.²²

1.2.6 Dvā,das’āvattā. The 12 ocean currents (*dvā,das’āvattā*) are the 6 internal sense-faculties and their respective 6 external sense-objects.²³ Like the bottomless abyss (*pātāla*), these 12 sense-bases are insatiable, “without a standing spot” (*apatitṭhitha*). (SA 1:85)²⁴

2 Related texts and teachings

The (**Pañca**) **Deva,dūta Sutta** (M 130) is a longer text dealing with the hells, describing them in great graphic details. See especially the Introduction, on “The hells are allegorical.”²⁵ (SD 2.23 (3.2))

— — —

Pātāla Sutta

The Discourse on the Bottomless Abyss

S 36.4

“The abyss” is only a name

3 [206] Bhikshus, when the untutored ordinary person makes the statement:

¹⁷ *Timiṅgala*, V 2:238,16 = A 4:200,4 (Se *timi,timiṅgala*) = U 54,15 (UA 303,3). See DP for other refs.

¹⁸ *Timi,timiṅgala*, V 2:238,16 (Ce *timira,piṅgalo*) = A 4:200,4 (Be *timira,piṅgalo*; Ce *timira,piṅgalā*) = U 54,15 (Ee *timira,piṅgalo*). For other refs, see DP.

¹⁹ *Tatrāssā moho sahaṅgā,koṭṭiyā malaṃ hoti, rāga,dosā upanissaya,koṭṭiyā.*

²⁰ See **Kāma,guṇa S** (S 35.117), SD 88.6 & **Kāma-c,chanda**, SD 32.2 (2.3).

²¹ On the 3 unwholesome roots, see **Abhabba Tayo,dhamma S 1** (A 10.76,39), SD 2.4.

²² Cf a positive figure of this at V 2:238,1 ff = A 4:199,7 ff = U 55,29 ff.

²³ On the 12 sense-bases, see **Sal,āyatana Vibhaṅga S** (M 137/3:216-222), SD 29.5.

²⁴ See also Ñāṇananda’s tr & long n, *Saṃyutta Nikāya: An anthology: Part II*, Kandy: Wheel 183-185 1983 online 2008: S:Ñ 3.4/5 & n17 (34 f).

²⁵ M 130 (SD 2.23).

“In the great ocean there is a **bottomless abyss** (*pātāla*),” he makes such a statement about something that is non-existent and false.

4 This “bottomless abyss,” bhikshus, is only a designation (*adhivacana*) for painful bodily feelings.²⁶

Hell as a mental state

5 When the untutored ordinary person is touched by a painful bodily feeling, he sorrows, grieves, laments, beats his breast and falls into confusion.²⁷

This is called an untutored ordinary person who has not risen up from the bottomless abyss, one who has not gained solid ground.

Rising out of “hell”

6 But, bhikshus, when the tutored noble disciple is touched by a painful bodily feeling, he does not sorrow, nor grieve, nor lament, nor weep, nor beat his breast, nor fall into confusion.

This is called an tutored ordinary person who has risen up from the bottomless abyss, one who has gained solid ground.

One who endures not
painful feelings that have arisen,
bodily feelings that take life away,
who trembles at their touch,

*yo etā nādhivāseti
uppannā vedanā dukkhā
sārīrikā pāṇa,harā
yāhi phuṭṭho pavedhati*

who weeps and wails,
who is weak, of little strength—
he has not risen up from the bottomless abyss,
nor has he even gained solid ground.

*akkandati parodati
dubbalo appa,thāmakō
na so pātāle paccuṭṭhāsi
atho gādham pi nājḥagā*

[207]

But one endures them—
the painful feelings that have arisen,
bodily feelings that take life away,
who trembles not at their touch—
he has indeed risen from the bottomless abyss,
and gained firm ground, too.

*yo ce tā adhvāseti
uppannā vedanā dukkhā
sārīrikā pāṇa,harā
yāhi phuṭṭho na vedhati
sa ve pātāle paccuṭṭhāsi
atho gādham pi ajḥagā*

— evaṃ —

101116 130914 151231 171116 180914 201001

²⁶ *Sārīrikānaṃ kho etaṃ bhikkhave dukkhānaṃ vedanānaṃ adhvācanaṃ yad idaṃ pātālo'ti*. Cf **Ajjuna Tha** (Tha 88bc) & **Deva,sabha Tha** (Tha 89b) for similar figures. See also **Tāla,puṭa Tha** (Tha 1104) & SD 20.9 II:1104 & SD 10.9 (8.4.3).

²⁷ See also **Alabbhaniya S** (A 5.48.6/3:54), SD 42.1.