

The Buddhist Hell: An Early Instance of the Idea?

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Abstract

In spite of the modern idea that Buddhism is too rational a religion to have a conception of hell, the case is just the opposite. The Buddhists promoted this idea very early. This is not really surprising, since the idea of hell is closely connected with the concept of *kamma*, action, and its fruit or result. Every living being is what it is by the force of its actions in this or earlier lives: good actions entail rebirth in heaven or as a human, while bad actions have as their result rebirth as an animal, a ghost, or worst of all, in hell. In the Buddhist hell one is thus punished by the evil actions themselves, not by some sort of divine justice. Although life in hell is not eternal in Buddhism, it can still last for an enormous time span until the bad actions have been atoned for and one is reborn to a happier state of existence. Thus hell plays a great part in the Buddhist system of teachings, and it is a favourite topic in the monastic rules as well as in the narrative literature of the *Jātakas*, the subject of which is the Buddha's earlier lives. Hell is discussed as a topic already in the *Kathāvatthu*, the first scholarly treatise of Buddhism with a named author, datable between 250 and 100 BC. The discussion in the *Kathāvatthu* represents what may be seen as a fully developed conception of hell, and thus the Buddhist hell as described by its earliest canonical literature predates the appearance of the idea in most, if not all other religious traditions.

Keywords

Buddhist hell, Buddhist ethics, Buddhist monastic rules, the early Buddhist canon, Jātaka literature, Buddhist cosmology

According to Max Weber, the Buddhist theodicy contained the most rational formulation of why men suffer, or are what they are. He called it “the formally most perfect solution of the theodicy problem.”¹ The

¹) “Die formal vollkommenste Lösung des Problems der Theodizee ist die spezifische

doctrine of *kamma* — that every living being has to reap the fruits of his own actions, whether in this life or in one of the innumerable lives that all beings have lived through successive reincarnations since time immemorial — says that every human being is what he is because of his past actions: “A living being is what he is by the force of his own deeds, my brahman friend, beings are heirs to their deeds. Thus deeds are their womb, deeds are kin, deeds are the only thing they can rest upon. Deeds divide being into lowness and excellence.”² Every god (*deva*), human being (*manussa*), animal (*tiracchāna*), restless ghost (*peta*) or habitant of hell (*niraya*, *naraka*) has been born in exactly that state because of his or her earlier actions, and not because they are punished or rewarded by a god or divine being. Any living being is totally responsible for his own fate, or rather state, since we are all the result of what we ourselves have done, and these worlds continue to exist because the beings in them continue to act.³

Leistung der indischen ‘Karma’-Lehre, des sog. Seelenwanderungsglaubens... Der Einzelne schafft sich seinen eigenen Schicksal im strengsten Sinne ausschließlich selbst. Der Seelenwanderungsglaube knüpft an sehr geläufige animistische Vorstellungen von dem Übergang der Totengeister in Naturobjekte an. Er rationalisiert sie und damit den Kosmos unter rein ethischen Prinzipien. Die naturalistische ‘Kausalität’ unser Denkgewohnheiten wird also ersetzt durch einen universellen Vergeltungsmechanismus, bei dem kein *ethische* relevante Tat jemals verloren geht... Diese Konsequenz der Seelenwanderungslehre hat in vollem Sinne nur der Buddhismus gezogen...” (Weber 2001:299–301 [“Das Problem der Theodizee”]; cf. also *ibid.* 438: “Auch diese Ethik ist ‘rational’ im Sinn einer stetigen wachen Beherrschung aller natürlichen Triebhaftigkeit, aber mit gänzlich anderem Ziel,” where Weber is writing on Tibetan, Chinese and Japanese *Volksreligiosität*.

²) This is the classical formulation of the Buddhist theodicy: *kammasakkā māṇava, sattā kammadāyādā kammayoni kammabandhu kammaṇṇisaṇṇā. kammā satte vibhajati yadidā hinappaṇṇitāyāti*, is found in MN III.4.5, *Cūḷakammavibhaṅga*, p. 204; cf. also AN IV.2.1.7: *kammasakkā māṇava, sattā kammadāyādā kammayoni kammabandhu kammaṇṇisaṇṇā yā kammā karissāmi kalyāṇā vā pāpakā vā tassa dāyādo bhavissāmiṭi abhinṇā paccacekkhitabbā itthiyā vā purisena vā gahattṭhena vā pabbajitena vā*, “... whatever deed I do, whether good or bad, I shall become heir of it! This ought to be contemplated by woman or man, layman or monk.” See further references in AN tr. III.59, note 3 and *passim*. On the endlessness of the cycle of birth and death, cf. SN III.2.4–10 and *passim*: *anamattaggoyā bhikkhave, saṃsāro, pubbā koṭi na paññāyati*, “Saṃsāra is impossible to imagine, it is not possible to form a concept of its beginning.” Cf. also Nidd II.10 where the numbers are even much higher.

³) *yathā yathāyaṃ puriso kammaṃ karoti tathā tathā taṃ paṭisaṃvedissati*, A.1.249, “In

Thus, the above list of states of existence (*gati*) corresponds to five worlds, where beings are reborn as the result of what they did during their innumerable earlier lives: bad deeds make you an animal or a hungry ghost, but a really bad deed brings you to hell — these three states are called bad states (*duggati*). Good actions, on the other hand, lead to rebirth as a human or a god, which are good states (*sugati*). Birth as a god, though, does not preclude a later birth in hell, since when the good deeds are consumed in the pleasurable existence in heaven, one may easily fall into hell, or be reborn as an animal or a ghost, because earlier *karma* by its latent force creates rebirth in these states, conditioned as they are by past deeds of evil, or lust (*rāga*, *lobha*), ill-will (*dosa*) and bewilderment (*moha*). Being reborn as human, though, is in general seen as a very good rebirth,⁴ because in this state the Bodhisatta is born, to be fully awakened as a Buddha, who can teach the end of all the suffering entailed by the unending cycle of rebirth, the end of which is *nibbāna*, cessation of action, *kammanirodha* or *kammakkhaya*. In the human state one is able — that is, if one hears the teachings of the Buddha — to realize, through insight and meditation, that everything is impermanent and selfless, empty and brings only suffering; then, one does not seek rebirth again neither as humans, gods, or for that sake as animals or in hell, because having given up attachment to a self, and thus any attachment to life in the five states of existence, in *samsāra*, one will reach final extinction in *nibbāna*.

Thus, in Buddhist rationality, hells of many types, or, for that matter, heavens of various sorts, are an integral part of, and organically connected to, the doctrine of *karma* and reincarnation. The ideas and images of hell are also recurrent parts of Buddhism as it unfolds historically and geographically throughout the whole of East Asia in its more than two thousand years of history. It is thus interesting to note that Buddhism has at times in modern Western societies been preferred over Christianity as a particularly rational religion because, among

whichever way this man does a deed, in the same way he will experience it.” *kammanā vattati loko kammanā vattati pajā, kammanibandhanā sattā rathassāṇiva yāyato*, Sn 625, “By actions the world goes round, by actions all created beings go around [in the round of rebirth], beings are fastened to their actions as the wheel is to its axle as it revolves.”

⁴) And hard to attain, see below, p. 270 and n.26, and p. 272.

other things, it is perceived as not believing in such Christian irrationalities as an eternal hell. But our sources for the idea of hell in Buddhism are very rich, and they also seem to be anterior to the development of this idea in Christianity. One of the main differences between the Christian and the Buddhist hell is that the first is eternal, while the second is not — Buddhism teaches that everything is impermanent. Even so, rebirth in a Buddhist hell may last for prolonged periods.⁵ It is likely that this is why many of the early translators of the Buddhist Canon have preferred using the term “Purgatory” rather than “hell.” What is similar in the two traditions, however, is that stories about hell are very popular and in different ways illustrate the doctrines of the two traditions with very powerful images. Hell is, therefore, an ever-recurrent motif in the Buddhist tradition, as in the Christian, and forms part of edifying story-telling for the sake of the religious education of the lay community.⁶

⁵ “By the ripening of that deed, for many years, for many a hundred, for many a thousand, many a hundred thousand years he suffered [or: is cooked] in Purgatory [or: hell] ...,” stock phrase *passim* in KN, MN, SN and Vin: *so tassa kammaṣṣa vipākena bahūni vassāni bahūni vassasatani bahūni vassasahassāni bahūni vassasatasahassāni niraye paccittha*, etc. The numbers are not consistent or accurate, but only express a very long duration: Kokālika (see below) is born in the Lotus Hell, indeed for long: “Long, monk, is the term of life in the Lotus hell. It is not easy to reckon it by so many years, so many thousands of years, and by so many hundreds of thousands of years.’ ‘Is it possible to give a simile, sir?’ ‘It is possible, monk,’ he replied. ‘Suppose there were twenty Kosalan cartloads of sesamum seed and at the end of every hundred years a man were to take out a seed, just one; well, sooner, monk, would those Kosalan cartloads of sesamum seed be used up and exhausted in that way — and that’s not one Abbuda hell! Monk, as twenty Abbuda hells are one Nirabbuda hell, as twenty Nirabbuda hells one Ababa hell, as twenty Ababa hells one Ahaha hell, as twenty Ahaha hells one Aṭṭa hell, as twenty Aṭṭa hells one Kumuda hell, as twenty Kumuda hells one Sogandhika hell, as twenty Sogandhika hells one Uppalaka hell, as twenty Uppalaka hells one Puṇḍarika hell, as twenty Puṇḍarika hells one Paduma (Lotus) hell. Verily, monk, the monk Kokālika was born in that hell because of the illwill he bore towards Sāriputta and Moggallāna.” In contrast to the eight hells mentioned below, which are warm, these are the cold hells, as implied by the sounds of freezing contained in the names of the first five. On the cold hells in general see Feer 1892:211 ff. It is not attested explicitly in the earliest texts that they are *cold*, this is said only in later commentaries, cf. *ibid.* 220 ff. The rest of the names are related to variants of lotus flowers. SN I.6.1.1 ff.: *Kokālivagga*, quotation from SN I.152, also in AN 174.

⁶ On Indian and Buddhist cosmology in general, including the systems of *kalpas*,

And indeed story-telling has been crucial to the propagation of Buddhist doctrines. The *tipitaka*, “the three baskets,” as the canonical scriptures of the Buddhists are called, consist traditionally of the *sutta* section, *viz.*, the speeches of the Buddha, the *vinaya*, the rules regarding monastic life, and the *abhidhamma* section, which is a systematic exposé of Buddhist psychology and the philosophy of the *dhamma*, the teachings of the Buddha. The written versions of these scriptures, many of which are extant today, underwent constant transformation throughout history with different sects reinterpreting the “true words of the teacher.”

Now, ideas on the infernal regions of the universe were of course found in India before Buddhism, and the king of the netherworld, Yama, ruled over the deceased, who could enjoy their afterlife if they were offered enough sacrifice from their living descendants — indeed the ideas of *karma* and retribution originated from this sacrificial cult. Originally *karma* denoted mainly the sacrifice, and its result was not computed so much in terms of abstract ethics as in terms of material compensation — the dead would have resources to live on after death only to the extent that their progeny and kin could perform sacrifices on their behalf. As Buddhist and Jaina ascetics brought in with them the idea of ethical conduct, the infernal regions, or, for that matter, other regions of the cosmos, changed into places of reward or retribution for those engaged in moral or immoral conduct. In the same process, Yama underwent a transformation from being the king of the forefathers to become the ruler of hell. This offers us an example of the transformed netherworld with a richness of imagery to describe the various punitive states of hell.⁷ The process of transformation from the world of deceased forefathers to a “fully developed hell” — as a cosmic

yugas and hells, see the still authoritative work of Kirfel 1920, further McGovern 1923 and Kloetzli 1983. For later Buddhist views on hell see Lamotte 1949:955 ff. with notes. It should be pointed out that the numbers used to describe distance and time in the Buddhist sūtras and commentaries are fanciful numbers used only to describe rhetorically very long duration, and not to be taken as accurate numbers. On the motives of Buddhist narrative *motifs* in general, see Grey 2000, with updated bibliography.

⁷ On Yama as the king of hell in general Indian tradition see Kirfel 1920:147–73, and 198–206 for list of the names and duration of punishments also from later sources in Buddhism. For Jaina hells see *ibid.* 315–29.

region which has as its purpose the punishment of sinners — has its parallels in the Mediterranean regions, and even in Iran.

The word for hell in early Buddhism is *niraya*. The etymology is not quite clear; *nir-i-* means to “go out,” or to “go asunder” — the last etymology is usually preferred to explain hell as a place where beings are destroyed, or their bad actions are destroyed.⁸ A *nerayika* is an inhabitant of hell. Less used in early tradition is *naraka*, another name for hell frequent in later literature.

If we address the question of hells in Buddhism from the perspective of origins, and ask when the idea of hell took root in Buddhism, we encounter some difficulties of dating, since the dates of Buddhist texts are very often uncertain, and scholarly opinions on the question to some extent diverge. The question is further complicated because Buddhist teachings, not yet written texts, were transmitted orally probably up to about 100 BC, at which time they were written down in Ceylon.⁹ There is, however, scholarly agreement on the whole that the Pāli canon is fairly formalized from this time, and thus a reliable source for early Buddhism.

Thus, it would be fairly safe, from the perspective of dating the ideas of the Buddhist hell, to start our investigation with the *Kathāvatthu*, which is the earliest Buddhist scripture with a named author, and which also is the first scripture to be dated by the Buddhist tradition itself.¹⁰

⁸ There are also indigenous etymologies from the Buddhist commentaries, for the ones in the Pāli tradition, see PTSD s.v.

⁹ On the earliest date of the written codification of the Buddhist canon, see von Hinüber 1996:88 with references; Norman 1983:10–11. By very recent discoveries of Buddhist manuscripts in Afghanistan and Pakistan edited in projects led by Harry Falk and Richard Salomon, Buddhist literature, even Mahāyāna, written in Kharoṣṭhī characters, has been dated well before the Common Era.

¹⁰ Thus, the Pāli tradition (*Atthasālinī* 4.25) asserts that the Kv was composed by the Elder Mogalliputtatissa 218 years after Nirvāna, which places it during the reign of emperor Aśoka (273–232 BC.). There is considerable disagreement on the date of the Buddha in the last two decades of research on Buddhism, but most scholars now believe the date of the Buddha to be later than was earlier thought. Thus, while the number 18 of the “218 years” may be correct, and indicate that the council, on which Kv is a “report,” was held some years after the beginning of Aśoka’s reign, “200 years” may seem to indicate only “a long period.” On the problem of dating early Buddhist history, see Bechert 1991–97. Later Pāli commentaries ascribe the various viewpoints discussed in the council also to the traditional sects of Buddhism, which must be later

The *Kathāvatthu* discusses various points of disagreement within the clergy, and, in this context, it depicts a council in the middle of the 3rd century BC, where one of the topics discussed is hell. Going by this date, we can, with some caution, date the earliest conceptions of hell in this period too. However, since the concept of hell was part of a fairly complex discussion, there is good reason to believe that the basic ideas on this issue were somewhat older than the discussion that took place at that date. At any rate, these ideas are an integral part of the doctrines discussed by the *Kathāvatthu*.

The first and second discussions in the *Kathāvatthu* of hell (I.1.161, 210–11), or Purgatory, as the translator wants it, refer, first, to the question of *karma* and, then, to the personality, *puggala*, the questions being whether it is the same personality or a different one that is reborn. The orthodox view seems to be that it is a different personality, since the stream of conscious states is constantly changing — into a *yakkha*, a semi-divine being, a *peta*, hungry ghost, an animal, or an inhabitant of hell, *nerayika*. At any rate, *karma*, actions, clearly is the force that drives a sentient being from state to state in the system of worlds. Later, there is a discussion as to whether the action *itself* is hell, or whether rebirth in hell is the *result* of a particular bad action, like murder. This is of course a theme much developed upon in later Buddhist philosophical traditions, which tend to see the world as a projection of the collective mental states of living beings. The position of the orthodox in the following quotation from *Kathāvatthu* (VII.10.4) seems to be that hell is indeed a state to be experienced in another life as the result of action:

than the *Kathāvatthu*. According to the northern sources of Mahāyāna Buddhism (Tibetan, Chinese), the first schism between the Mahāsāṃghika and the Theravāda (Pāli, Sanskrit: Sthāviravāda) took place during Aśoka's reign, and many of the disagreements described in the Kv are in accordance with the disagreements leading to this schism as described in the northern sources. The main topics of the Kv are the status of the self, and how perfect is the *arhat*, the Buddhist Saint, though many other points of controversy are referred to as well. The Kv refers to canonical statements, and if these are not to be considered later interpolations, they show that a Buddhist canon was in existence at that time, though most probably only in oral form. So with some scepticism we should have a source on Buddhist hells, thought of as places of retribution for bad deeds, dating from the middle of the 3rd century BC. On the *Kathāvatthu*, see Norman 1983:103–5, and *passim*, index s.v.; and von Hinüber 1996:70–73, and *passim*.

“Again, do you mean that a given bad mental state is its own result, a given good state its own result? That the consciousness with which we take life is the very consciousness with which we burn in Purgatory? That the consciousness with which we give a gift of merit is the very consciousness with which we rejoice in Heaven?” This heretical view was that of the sect of the Andhakas, according to the commentaries. We see that speculation on both Heaven and hell is clearly connected with the retribution for bad and compensation for good actions.

The next chapter of the *Kathāvatthu* starts out with a discussion as to whether there are five or six worlds. The commentaries state that the sects of the Andhakas and the Uttarāpathakas held that the Asuras also had a world of their own — the Asuras being the Vedic Asuras, warlike gods, something like the Titans or Giants of Greek mythology — in addition to the five subscribed to by the orthodox Theravādins, as mentioned above, hell being one of them.¹¹ An essential part of the discussions of the *Kathāvatthu* concerned the ideals of sainthood and religious perfection, and, thus, there was a discussion about whether a person with correct views on selflessness, etc., could commit bad deeds, even the five deadly sins — sins “having no intermediate” (*ānantarika*), that is, no intermediate state between the deed and rebirth in hell. These are: 1) matricide, 2) patricide, 3) killing a perfected saint (*arahant*), 4) wounding the Tathāgata, the Buddha, with evil intent, and 5) creating schism in the *sangha*, the Buddhist order of monks. These sins, according to the orthodox view, could not be committed by a person with a firm understanding of the true doctrine. Others, however, held the opposite view.¹² The prolonged periods of suffering, such as for an “aeon,” *kappa*, were also addressed, with reference to the canon: “One

¹¹ Kv VIII.1.1: Controversial point. — That there are six spheres of destiny. Did not the Exalted One name five destinies — purgatory, the animal kingdom, the Peta-realm, mankind, the devas? *cha gatiyo ti? āmantā. nanu pañca gatiyo vuttā bhagavatā, nirayo, tiracchānāyoni, pettivisayo, manussā, devā, no vata re vattabe “cha gatiyo ti.”* The argument goes on, *pro et contra*, though in later tradition, at least, the Asuras were usually counted as a sixth world, even though somewhat contiguous with the Devas. The question was not controversial in later tradition.

¹² Kv VII.7; Vinaya iii.303 is quoted as support for the orthodox view; thus those “inside” the faith were safe to reach salvation, a view, of course, which may have served to protect orthodoxy.

who breaks up the concord of the order is tormented in purgatory for a *kappa*.¹³ Even unintentionally committing any of the *ānantarika* incurs the most terrible suffering in hell. The last is a controversial point in the *Kathāvatthu*, and though opposed by several sects, it is still believed by the orthodox, notwithstanding the principle stated in many places in Buddhist philosophy, that action is mainly intention (Kv XX.1).

Two further problems concerning hell are discussed in the *Kathāvatthu*, problems also intimately connected with other Buddhist doctrines: namely, whether hell has guards that torture the inmates of hell (XX.3), and whether the Bodhisatta, or the Buddha to be, can be reborn in the bad and lower states of existence (*apāya*, *duggati* or *vinipāta*), that is, undergo hell, or being born as a ghost or an animal (XXIII.3).

The first problem is connected to the one mentioned above, whether one, as it were, *is* in hell when committing the evil deed, that the consciousness of the act is the same as the suffering. This is a view, the commentaries say, held e.g. by the Andhakas (again!), who suppose that there are no guards in hell charged with torturing and punishing; rather, these torturers are nothing but the bad actions themselves, committed in the “shape of hell-keepers who purge the sufferers.” The orthodox protested, and did so with canonical quotations:¹⁴

Him, bhikkhus, Hell’s guards torture with fivefold punishment; they trust a hot iron stake through one hand, then another through the other hand, then one through the foot, then another through the other foot; they thrust a hot iron stake through the middle of the chest. And he thereupon feels painful, piercing, intolerable suffering, nor does he die till that evil deed of his is cancelled.

Him, bhikkhus, Hell’s guards make to lie down and flay him with hatchets . . . they place him head downwards and flay him with knives . . . they bind him to a chariot and drive him to and fro over burning, blazing glowing ground . . . they lift him up on to a great hill of burning, blazing, white hot coals and roll him down a fiery slope . . . they double him up and cast him into a hot brazen jar, burning glowing where he boils, coming up like a bubble of foam, then sinking, going now to this side, now to that. There he suffers fierce and bitter pain, nor does he die till that evil karma is cancelled. Him Bhikkhus, they cast into the Great Purgatory.

In districts measured out four-square four-doored,
Iron the ramparts bounding it, with iron roofed,

¹³ *Itivutaka*, §§13 and 18: *Saṅghā samaggā bhettvāna kappaṃ nirayambi paccatīti*.

¹⁴ *Majjhima* iii.166–67, 182–83; *Anguttaranikaya* 1.41, translation from Kv tr. p. 346–47.

Iron its soil welded by fiery heat,
Spreading a hundred leagues it stands for aye.

With this display of canonical and orthodox rhetoric the article ends, leaving no doubt that the orthodox view is that hell is real. Moreover, it is a hell of the type we may call fully developed, where moral frailty and bad deeds are punished: “Hence there surely are guards in purgatory.”

The views of the Andhakas, however, who were heirs to the Mahāsāṃghika, point in the direction of the relativist and mentalist views of later Mahāyāna literature. This is also the case with another Andhaka view, this time about the Bodhisatta: though he is a perfected being, he can still, by his own will, seek rebirth in the *vinipāta*, a lower state of existence. The idea of Mahāyāna Buddhism is that the Bodhisatta (or Bodhisatva in Buddhist Sanskrit — in modern works often Bodhisattva), should by expedient means (*upāya*) seek rebirth where there is most suffering, so that he can consume more quickly his bad *karma* from earlier lives, and thus speed up his development of good action and wisdom in order to attain complete awakening as a Buddha. The orthodox view in the *Kathāvatthu* objects to that kind of rebirth for the Bodhisatta, as he is seen as a superior moral being who cannot, by the force of his own good action, be reborn in such low states of existence as hell, as a spirit or as an animal. In the Mahāyāna, however, the Bodhisatva is reborn in the lower states not because of his attachment to these states, but because of his compassion and his promise to save all living beings. This cosmic mobility of the Bodhisatta is a key point in the later discussions between the Mahāyāna and the Thera/Sthāvira positions, discussions, though, that have mostly been initiated by the Mahāyāna side. But we find disagreement on this issue already in the *Kathāvatthu*:

[Controversial Point:] That a Bodhisatta goes to an evil doom, enters a womb, performs hard tasks, works penance under alien teachers of his own accord and free will.

[Question from the orthodox position, implying that the opponent is wrong:] Do you mean that he so went and endured purgatory, The Sañjīva, Kālasutta, Tāpana, Patāpana, Sanghātaka, Roruva, and Avīci hells? Can you quote me a Sutta to support this? . . . (Kv XXIII.3)¹⁵

¹⁵ The paragraph goes on to discuss the other related questions. The Mahāyāna view is found in a number of *sūtras* and commentaries, and is summarized e.g. by the

In this paragraph we also note that the eight departments of hell are already in place at the early date of the *Kathāvatthu*, a fact that underscores that a very developed and systematic view of hell existed in this period. The names of the hells, however, vary to some extent in the literature, but the eight hells constitute a basic list.¹⁶ Generally, the names of the various hells denote suffering and torture, expressive of the torture going on there when *kamma* is “matured” or, literally, “boiled” (Pāli: *paccati*) — implying on the one hand that the sufferer is purified of his bad deeds, but also playing on the word to indicate that boiling is part of the torture.

From what we, with some argumentative force, may call a very early source of Hell in Buddhism, we will go on to treat other sources. There is no doubt that Buddhist literature has developed through repeated processes of canonization, but, as mentioned above, there is some scholarly agreement that the Pāli canon was fixed about 100 BC. However, the *suttas* and the *vinaya* fixed in writing definitely build on earlier oral tradition, and, as we have seen, the *Kathāvatthu* also quotes earlier

Mahāyānasūtrālamkāra (XIII.14–15): “Indeed, great pain suffered during a sojourn in Hell is never an obstacle to the sons of the Victorious, as it is suffered for the sake of [all] beings. But all kinds of thought-constructions in the inferior way (*hinayāna*) concerned with purity — arising from [reflections on] the good qualities of peace and the bad qualities of existence — are an obstacle to the intelligent. Indeed a sojourn in hell is never a hindrance to the intelligent in attaining the undefiled and extensive awakening. But the thought-constructions consisting in the absolute coldness of one’s own good only, which are found in the other way, make hindrances to staying in the absolute joy.” The Mahāyāna criticized the *śrāvakayāna*, or *hinayāna* — which our Pāli literature on the whole may be said to represent, being the literature of the Theravāda — for their selfish seeking of their *own* salvation. The Bodhisatta’s rebirth in hell is, however, still found in the Pāli *Jātakas*. In Ja no. 538 the Bodhisatta is described as a king in Benares, then he stays eighty thousand years in the Ussada hell, after which he is reborn as a god in Indra’s heaven, where Indra asks him to take rebirth again as a human. The Ussada hell is “twice eight times more in number, a kind of minor hell” (Ja V.137). In general there is also talk of the Great Hell, and the sixteen lesser hells (e.g. Ja no. 142); other numbers in Cowell 1895–1913:index, s.v. Hell.

¹⁶ Seven of them are mentioned in Kv: *sañjīva*: “reviving,” implying that suffering has no end because one does not “die” in hell; *kālasutta*: “thread of time,” probably also to express how suffering goes on continuously; *tāpana*: “suffering”; *patāpana*: “excessive suffering”; *sanghātaka*: “crushing”, “beating”; *roruva*: “roaring”, and *avīci*: (suffering with) “no intermission,” evidently hot hells. The *mahāroruvaninaya* “hell of great roaring” is not mentioned in the Kv list, but is usually included to make up a list of eight hells.

canonical works, which may thus be surmised to be older than the *Kathāvatthu*. If we use the argument of the written canon as a *terminus a quo*, this would bring the Buddhist ideas of a developed hell back more than a century BC, and the concept of hell also suffuses the canonical scriptures of Buddhism. Our next area of investigation would then, naturally, be the monastic *ordo*, the *vinaya*, and the speeches of the Buddha, the *suttas*.

Now, the *vinaya* is naturally most concerned with punishing people, or rather the monks and nuns, in *this* life rather than the afterlife. The reactions of the Buddhist monastic order to wrongdoings were of eight sorts. The most serious was expulsion from the order, the *pārājika* offences. Second are those wrongdoings punished by suspension (*saṅghādisesa*), and then there are six types of offences atoned for by expiation and confession, and no further punishment. However, the *pārājika* offences may also entail rebirth in hell, and the first offence mentioned is sexual conduct of any sort — for this, if it is intentional, the monk or nun is expelled from the *saṅgha*. Not having sexual relations is closely connected with the very identity of monastic life, not only in Buddhism, and is thus punished very hard, through exclusion or excommunication; it is the *pārājika* offence first mentioned in the Pāli *Vinaya*. All the rules are illustrated by long narratives throughout the *Vinaya*. The main story illustrating what is considered to be a sexual offence is the story of the monk Sudinna, who was seduced by his former wife, because her family wanted an heir to their properties. In the end Sudinna gave in, and he was scolded by the Buddha:

It is not fit, foolish man, it is not becoming, it is not proper, it is unworthy of a recluse, it is not lawful, it ought not to be done. . . . It were better for you, foolish man, that your male organ should enter the mouth of a black snake than it should enter a woman. It were better for you, foolish man, that your male organ should enter the mouth of a charcoal pit, ablaze afire, than it should enter a woman. For *that* reason, foolish man, you would go to death, or to suffering like unto death, but not on that account would you pass at the breaking up of the body after death to the waste, the bad bourn, abyss, hell. But for *this* reason, foolish man, at the breaking up of the body after death you would pass to the waste, the bad bourn, abyss, hell. (Vin. Su. P. I.5.11)¹⁷

¹⁷⁾ . . . na tv eva tappaccayā kāyassa bheda parammaraṇā apāyā duggatim vinipātā nirayā upapajjeya. ito nidānaṃ ca kho moghapurisa kāyassa bheda parammaraṇā apāyā duggatim vinipātā nirayā uppajjeya. (We write *Vinaya* with a capital when referring to

Sexual offences were evidently not forgiven, even if they were unconscious or unwilling, as some of the other stories illustrate. Real sexual offences would lead not only to exclusion from the order, however, but at death to lower existences and hell. There is no lack of creativity, though, in the description of the various sorts of sexual offences in the *Vinaya*.

The first of the four *pārājikas*, then, is sexual offence (*methuna-dhamma*), which is also punished in hell. The other three *pārājikas* of stealing, or, “appropriating what is not given” (*adinnādāna*), killing of human beings (*jīvitā voropana*), and the claiming of magical abilities (*uttarimanussadhamma*), be they true or not, were not as such connected to additional punishment in hell by their interpretative narratives in the *Vinaya*. There is, however, a story (Vin. Su. P. IV.1.2) that those claiming supernatural powers for the sake of extracting alms from the laity end up in hell. And in general all the sins subsumed under the category of *parājika* would lead to hell.

The fifth *ānantarika* sin, causing schism in the monastic order (*saṅghabbeda*), is not mentioned as a break of a *pārājika* rule, entailing automatic expulsion, but as entailing *suspension* for a period to be decided by the *saṅgha* (*saṅghādīṣeṣa*).¹⁸ This is illustrated by the narrative about the Buddha’s cousin, Devadatta, who tried to usurp the leadership of the *saṅgha* from the Buddha. Devadatta wished to split the monastic community by proposing a more strict discipline, by which he aimed at attracting more disciples, e.g. the prohibition of fish and meat, which were allowed by the Buddha if the meat given to the monk came from animals killed without the monk’s knowledge, and some other measures stricter than those taught by the Buddha.¹⁹ This was

the texts of the *vinaya* rules.) The monks and nuns were expected to know all these rules, and every fortnight they were recited during the *uposatha* ceremony. If anybody had committed a sin, they should show it with a sign, and receive the allotted punishment. The *vinaya* of the nuns included eight *pārājika* rules, the additional ones not surprisingly connected with sexual misconduct; see *Bikkhunivibhaṅga* I.1–IV.2.

¹⁸ See von Hinüber 1996:10. Norman (1983:18) uses the older translation “formal meeting” for *saṅghādīṣeṣa*.

¹⁹ Five rules: “The brethren shall live all their life long in the forest, subsist solely on doles collected out of doors, dress solely in rags picked out of dust-heaps, dwell under trees and never under a roof, never eat fish or flesh.” *Cullavagga* VII.3.14.

reported to the Buddha, who asked whether it was true, and when it was confirmed, he made the rule that splitting the *saṅgha* with such views was an offence entailing suspension if the monk, after being admonished three times, did not give up his views. This would also, by the next rule, be the reaction against monks supporting the schismatic view (Vin. Su. S. X–XI).

However, Devadatta went further than only sowing disagreement in the monastic community, and his personality became emblematic of treason against the Lord, against Truth and Awakening itself (Vin. Cullavagga VII.2.1–4.8.): To usurp the leadership of the community — his motive is stated to be gain and honour — he even tried to kill the Lord with an aggressive elephant named Nālāgiri. But the Lord “suffused the elephant Nālāgiri with loving kindness of mind... Then the Lord, stroking the elephant Nālāgiri’s forehead with his right hand... Then the elephant Nālāgiri, having taken the dust off the Lord’s feet with his trunk, having scattered it over his head, moved back bowing while he gazed upon the Lord... ‘Some are tamed by stick, by goads and whips. The elephant was tamed by the great seer without a stick, without a weapon.’” But the end for Devadatta was incumbent on him. Two of the Lord’s main disciples, Sāriputta and Moggallāna, came to see Devadatta, who asked Sāriputta to entertain the defecting monks with a talk on the *dhamma*, since he himself was tired and his back was aching. Sāriputta convinced the 500 monks lead astray by Devadatta to return to the Lord, and when Kokālika, Devadatta’s main follower, woke him up, “at that very place hot blood issued from Devadatta’s mouth,” and he was reborn “in a bad state of existence, as an inhabitant of hell for an aeon, incurable” (*āpāyiko nerayiko kappatṭho atekīccho*). The Devadatta story in the *Vinaya* ends with a verse:

Never let anyone of evil desire arise in the world;
 And know it by this: as the bourn of those evil desires.
 Known as “sage,” held as “one who made the self become,”
 Devadatta stood shining as with fame — I heard tell.
 He, falling into recklessness, assailing the Truth-finder
 Attained Avīci Hell, four-doored, frightful.

Thus we learn in the *Vinaya* that the sin of splitting the community of monks ended up in hell in Devadatta’s case, but, as we saw above, the

sin is one of expulsion decided by a formal meeting, and the *Vinaya* discusses in this perspective the difference between dissension (*saṅgharāji*) and schism (*saṅghabheda*), the second of course being the most heinous sin in that it attacks the very identity of the monastic order — and, therefore, the only appropriate punishment would be in hell, and the narrative on Devadatta illustrates this.

Kokālika, the main follower of Devadatta, died of ulcers all over his body and was reborn in the Lotus hell because he spoke ill about the Buddha's disciples Sāriputta and Moggallāna. His punishment is in accordance with his evil slandering:

In sooth to every person born
An axe is born within his mouth,
Wherewith the fool doth cut himself
Whereas he speaks evilly. (SN I,149)²⁰

Devadatta is described as the main culprit also in the *Suttas*, the speeches of the Buddha, as deserving the worst of punishment in the deepest of the hells, *Avīci*, for his *saṅghabheda*, but most of all for his thirst for gain, honour and praise (*lābhasakkārasiloko*) — the topic of the *Devadattasutta* in the *Aṅguttaranikāya*.²¹ But it is not the Buddha, of course, who punishes — one is punished by the force of one own actions — the Buddha is only forgiving and friendly, even when the elephant attacks him.

Niraya and the *duggati* are frequent themes in the *suttas* as places for gruesome punishments: we have already seen quotations in the *Kathāvattu* above, and *The Stupid and the Wise*, and the following *The Messengers of the Gods*,²² are *suttas* in particular devoted to the subject. The Stupid is of course the sinner who is stupid enough to incur only suffering by sins in body, speech and mind — as the sins are ordered in Buddhism, similar to the Christian formula “thoughts, words and deeds.” The five basic sins out of which the whole morality of Buddhism is generated are all committed by the Stupid, the fool, who is “one who

²⁰ *purisassa hi jātassa kuṭṭhārī jāyate mukhe, yāya chindati attānaṃ bālo dubbhāsitaṃ bhaṇaṃ*. Cf. above, note 5, same verse in AN V.174.

²¹ IV.2.2.8, but cf. *Purisindriyañānasutta* (VI.2.1.8), and *Devadattavipattisutta* (VIII.1.1.7) mentioning also his hellish career, similar in SN V.4.2; VI.2.2; etc.

²² *Bālaṇḍitasutta* and *Devadhūtasutta*, MN. III.3.9–10.

made onslaught on creatures” (*pāṇātipātī*), “a taker of what had not been given” (*adinnādāyī*), “behaving wrongly in regard to sense-pleasures” (*kāmesu micchācārī*) — i.e. sexual misconduct, mainly — “aliar” (*musāvādī*), and “one given up to occasions for sloth consequent upon drinking arrack, toddy and strong liquor” (*surāmerayamajjapamādatṭhāyī*) — fairly close to what are regarded as sins by most cultures, religious or not, universally.²³ Such thieves and evildoers are punished in this world by kings ordering for them tortures, as our *sutta* says, citing the standard catalogue in Pāli literature of such punishments, excelling in the (un)aesthetics of gruesomeness: “flogging him with whips, with canes, with cudgels, cutting of his hand, his foot hand and foot, his ear, nose, ear and nose, torturing him with the gruel-pot, with the chank-shave,” and so on.²⁴ But, indeed, he also ends up in hell: “He, monks, who is a fool, having fared wrongly in thought, at the breaking up of the body after dying arises in the sorrowful ways, the bad bourn, the Downfall, Niraya hell.”²⁵ These sins are, of course, punished much harder in hell

²³) Sometimes the arrack and toddy is left out and there are only the four sins, as in the *Lesser and Greater Analysis of Deeds*, the *Cūḷakammavibhaṅgasutta* and the *Mahākammavibhaṅgasutta*, MN III.4.5–6. The five are mentioned *passim*. The committer of the third sin is often called *abrahmacārī*.

²⁴) The commentaries explain: gruel pot: they took off the top of the skull and, taking a red hot iron ball with pincers, dropped it into it so that the brains boiled over; chank-shave: sandpapering the scalp with gravel until it became smooth as a sea-shell; Rāhu’s moth: Rāhu the Asura swallowed the moon and caused its eclipse; they opened his mouth with a skewer, inserted oil and a wick and lit it; fire-garland: the body was smeared with oil and set alight; flaming hand: the hand was made into a torch with oil-rags and set alight; hay-twist: the skin was flayed from the neck downwards and twisted below the ankles into a band by which he was hung up; bark-dress: the skin was cut into strips and tied up into a sort of garment; the antelope: the victim was trussed up, spitted to the ground with an iron pin and roasted alive; flesh-hooking: he was flayed with double fish-hooks; disc-slice: little discs of flesh the size of a copper coin were cut off him; pickling process: the body was beaten all over with cudgels and the wounds rubbed with caustic solution by combs; circling the pin: the body was pinned to the ground through the ears and twirled round by the feet; straw mattress: the body was beaten till every bone was broken and it became limp as a mattress. See AN tr. p. 42–43 with notes and references. One is struck by the imaginary power of cruelty and the highly developed ancient science of torture.

²⁵) Standard phrase with few variations *passim* in the Pāli canon: *Sa kho so bhikkhave bālo kāyena duccharitā caritvā vācāya duccharitā caritvā manasā duccharitā caritvā kāyassa bheda parammaraṇā apāyā duggatim vinipātā nirayā upapajjati.*

than here in the human world, and the Lord can only describe them with similes: a thief is stabbed with a hundred spears in the morning, midday and in the evening by the king's orders, but if one compares the suffering of this man with a small stone, the sufferings of hell would be comparable to a Himalaya mountain of such stones. Then follows a vivid description of hell as quoted above from the *Kathāvatthu*, and also a depiction of the various animal existences the sinner may incur because of his bad deeds — the deeds themselves attract him to these states of existences, horses and cattle being among the better states, followed by dogs and jackals, etc., and in the end he may be born among beetles, maggots and insects, or, worst of all among the animals, rotting fish.

There is every reason to avoid the *duggattis*, as they are extremely hard to get out of: it is very difficult to again attain human birth — which of course is a great privilege, because you then may receive the teaching of the Buddha and be liberated from the horrors of *samsāra*. The simile given to illustrate this concept is that of a man who throws a yoke with a hole in it into the sea and it floats everywhere: it is more difficult for a being born in the lower states of existence to attain human birth than it is for a blind turtle coming to the surface of the ocean every hundred years to put its neck through the hole of the yoke.²⁶ The reason is that “there is no *dhamma*-faring there, no even-faring, no doing of what is skilled, no doing of what is good. Monks, there is devouring of one another there and feeding on the weak.” It is also difficult to practice good *kamma* there, which is necessary if the unfortunate being is to move upwards into better states of existence. Even if born as a human again, he would be born among the low, where it is also difficult to perform good deeds to improve one's karmic lot (MN III.169). So the advice is to act well with regard to our fellow beings and keep our morality clean. The wise man, of course, is the opposite of everything appertaining to the stupid: he will be born in the divine world, where the pleasures are as indescribable as the sufferings of hell.

The king of Niraya, hell, is Yama. In the *sutta* *The Messengers of the Gods*²⁷ the sinner is questioned by the king, being brought before him

²⁶) For the simile, cf. also SN I.5.7–8.

²⁷) MN III.3.10, abridged version in AN III.1.4.6.

by the guardians of hell: “This man, sire, had no respect for his mother, no respect for his father, he does not honour recluses, he does not honour brahmins, he does not pay due respect to the elders of the family. Let your majesty decree a punishment for him.”²⁸ King Yama then interviews him on whether he has not seen the messengers of the gods, the *Devadhūtas*, who are personifications, depicted in a very sombre way, of the five situations of suffering of existence: birth, old age, illness, a thief punished by whipping, then a rotting corpse. We recognize the concluding elements of the chain of dependent origin.²⁹ The situations are depicted in the *sutta* as divine messengers of the qualities of *samsāra*, nothing but impermanence and suffering. But the man before the king had not taken heed of these reminders, he still acted badly, and “King Yama, monks, having cross-questioned him, questioned him closely and having spoken to him concerning the fifth divine messenger, was silent.” An ominous silence, evidently, because then the guards drag the poor man off to his punishments. The favourite piece quoted in the *Kathāvatthu* concerning punishments (see above) is given. But the *Devadhūtasutta* has more details. The unfortunate is hurled around the Great Hell against the four gates, burned and tortured. And then:

Monks, there comes a time once in a very long while when the eastern gateway of this Great Niraya Hell is opened. He rushes there swiftly and speedily; while he is rushing swiftly and speedily his skin burns and his hide burns and his flesh burns and his tendons burn and his eyes are filled with smoke — such is his plight. And though *he has attained much*, the gateway is nevertheless closed against him. Thereat he feels feelings that are painful, sharp, severe. But he does not do his time until he makes an end of that evil deed.³⁰

²⁸) MN III.180: *nirayapālā nānābhāsu gahetvā yamassa rañño dassenti ’ayā deva, puriso amatteyyo apetteyyo asāmañño abrahmañño na kulejettāpacāyī, imassa devo daṇḍā paṇetuti.*

²⁹) The final elements of the *paṭiccasamuppāda*, the result of ignorance, *avijjā*, are birth, old age, death, sorrow, lamentation suffering, depression and despair: *jarāmaraṇasokaparidevadukkhadomanassa’ ūpayāsa*. The *devadhūtas* also correspond to the objects of meditation, as meditation on the impure creates disgust for existence and makes one seek the good, and ultimately *nibbāna*.

³⁰) The commentary on the *sutta*: “After saying that ‘he has attained much,’ that is, having attained many hundred thousand years in Avīci, [it says] that it takes him all this time to work off the ripening of his evil deed” (abbreviation of MA 4.235 as in MN III, tr. p. 227 n.5). The Buddhist “Judas” occupies, expectedly, the lowest and most terrible hell.

Not unexpectedly, he experiences the same at the other gates, but, in the end, the eastern gate is open for him, but only for him to be reborn in another hell: the Great Filth Hell, where his skin, flesh and bones are cut off. Then he is reborn the in Ember Hell, the Forest of Silk-Cotton Trees, which he has to climb — they are of course burning — and then the Hell of burning water. He is hungry, asking for food, and the guards haul him out with a fishhook and fill his mouth with glowing copper pellets that burn his chest and stomach before they pass out with his bowels and intestines. When daring to say he is thirsty, he gets a similar treatment.

The end of this text, though, shows that there is after all a way out of hell, and that even its ruler Yama is reborn in *inferno* because of his own actions: even he would like to be born as a human to hear the teachings of the Lord Buddha and thus be liberated from suffering. So Yama is not an eternal ruler of the Netherworld, he is in principle a living being transmigrating like any other, who, because of his actions, has become what he is, in accordance with the *kamma* principle, which is universal:

Once upon a time, monks, it occurred to King Yama: “Those that do evil deeds in the world are subjected to a variety of punishments like these. O that I might acquire human status and that a Tathāgata might arise in the world, a perfected one, a fully Self-Awakened One, and that I might wait on that Lord, and that that Lord might teach me *dhamma*, and that I might understand that Lord’s *dhamma*.” (MN III.187)

Thus, there is indeed mobility in the Buddhist universe, but at a fairly slow rate, given the particular understanding of time in classical India, where the age of the universe was not counted in millennia, as in ancient western traditions, but in *kappas*, aeons, time periods of enormous length³¹ — which length, however, varied according to

³¹ Cf. SN III.1.6: *Dīgho kho bhikkhu kappo. So na sukaro sākhātum ettakāni vassānīti vā, ettakāni vassasatāni iti vā, ettakāni vassasahassāni iti vā, ettakāni vassatasahassāni iti vāti.* “A *kappa* is long. It is not easy to calculate how many years it is, how many hundreds of years it is, how many thousand of years it is, how many hundred thousands of years it is.” Later, and particularly in the Mahāyāna, the numbers of years in a *kalpa* tended to reach unthinkable and immeasurable figures. See also notes 2, 5 and 6.

various traditions. The *kappas* would also be eternally recurring. The Buddha would remember these *kappas*, because of his divine vision, and his advanced students would also remember some. But only the Buddha could recount *all* his previous births, and also all the births of others, and that is the rationale given in the *Jātakas*. Remembering one's former lives, and being able to relate to all the sins one has committed during the innumerable previous births, is the clue to get rid of their results and be freed from being reborn again in the *duggati*, and in the end to be liberated from *samsāra*.

In the *Dhammapada*, it seems, it is still mainly the monks, who are exhorted to perform good deeds and are threatened with hell, who are targets of the preaching, and the theme of monastic hypocrisy and corruption is emphasized — a frequent theme both in Buddhism and in other monastic traditions: “Who speaks untruth to purgatory goes; he too who says ‘I do not’; both these, in passing on, equal become, men of base actions in another world. Many about whose neck is a yellow robe, of evil qualities and uncontrolled, wicked by wicked deeds, in hell they're born.”³²

In the *Jātakas*, though, the layperson is more often part of the story, and it is in the *Jātrakas* that the exuberance of early Buddhist narratives unfolds fully — also concerning the subject of hell. The *Jātakas* are a vehicle of Buddhist preaching. They narrate how bad actions entail bad results, and the good the opposite, and that across the borders of death, as the fruits of *kamma* appear in many lives after the act was committed. Thus the *Jātaka* stories illustrate how the Buddha, being first a Bodhisatta, incarnated in all kinds of existences throughout his development before becoming a complete Buddha, cultivated his wisdom and compassion and his good actions. They also show how incidents in the Buddha's “present” life are connected to all the people he related to in his former lives, and thus the workings of *kamma* from life to life, and the connections between the *dramatis personae* throughout the chains of reincarnation, are brought into focus. Thus the *Jātakas* have a common formal structure: (1) story of the present (*paccupannavatthu*,

³²) DhP XXII, 306 ff., The Hell Chapter, *nirayavaggo* 1–2: *abhūtavādi nirayaṃ upeti yo cāpi katvā na karomīti cāha, ubho'pi te pecca samā bhavanti nihīnakammā manuḷe parattha. kāsāvakaṇṭhā bahavo pāpadhammā asaṅṅatā, pāpā pāpehi kammehi nirayaṃ te upapajjare.*

an incident from the life of the Buddha); (2) a past event (*atītavatthu*, giving the reason for the incident, by way of the *kamma* that would be the cause of it in lives past); (3) the connections (*samodhāna*) between the *dramatis personae* in the present with those in the past lives, their “identifications,” so to say (von Hinüber 1996:56). A mnemonic verse contains first the title, then the present, and then the past, and then the connections and the verse are expanded on through a commentary on each of the words in the verse, and we have a full story.

As the Buddha in the stories most often was reborn as a layman, the *Jātakas* were always important in lay Buddhism; thus, they are close to the Mahāyāna literature, which also underlines the lay ideals at the expense of monasticism, often described as corrupt and decadent. There are, however, few, if any, explicit Mahāyāna dogmas in the Pāli *Jātaka* collection that we are employing here to describe early Buddhist views on hell. Thus the *Jātakas* describe not only the Buddha’s previous lives, but also the moral ideals and ethical self-sacrifice he practiced in these earlier lives, as models for the Buddhists, and how he developed, by his behaviour, into the perfected man and laid down the path to be followed by others. Thus the ethics of the Buddha and his former incarnations are described, but also the other personalities he meets, and how *they* acted in former lives — good actions causing good rebirths, and bad ones causing rebirth as animals, spirits and not the least in hell, all according to the law of *kamma*. Thus the *Jātakas* became a source of entertainment as narratives, and were always an important instrument in the hands of the monks in their effort to educate the lay people with edifying storytelling. On the whole, the descriptions on hell in the *Jātakas* are the same as those given in the earlier *Vinaya* and *Sutta* literature. The earliest *Jātakas* are a formalized part of the Tipiṭaka, and were written down in verse for memorizing. The *Jātaka* collection of the *Khuddakanikāya* consists of such verses, which are the nuclei of the developed stories as we have them. The total number of *Jātakas* was originally 550 (von Hinüber 1996:54–58, Norman 1983:77–84). The verses are, as often in Buddhist literature, mnemonic, containing only a reference to the story, while the stories themselves were probably orally transmitted and written down at a later stage.³³

³³ Other (and later) *Vinayas* often integrated more of the *Jātakas* into the *Vinaya*

Our topic is of course important in the *Jātakas*, since many of the persons the Buddha meets throughout his career of rebirths are described as having had a stay in hell — as well as in the other states of existence — the cycle of rebirth being unending without the teachings of a Buddha.

For our survey of hell in the *Jātakas* we may start again with Devadatta, the main villain of the Buddhist drama and the foremost candidate for punishments in hell. He goes to the deepest hell, and his mode of dying is expanded upon compared to the earlier sources. He falls ill, and blood issues from his mouth, but he somehow repents and wishes to be reconciled with the Lord. But the Lord does not wish to see him, and Devadatta, lying on a litter, wishes to ease his pains with drink and a bath. He gets up, but before he can drink, fires flare up from the deepest hell, Avīci. The earth opens, and even though he takes refuge in the Buddha in that moment, he is swallowed by the earth, and with five hundred families of his followers he is reborn in the deepest hell.³⁴ Evidently, in early Buddhism, contrary, e.g., to Christianity, to express your faith in the last moment before death has no effect on your fate in the afterlife — the principle of *kamma* is merciless and impossible to change.³⁵ However, it still seems possible to avoid hell, if the Way of Truth is followed. King Ajātasattu, who had killed his father, king

itself, like that of the Sarvāstivāda, which is completely extant in Tibetan and partly in Sanskrit. A number of indices exist for the *Jātakas* e.g. Cowell 1895–1913, with its ample indices in vol. VI, as well as electronic editions. We are using Cowell's translations and references to them.

³⁴ The idea connected with it is that the earth is not able to carry the weight of such misdeeds — even though it can carry the weight of Mt. Sumeru. Devadatta also died in that way in former births (e.g. Ja no. 72, 358), and this is the mode of dying for very great sinners. A woman who tried to lie about a sexual relation with the Lord, to harm him so that rival ascetics would get more alms, dies in the same way: the earth opens, flames encompass her and she falls into Avīci. There was a background to the story, though: in a previous incarnation the evil woman had made sexual advances on her son, the Bodhisatta, who of course rejected her (Ja no. 472).

³⁵ Ja no. 467: *Samuddavāṇijātakā*, which illustrates a present event, as usual, with a previous birth, a story however fairly unrelated to the present apart from the ever-recurrent dichotomies of stupid and wise, bad and good, as in several other stories on Devadatta in previous lives, like that of “Luckie and Blackie” — as Cowell translates — in Ja no. 11. Further references to Devadatta's death and repeated condemnation to hell is found in Cowell 1895–1913: index, s.v. Devadatta.

Biṃbisāra, on Devadatta's advice, has unbearable visions of hell in his dreams, and fears the consequences of his ill deed. Humbly he approaches the Tathāgata, and, "listening to his sweet discourse on the Law and consorting with a virtuous friend, his fears abated and his feeling of horror disappeared, and he recovered his peace of mind and happily cultivated the four ways of Department." The story is underlined with an *atītavatthu*, where, in another life, the Bodhisatta tells another king who also committed patricide, of the horrors of hell:

Bright jets of fire on every side shoot from his tortured frame,
 His very limbs, hair, nails and all, serve but to feed the flame.
 And his body burns apace, racked through and through with pain,
 Like a goad-stricken elephant, poor wretch, he roars again.
 Whoso from greed or hatred shall, vile creature, slay his sire,
 In Kālasutta Hell long time shall agonize in fire.

Consolation is evidently possible, especially through being scared away from bad ways by hellish visions and stories, but the story remains silent on the afterlife of king Ajātasattu. There is evidently hope, however, if one follows the right path, and thus the Bodhisatta ends his versified sermon with a heavenly vision:

Through virtue stored on earth of old the good to Heaven attain,
 Here Brahmas, Devas, Indra, lo! ripe fruit of Virtue gain.
 This then I say, bear righteous sway throughout thy realm, my king,
 For justice done is merit won, nor e'er regret will bring.³⁶

But, of course, attaining heaven by good acts is not the aim of Buddhist practice, which is *nibbāna*, attained by *kamma* neither moral nor non-moral, the complete freedom from rebirth in the whole system of five worlds.

Another *Jātaka* that describes a fully developed hell with all its qualities and paraphernalia is the *Mahānāradakassapajātaka*, where Devadatta again is one of the persons in the *paccupannavatthu* (vol. VI, no. 544). The *Jātaka* also puts its description of hell into the context of Indian philosophy of the day, which very often discussed actions and

³⁶ Further in Cowell 1895–1913:iv, 137–40; Ja no. 530, where the eight classical hot hells are mentioned, and others are referred to.

their fruits. As we have seen, the Buddhists took a firm stance on the principle that *kamma* never disappeared, that actions always had consequences, and in this *Jātaka* that principle is contrasted with the view that destiny, or necessity, *niyati*, always decides our lives, and even though we might reincarnate, our actions mean nothing: we are not purified or defiled by our actions, only time will purify us, and in the end, at the world conflagration, our actions will be purified anyway.³⁷ In the present story king Āngati is a recent convert of the Buddha, and identical to the famous Uruvela-Kassapa, whom the Buddha wishes to show as his convert — and not the other way around, since Uruvela-Kassapa was a great teacher and magician. One evening king Āngati considers what to do for entertainment and counsels with his ministers. One of them, Alāta, who was a former incarnation of Devadatta, wishes to make war with the neighbouring state to entertain the king, but another minister suggests it would be a better idea to listen to a sage. The sage they choose, though, teaches the doctrine of no retribution and of universal necessity, contrary to the teachings of the Buddha. Alāta agrees, since in his former life, which he remembers, he was a butcher, killing a lot of living beings, but now he is a great general — thus his former bad actions have meant nothing for his status in this life. Another poor man there, an ascetic keeping all his vows and fasts, gains nothing, even though he practiced the same virtuous life also in his former reincarnation — thus he also decides to give up that hard ascetic life for pleasures. The story ends with the king being convinced by the doctrine of no retribution, and orders his retinue and palace to produce for him only pleasure and entertainment, so that he can give up his administrative duties, which provide him with no fun.

It took his delightful daughter, named Rujā, to get him onto better ways: she was born from his main queen — all his other sixteen thousand other wives were barren. “She had offered prayers for a hundred thousand ages,” she kept the fasting days and gave away all her riches to the poor. Useless, said the king, because good actions have no effect. The *kamma*, however, is accumulated gradually, and eventually, like when the load of a ship is too heavy, it sinks, just as one gradually

³⁷) Such views are in Buddhism usually called *ucchedavāda*, “school of discontinuity,” but in general also *kālavāda*, “school of time.”

accumulating bad *kamma* in the end will sink into hell. Likewise, a pair of scales, when filled on one side, will gradually rise like a good person to heaven. It took, however, a tale of her former incarnations, and a sermon of the Bodhisatta on hell, to persuade the king to give up his wrong views and destructive ways.

To illustrate her point she recalled her seven last incarnations. First, she was the son of a smith who committed much evil with his friend — corrupting other men’s wives as if he were an immortal. The next incarnation was not that bad, as the son of a rich merchant family, fostered and honoured, learned and devoted to good works. In the next rebirth, though, came the full force of *kamma*: she was reborn in the Rorava Hell for an extended period, and after that as a monkey whose father bit off his testicles, as a result of touching other people’s wives.³⁸ Then, before being born as a human again, she was successively a castrated ox, a human neither man nor woman, then a goddess at the court of the king of the gods, and in the end she was born as Rujā, as the bad results waned. She would be born as a woman, though, for seven more rebirths, since to be born as a man is more difficult. She tried to persuade her father with her sermon on *kamma*, but it did not work, and it took the Bodhisatta to depict the punishments of hell and scare him before the king was put on the right track again. The Bodhisatta was then named Nārada and incarnated in none less than the creator god Brahma. Thus the story illustrates the mobility of the cosmos: the creator god is also a particular being in a particular incarnation, not some kind of eternal divine entity. The god took pity on the worshipping girl who wanted to save her father from hell, he assumed the looks of an ascetic in this world and then convinced the king that there indeed are other worlds, like heaven and hell, contrary to the *ucchedavāda* of the teacher Guṇa Kassapa, the materialist, nihilist and believer in necessity, fate. The sermon on hell given by the Bodhisatta spares nothing by way of depicting the worst punishments (Ja IV.124–25). In this sermon on hell we notice the dogs of hell, reminding us to some extent of Cerberus: “Two dogs Sabala and Sāma of giant size, mighty and strong, devour with their iron teeth him who is driven hence and goes to another world.” Also

³⁸) More detailed punishment for such sinners in hell, and the difficulty of escaping it, in Ja no. 314.

the river of hell has similarities with Lethe, etc., though in the Buddhist version the river of hell is a poetic image rather than a cosmologically significant entity: “On flows the river Vetaraṇī, cruel with boiling water and covered with iron lotuses and sharp leaves as he is hurried along covered with blood and with his limbs all cut, in the stream of Vetaraṇī where there is nothing to rest upon — who would ask him for his debt?” Thus the king was saved.

Another widespread motif in the narratives of hell is the visit to the infernal regions. It is found in Buddhism in the *Nimijātaka* (Ja no. 541). King Nimi, again a former incarnation of the Buddha, is the Buddhist Dante, and Mātali, the charioteer of the god Indra — Ānanda, the Buddha’s main disciple, in the present life — plays the part of Vergil. The gods in Indra’s heaven are so impressed by king Nimi, his generosity and his pure behaviour, that they wish to see him in heaven. He is sent for with Indra’s chariot, and on the way to heaven he is shown first the infernal and then the celestial regions by his guide and driver Mātali, who explains the tortures of the sinners in hell. The catalogue is long: misers and those with bad language are eaten by dogs and other animals; those hurting and tormenting people without sins lie on the ground pounded with red-hot irons; those bribing witnesses and denying debts are burned in coal-pits; those hurting ascetics or brahmins are fired in an iron cauldron; those killing birds are boiled in hot water; those cheating by mixing chaff in the grain try, thirsty, to drink from a river, but the water turns into chaff; thieves are pierced by arrowheads and spikes; hunters are fastened by the neck and their bodies are torn to pieces; those harming their friends must lie in a stinking lake; matricides and patricides are punished in a lake of blood; dishonest traders have their tongues pierced with hooks and must live like fish on land; women who leave their husbands to satisfy their lust are buried down to their waists, and men seducing other people’s wives are taken by their legs and thrown headlong into hell; and, the worst of all punishments, which is not specified, though, is for heretics. Indra in his heaven is worried that Nimi would consume all his life in his cosmic travel, so he instructs Mātali to show him the whole universe in a flash, since a small moment in other worlds, like heaven, is like a month for humans, even though at the time the story unfolds, humans lived four times eighty four thousand years — again an example of the enormous time-spans

imagined in Indian mythology. However, Nimi arrives safely in heaven after visiting a number of heavenly abodes and being explained how the extreme happiness experienced by the inmates there is the fruit of good actions. Nimi gives a sermon in heaven on the balance between good deeds and ascetic penance, and then goes back to his kingdom to make his son the new king. He would himself spend his last eighty-four thousand years as an ascetic, as had his eighty-four thousand predecessors. The Buddhist *Jātaka* literature may, with a certain right, be regarded as the first fiction literature. The stories usually seem to have an entertaining character, and may not be intended to be taken as absolutely serious — indeed this tendency develops from the more realistic storytelling in the speeches of the Buddha, via the *Jātakas*, to the Mahāyāna sūtras, which definitely were not intended to be read as anything but fictitious literature into which the dogmas of Buddhism were woven.

The transformation of the Netherworld from an often sad place for the deceased forefathers into a place of retribution and punishment for bad behaviour constitutes a problem in the study of religions. And it is not easy to explain how the idea of hell was propagated. If our understanding of the dates is correct, the Buddhist idea of hell is historically prior to the same idea in the Mediterranean cultures. Thus the following question may be posed: did the idea of hell originate in India with Buddhism and then spread to the West, or did the idea originate independently in the Mediterranean world? Clearly, there was ample communication between India and the West over sea and land during the centuries before and after Christ. Thus the diffusion of the idea of hell from the East to the West is historically and geographically possible. One cannot but notice that the “fully developed hell” originates in the West much at the same time as monastic institutions and practices, and one can argue, even with simple Freudian arguments, that monks and nuns are psychologically inclined to condemn to eternal punishments the sinners practising what they are themselves denied. The monastic institutions and lifestyle “need” hell, one might say. And Buddhism was indeed the earliest and most important tradition to institutionalize monastic life. Thus it is quite possible that both hell and monastic discipline were, if not necessarily “imported,” at least influenced from India when they suddenly became popular in fourth century Egypt and elsewhere around the Mediterranean. In the present paper we have

limited ourselves to the description of the Buddhist hells as they appear in the Pāli sources. Since, however, the original function of hell in Buddhism was to illustrate the workings of *kamma*, the later Buddhist tradition, with all its variants on the theme, largely built on the same principles as the ideas about hell in early Buddhism.

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The abbreviations of the Pāli texts are as von Hinüber 1996:250–53. Terms from the literature are in Pāli, not Sanskrit, given our sources.

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