

Does the King of Hell, Yama Really Exist?

In Chinese folk belief, one has to report to and be tried by the King of Hell, Yama (*dharmapāla*) in hells after death. The King of Hell is the master who controls the birth-and-death as well as the reincarnation of living beings in hells. Is this the correct view? Let us look at the Buddhist sūtras to see what they say.

Chapter 19 of the *Long Āgama Sūtras (Dīrgha Āgama)* states that there is a great Vajra Mountain in the southern part of Jambudvīpa. Inside the mountain, there is a palace of the King of Hell where the King rules a region of the size of six thousand *yojanas* spanning north to south. Three times a day, wardens of the hell will come and grab King Yama and put him on a hot iron plate. They use iron hooks to prop open the mouth of King Yama and feed him boiling liquid copper that severely burns his lips, tongue, throat and abdomen. After the punishment, the King will again return to his palace to be entertained by his maids. He also teaches those who have committed various evil acts to stop their ill conduct and turn to good conduct.

The Sūtra on the Hell of the Iron City also describes hell wardens bringing a person who has been reborn in hell as the result of committing unwholesome deeds to King Yama and telling him that

the person did not filially respect his parents; did not willingly make offering to the monks; did not respect the elders; did not make charitable giving; and did not fear causal retribution or punishment when he was in the human world. The hell wardens then urge the King to sentence the person according to his unwholesome deeds. King Yama summons the person and asks him the following five questions to teach him:

1. "Why were you not grateful to your parents for raising you and why did you not practice filial piety when you were in the human world?"
2. "Have you never seen that your mobility was severely restricted when you were weakened by illness?"
3. "Have you never seen that men and women in their senior human world age, have their hair turn grey, lose their eyesight and hearing, and need the help of a walking stick to totter around?"
4. "Have you never seen that men and women one-day dead, two-days dead, or even seven-days dead, became rotten, disfigured and decomposed, devoured by worms and ants, and despised by others while you were in the human world?"
5. "Have you never seen ill-behaved people or thieves being arrested, tortured, and punished while you were in the human world? Why

did you not make charitable donations to others? Why did you not practice wholesomeness of body, speech and thought?

After asking each of the five questions, King Yama says: “You have seen and been aware of these things. Why didn’t you change and perform wholesome good deeds?” The person replies: “I have been really foolish and arrogant.” The King says: “Your sentence is based on the mistakes you committed and is not due to your parents, divine beings, emperors, or *śramaṇa* and other practitioners.”

After the lesson taught by King Yama, the hell wardens then take the person to the iron city to be punished.

According to the above scriptures, King Yama fell to the hell realm due to his bad conduct but the degree of his bad deeds was not severe enough to send him to the interminable hell. Due also to the merits he accumulated from benefiting sentient beings through his teachings and support, he was able to become the King of Hell. However, he will still have to receive his own punishment in the hell realm. After the temporary cessation of his suffering, he will also be able to receive his reward, and provide teachings and lessons to the sentient beings in the hell realm. Some of the Kings of Hell, however, are the bodhisattvas who have vowed to be born as the Kings of Hell in order to teach and relieve sentient beings in the hell realms.

As stated in Chapter 18 of the *Long Āgama Sūtra*: “As the sun and moon circle round the four quadrants, the places where the light shines are one world. Within such thousand worlds, there are a thousand suns and moons, a thousand Kings of Mount Sumeru, ..., a thousand Kings of Hell, ...” From the text of the *sūtra*, we know that in the world where our solar system lies, there are the sun and moon constantly circling around the four quadrants; so, there should exist the King of Hell who tries, sentences, and teaches lessons to the ill-behaved beings in the hell. Thus, the name “King of Hell” is not just a nominal construct. The King of Hell does indeed exist within the three realms.