MN 130 — Messengers of the Gods

English translation by Bhikkhu Sujato.
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Text

Middle Discourses 130

Messengers of the Gods

So I have heard. At one time the Buddha was staying near Sāvatthī in Jeta's Grove, Anāthapiṇḍika's monastery. There the Buddha addressed the mendicants, "Mendicants!"

"Venerable sir," they replied. The Buddha said this:

"Mendicants, suppose there were two houses with doors. A person with clear eyes standing in between them would see humans entering and leaving a house and wandering to and fro.

In the same way, with clairvoyance that is purified and superhuman, I see sentient beings passing away and being reborn—inferior and superior, beautiful and ugly, in a good place or a bad place. I understand how sentient beings pass on according to their deeds: 'These dear beings did good things by way of body, speech, and mind. They never denounced the noble ones; they had right view; and they chose to act out of that right view. When their body broke up, after death, they were reborn in a good place, a heavenly realm, or among humans. These dear beings did bad things by way of body, speech, and mind. They denounced the noble ones; they had wrong view; and they chose to act out of that wrong view. When their body broke up, after death, they were reborn in the ghost realm, the animal realm, or in a place of loss, a bad place, the underworld, hell.'

The wardens of hell take them by the arms and present them to King Yama, saying, 'Your Majesty, this person did not pay due respect to their mother and father, ascetics and brahmins, or honor the elders in the family. May Your Majesty punish them!'

King Yama pursues, presses, and grills them about the first messenger of the gods: 'My man, did you not see the first messenger of the gods that appeared among human beings?'

He says, 'I saw nothing, sir.'

King Yama says to them, 'My man, did you not see among human beings a little baby collapsed in their own urine and feces?'

He says, 'I saw that, sir.'

King Yama says to them, 'My man, did it not occur to you—being sensible and mature— "I, too, am liable to be born. I'm not exempt from rebirth. I'd better do good by way of body,

speech, and mind”?’

He says, ‘I couldn’t, sir. I was negligent.’

King Yama says to them, ‘My man, because you were negligent, you didn’t do good by way of body, speech, and mind. Well, they’ll definitely punish you to fit your negligence. That bad deed wasn’t done by your mother, father, brother, or sister. It wasn’t done by friends and colleagues, by relatives and kin, by ascetics and brahmins, or by the deities. That bad deed was done by you alone, and you alone will experience the result.’

Then King Yama grills them about the second messenger of the gods: ‘My man, did you not see the second messenger of the gods that appeared among human beings?’

He says, ‘I saw nothing, sir.’

King Yama says to them, ‘My man, did you not see among human beings an elderly woman or a man—eighty, ninety, or a hundred years old—bent double, crooked, leaning on a staff, trembling as they walk, ailing, past their prime, with teeth broken, hair grey and scanty or bald, skin wrinkled, and limbs blotchy?’

He says, ‘I saw that, sir.’

King Yama says to them, ‘My man, did it not occur to you—being sensible and mature— “I, too, am liable to grow old. I’m not exempt from old age. I’d better do good by way of body, speech, and mind”?’

He says, ‘I couldn’t, sir. I was negligent.’

King Yama says to them, ‘My man, because you were negligent, you didn’t do good by way of body, speech, and mind. Well, they’ll definitely punish you to fit your negligence. That bad deed wasn’t done by your mother, father, brother, or sister. It wasn’t done by friends and colleagues, by relatives and kin, by ascetics and brahmins, or by the deities. That bad deed was done by you alone, and you alone will experience the result.’

Then King Yama grills them about the third messenger of the gods: ‘My man, did you not see the third messenger of the gods that appeared among human beings?’

He says, ‘I saw nothing, sir.’

King Yama says to them, ‘My man, did you not see among human beings a woman or a man, sick, suffering, gravely ill, collapsed in their own urine and feces, being picked up by some and put down by others?’

He says, ‘I saw that, sir.’

King Yama says to them, ‘My man, did it not occur to you—being sensible and mature— “I, too, am liable to become sick. I’m not exempt from sickness. I’d better do good by way of body, speech, and mind”?’ He says, ‘I couldn’t, sir. I was negligent.’

King Yama says to them, ‘My man, because you were negligent, you didn’t do good by way of body, speech, and mind. Well, they’ll definitely punish you to fit your negligence. That bad deed wasn’t done by your mother, father, brother, or sister. It wasn’t done by friends

and colleagues, by relatives and kin, by ascetics and brahmins, or by the deities. That bad deed was done by you alone, and you alone will experience the result.'

Then King Yama grills them about the fourth messenger of the gods: 'My man, did you not see the fourth messenger of the gods that appeared among human beings?'

He says, 'I saw nothing, sir.'

King Yama says to them, 'My man, did you not see among human beings when the rulers arrested a bandit, a criminal, and subjected them to various punishments— whipping, caning, and clubbing; cutting off hands or feet, or both; cutting off ears or nose, or both; the 'porridge pot', the 'shell-shave', the 'Rāhu's mouth', the 'garland of fire', the 'burning hand', the 'bulrush twist', the 'bark dress', the 'antelope', the 'meat hook', the 'coins', the 'caustic pickle', the 'twisting bar', the 'straw mat'; being splashed with hot oil, being fed to the hounds, being impaled alive, and being beheaded?'

He says, 'I saw that, sir.'

King Yama says to them, 'My man, did it not occur to you—being sensible and mature— "It seems that one who does bad deeds receives such punishment in this very life. What must happen to them in the next? I'd better do good by way of body, speech, and mind"?'

He says, 'I couldn't, sir. I was negligent.'

King Yama says to them, 'My man, because you were negligent, you didn't do good by way of body, speech, and mind. Well, they'll definitely punish you to fit your negligence. That bad deed wasn't done by your mother, father, brother, or sister. It wasn't done by friends and colleagues, by relatives and kin, by ascetics and brahmins, or by the deities. That bad deed was done by you alone, and you alone will experience the result.'

Then King Yama grills them about the fifth messenger of the gods: 'My man, did you not see the fifth messenger of the gods that appeared among human beings?'

He says, 'I saw nothing, sir.'

King Yama says to them, 'My man, did you not see among human beings a woman or a man, dead for one, two, or three days, bloated, livid, and festering?'

He says, 'I saw that, sir.'

King Yama says to them, 'My man, did it not occur to you—being sensible and mature— "I, too, am liable to die. I'm not exempt from death. I'd better do good by way of body, speech, and mind"?'

He says, 'I couldn't, sir. I was negligent.'

King Yama says to them, 'My man, because you were negligent, you didn't do good by way of body, speech, and mind. Well, they'll definitely punish you to fit your negligence. That bad deed wasn't done by your mother, father, brother, or sister. It wasn't done by friends and colleagues, by relatives and kin, by ascetics and brahmins, or by the deities. That bad deed was done by you alone, and you alone will experience the result.'

After grilling them about the fifth messenger of the gods, King Yama falls silent.

The wardens of hell punish them with the five-fold crucifixion. They drive red-hot stakes through the hands and feet, and another in the middle of the chest. And there they suffer painful, sharp, severe, acute feelings—but they don't die until that bad deed is eliminated.

The wardens of hell throw them down and hack them with axes. …

They hang them upside-down and hack them with hatchets. …

They harness them to a chariot, and drive them back and forth across burning ground, blazing and glowing. …

They make them climb up and down a big mountain of burning coals, blazing and glowing. …

The wardens of hell turn them upside down and throw them in a red-hot copper pot, burning, blazing, and glowing. There they're seared in boiling scum, and they're swept up and down and round and round. And there they suffer painful, sharp, severe, acute feelings—but they don't die until that bad deed is eliminated.

The wardens of hell toss them into the Great Hell. Now, about that Great Hell:

'Four are its corners, four its doors,

neatly divided section by section.

Surrounded by an iron wall,

of iron is its roof.

The ground is even made of iron,

it burns with fierce fire.

The heat forever radiates

a hundred leagues around.'

Now in the Great Hell, flames surge out of the walls and crash into the opposite wall: from east to west, from west to east, from north to south, from south to north, from bottom to top, from top to bottom. And there they suffer painful, sharp, severe, acute feelings—but they don't die until that bad deed is eliminated.

There comes a time when, after a very long period has passed, the eastern gate of the Great Hell is opened. So they run there as fast as they can. And as they run, their outer skin, inner skin, flesh, and sinews burn and even their bones smoke. Such is their escape; but when they've managed to make it most of the way, the gate is slammed shut. And there they suffer painful, sharp, severe, acute feelings—but they don't die until that bad deed is eliminated.

There comes a time when, after a very long period has passed, the western gate … northern gate … southern gate of the Great Hell is opened. So they run there as fast as they can. And as they run, their outer skin, inner skin, flesh, and sinews burn and even

their bones smoke. Such is their escape; but when they've managed to make it most of the way, the gate is slammed shut. And there they suffer painful, sharp, severe, acute feelings—but they don't die until that bad deed is eliminated.

There comes a time when, after a very long period has passed, the eastern gate of the Great Hell is opened. So they run there as fast as they can. And as they run, their outer skin, inner skin, flesh, and sinews burn and even their bones smoke. Such is their escape; and they make it out that door.

Immediately adjacent to the Great Hell is the vast Dung Hell. And that's where they fall. In that Dung Hell there are needle-mouthed creatures that bore through the outer skin, the inner skin, the flesh, sinews, and bones, until they reach the marrow and devour it. And there they suffer painful, sharp, severe, acute feelings—but they don't die until that bad deed is eliminated.

Immediately adjacent to the Dung Hell is the vast Hell of Burning Chaff. And that's where they fall. And there they suffer painful, sharp, severe, acute feelings—but they don't die until that bad deed is eliminated.

Immediately adjacent to the Hell of Burning Chaff is the vast Red Silk-Cotton Forest. It's a league high, full of sixteen-inch thorns, burning, blazing, and glowing. And there they make them climb up and down. And there they suffer painful, sharp, severe, acute feelings—but they don't die until that bad deed is eliminated.

Immediately adjacent to the Red Silk-Cotton Forest is the vast Sword-Leaf Forest. They enter that. There the fallen leaves blown by the wind cut their hands, feet, both hands and feet; they cut their ears, nose, both ears and nose. And there they suffer painful, sharp, severe, acute feelings—but they don't die until that bad deed is eliminated.

Immediately adjacent to the Sword-Leaf Forest is the vast Acid River. And that's where they fall. There they are swept upstream, swept downstream, and swept both up and down stream. And there they suffer painful, sharp, severe, acute feelings—but they don't die until that bad deed is eliminated.

The wardens of hell pull them out with a hook and place them on solid ground, and say, 'My man, what do you want?'

They say, 'I'm hungry, sir.'

The wardens of hell force open their mouth with a hot iron spike—burning, blazing, and glowing—and shove in a red-hot copper ball, burning, blazing, and glowing. It burns their lips, mouth, tongue, throat, and stomach before coming out below dragging their entrails. And there they feel painful, sharp, severe, acute feelings—but they don't die until that bad deed is eliminated.

The wardens of hell say, 'My man, what do you want?'

They say, 'I'm thirsty, sir.'

The wardens of hell force open their mouth with a hot iron spike—burning, blazing, and glowing—and pour in molten copper, burning, blazing, and glowing. It burns their lips,

mouth, tongue, throat, and stomach before coming out below dragging their entrails. And there they feel painful, sharp, severe, acute feelings—but they don't die until that bad deed is eliminated.

The wardens of hell toss them back in the Great Hell.

Once upon a time, King Yama thought: 'Those who do such bad deeds in the world receive these many different punishments. Oh, I hope I may be reborn as a human being! And that a Realized One—a perfected one, a fully awakened Buddha—arises in the world! And that I may pay homage to the Buddha! Let that Buddha teach me Dhamma, so that I may understand his teaching!'

Now, I don't say this because I've heard it from some other ascetic or brahmin. I only say it because I've known, seen, and realized it for myself."

That is what the Buddha said. Then the Holy One, the Teacher, went on to say:

"When warned by the gods' messengers,

those sons of Manu who are negligent

sorrow for a long time

when they go to that wretched place.

When warned by the gods' messengers,

the good and true persons here

never neglect

the teaching of the Noble One.

Seeing the danger in grasping,

the origin of birth and death,

the unattached are freed

with the ending of birth and death.

Happy, they've come to a safe place,

quenched in this very life.

They've gone beyond all enmities and fears,

and risen above all suffering."