

## Book Reviews

### **The Four Planes of Existence in Theravada Buddhism**

**By Sunthorn Na-Rangsi  
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The present work entitled ‘**The Four Planes of Existence in Theravada Buddhism**’ is a pamphlet originally published in 1976 on the subject of Buddhist Cosmology. It has been republished by Buddhist Publication Society, Kandy, Sri Lanka in 2006.

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The purpose of this small book is to give a lucid description of planes of existence in Theravada Buddhism. Basic material is taken from the early sutras, Abhidhamma and commentaries. Early pioneering work on Buddhist cosmology was written by Dr. A. MacGovern. There is a useful introduction to the book where readers find the mention made of other planes of existence apart from human world. This is the key point of the present work. The term Bhava is explained as ‘becoming’ or ‘state of existence’ or ‘plane of existence’. Sariputta’s explanation of origin and cessation of Bhava is quoted from the Sammaditthi sutra of the Majjhima Nikaya. In this the Pali term Upadana has been translated as attachment. For the Pali word, Upadana, attachment is not the right word in my opinion. It should be translated as grasping or clinging. In the Pali sutras Bhava is divided into three:

Kama (the plane of desire), Rupa (the plane of form) and Arupa (the plane of no-form). It has been pointed out in the introduction that the Abhidharmatthasangaha uses a new term, Bhumi, for Bhava. These four Bhumis are: Apayabhumi (the plane of misery), Kamasugatibhumi (the sensual happy plane), Rupavacarabhumi (the plane of form) and Arupavacarabhumi (the plane of no form). And also four types of births, Andaja (born from egg), Jalabuja (born from womb), Samsedaja (born from moisture) and Opatatika (spontaneous birth).

Chapter one is plane of misery (Apayabhumi) which deals with hell (Niraya), the realm of animals (Tiracchanayoni), the realm of the hungry ghost (Pretayoni) and the realm of Titans (Asurayoni). In Buddhist cosmology hell is divided into eight: Sanjiva, Kalasutta, Sanghata, Roruva or Dhumaroruva, Maharoruva, Tapanā, Mahatapanā and Avici.

Before describing the nature of each hell, definition of Niraya is given according to Paramatthajotika commentary. Niraya is the place where there is no happiness at all. And it is one of the realms where evildoers are born after death. All the Nirayas (hells) are located under the realm of human beings. Going by Paramatthajotika, the commentary on Petavatthu, five Ussada Nirayas are also mentioned. These five are smaller compared to eight great hells but suffering is abundant in these hells.

Next there is the description of great hell in accordance with the Devaduta sutra of the Majjhima Nikaya. Roof, floor, wall and so forth of this hell are made up of glowing iron. Five small hells (Ussadanirayas), Gutha-niraya (the Filth Hell), Kukkula-niraya (the Ember Hell), Simalivana-niraya (the Silk-cotton-tree

Hell), Asipattavana-niraya (Sword-leafed-forest Hell) and Vetarani-niraya (Caustic River Hell) are situated next to each gate of the Great Hell. It has been pointed out that altogether there are one hundred and sixty eight hells: eight great hells and one hundred and sixty small hells.

The questions asked by Yama, the ruler of hell, from each being who came to hell depending on bad karmas done by them are included in this chapter. And then the procedure of punishment has been recorded according to the description of the Devaduta sutra.

Next there is a short description of animal realm which is a part of the plane of misery. Quoting from Mahakammavibhanga sutra it is stated that those who kill animals are born as animals in the animal kingdom. Even the gods may be born as animals after the exhaustion of their good karmas, if they have negative karmas done previously. Animal kingdom is nowhere else but it is in the human realm. Referring to Jataka, the stories regarding the Buddha's previous existences in the Samsara, it is emphatically stated that the Bodhisatava was born in the animal realm many times.

The realm of unhappy ghosts (Pettivisaya) is considered as unhappy according to Buddhism. The beings in this realm are called Peta. There is no separate realm for Petas and they live in the human realm too. They are invisible to human eyes but visible to clairvoyance (Dibbacakkhu). Four kinds of Petas have been mentioned: Paradattupajivika-peta (Petas live on what was given by others), Khuppipasika-peta (hungry and thirsty peta), Nijjhamatanhika-peta (petas who consumed craving) and Kalakakancika-peta (black-eared- peta). Some stories from Pali texts are quoted to illustrate the state of Petas.

There is a short description of Titans (Asuras). This is the last category of beings born in the plane of misery. A distinction is made between Asuras (Titans) and God-Asuras (god-Titans). God-Asuras are said to be a kind of gods who live in Tavatimsa heaven. Vepacitti is the king of this class of Asuras. According to Paramatthajotika commentary, both Peta-Asuras and Niraya-Asuras live in a miserable state and they are called Kalakancika Petas.

Chapter two describes the nature of sensual happy planes of existence (Kamasugati-Bhumi). This plane is also called Kamavacara-bhumi. Dominating factor of this plane is diverse worldly desires. Sensual pleasures are derived from six sense faculties. First the reader finds many classifications of this realm in terms of commentarial description. There are twenty realms of sensual happy planes and they are divided into three groups: the sensual happy plane (Kamasugati Bhumi), the plane of form (Rupavacara Bhumi) and the plane of no-form (Arupavacara Bhumi). The sensual happy plane includes seven realms: the human realm and six heavens: Catummaharajika, Tavatimsa, Yama, Tusita, Nimmanarati and Paranimitavasavatti. Birth in these realms depends on meritorious karmas done by people in their previous lives.

The first human realm is considered as a happy plane even though many unhappy states are found to exist. To be born in the human realm, good karmas are necessary factors. In the description of the human plane it is stated that even though the human world is the lowest of happy realms of existence it has many good characteristics that cannot be found in other happy planes. To be a Buddha one has to be born in the human world. The completion of perfections (Paramitas) is possible only in the human world.

The description of Catummaharajika heaven is taken from Paramatthajotika

commentary and Atanatiya sutra of the Digha Nikaya. The heaven of the four great kings (Catummaharajika) is so called due to the fact that this realm is governed by four great kings. The god king Dhatarattha rules over the eastern direction of Catummaharajika. Dhatarattha is the king of Gandhabbas (musicians). Virulhaka is the king of Kumbhandas and rules over the southern direction. Virupaksa rules over the southern region and he is the king of Nagas. Kuvera or Vessavana is the king of demons (Yakkhas) and he is in charge of the northern region of Catummaharajika.

The heaven of the thirty three (Tavatimsa) gods is so called due to the fact that Magha and his thirty two friends were born in this happy realm. In their previous lives, this group accumulated good karmas. A description of what they did in their previous existence in the human world is given in this section.

Heaven of the Easeful (Yama) is ruled by the god king called Yama, therefore this realm is called Yama. Readers are told that regarding this heaven there is no much material found in the Pali scriptures. A comparison of days, months and years in the human world and heavenly realm is given in terms of Pali scriptures.

Tusita heaven is described as a contented and happy realm in the heavenly plane. It has been mentioned that Buddha's mother was born in this heaven after her death. And also Abhidhamma was preached by the Buddha to mother god and other gods of Tusita heaven.

The next description is regarding the heavenly realm called Nimmanarati (Delight in Creation). One noteworthy point has been mentioned in the description of Nimmanarati realm. In other pleasurable planes, the object of

enjoyment already exists. But in the case of Nimmanarati plane the objects are created by those who live in that realm.

One criticism made with regard to birth in heavenly realm is that Buddha used the same explanation for rebirth in all pleasurable heavens. In Buddhist cosmology heavens are classified in a hierarchical order. The opinion expressed is that Tavatimsa heaven is superior to Catummaharajika heaven with regard to sensual happiness.

Chapter three is on the plane of form (Rupavacarabhumi) according to Abhidhammattha Sangaha. The four planes of form (Rupavacara) correspond to four Dhyanic (Absorption) states. A brief description of Dhyanic levels and their factors is given next. There are sixteen levels (Bhumis) of form and no-form realms. Those who attain to various Dhyanic levels from the first Dhyana to Neither perception and no non-perception through the practice of Smatha method of meditation are born in the form and formless realms. Particular plane of existence corresponds to the Dhyanic level one has achieved. Those who are born in these planes are called Brahmas. It has been pointed out that there is a hierarchical order among the beings born in these planes as Brahmāparisajja, Brahmāpurohita and Mahābrhama. Those who have attained to four formless Dhyanas are born in the four formless realms. Only the consciousness exists in these four realms without the support of corporeal body.

In conclusion it can be said that even though the book is small sufficient materials have been drawn from sutras, Abhidharma and commentaries. One cannot see much investigation and criticism regarding the material drawn from sources. Theravada traditional approach is visible throughout the entire book without a critical outlook. At the end of the book there is an appendix in which a chart of planes of existence and also one

hundred twenty nine end notes are included.

– **Kottegoda S. Warnasuriya**

## **Letter from Mara**

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Letter from Mara is a pamphlet written by Ajan Punnadhammo and published by Buddhist Publication Society, Kandy, Sri Lanka. This pamphlet contains a new approach to the concept of Mara, the evil one in Buddhism. This is not a research on the concept of Mara, but it is a fiction which dramatizes the evil one. In the acknowledgement it has been mentioned that the basic theme of the Book was taken from the Screw Tape Letters written by C. S. Lewis.

The book begins with a quotation from Padhāna sutra of the Sutta Nipāta (Vagga, III. Sutra 2) which describes Buddha's great striving (Mahāpadhāna) for attaining to the enlightenment. This sutra mentions that Mara, the mythical figure representing the evil side of the world, had ten battalions. The book starts in a narrative form. A short poetical description of Mara's mythical realm is given at the beginning in beautiful words. Mara, who has been personified as the god of death and evil, has a gorgeous mansion full of all modern amenities surrounded by beautiful nymphs who are very conscious of their beauty. The tall and handsome Mara sits comfortably on the chair of his office with his wife and secretary thinking of sending messages to his ten battalions in the form of letters. Before dictating letters to his secretary he wants to have a cup of coffee. He requests his beautiful secretary to prepare coffee while he is

surveying the state of his empire. Mara uses his computer to search the world.

First he checks various heavens within his domain. This is the worlds of pleasure where gods and goddesses enjoy in various ways. They move around in their heavenly chariots clothed in gorgeous raiments and bedecked with garlands and jewels. Then Mara clicks the unicorn ivory mouse of his computer and watches the animal realm. From animal realm he comes to ghost realm which is shadowy and dark. From ghost realm he comes to hell where the pain and unspeakable suffering prevail. In the meantime Mara gets his cup of coffee from his secretary. While sipping coffee he watches what is happening in the human world.

The letter is addressed to all squadron leaders of his army. Letter starts in the following way: Mara to his Minions. From: His Supreme Excellency the Mara Namuci, To: All Squadron Leaders, Operations Area: Planet Earth, Solar System, The Human Realm. The subject of the letter is regarding the present situation and status of current projects. Date is given as 26<sup>th</sup> century of current Buddha-period.

First Mara greets all his hard-working minions and reminds them that all strategies are working fine. It is mentioned ironically that the Great Samsara as the play ground and the Buddha as the clever fish who escaped the net laid by Mara two and half millennia ago. Mara mentions in this letter further that not only he tried very best and also his three beautiful daughters too could not budge him. Mara sends ten letters to his ten armies respectively urging them to be vigilant in carrying on the projects assigned to them.

The first letter is to the first army, the Host of Sense Desires (Kama). In his letter to the first battalion, Mara mentions the human nature regarding sensual pleasures. He tells the squad to be vigilant