

# Reflecting on Future Lives

## Contemplating what will occur in your future life: the happiness or suffering of the 2 types of beings.

You will die soon and then be reborn into either a happy realm or a miserable realm, because there is no birthplace but amongst these 2 types. Since you are under the control of your karma, you cannot choose where you want to be born. Your virtuous / nonvirtuous karma will dictate where you are born. This being the case you should contemplate the lower realms and think about how it would be if you were born there.

Nagarjuna says to meditate on the cold and hot hells, animal realms, and ghost realms daily, and determine to stop the causes of birth there and to create the causes of happiness.

This will make you careful to avoid committing sins and seeing that virtue creates happiness you will delight in virtue.

Frightened by suffering you fervently go for refuge to the 3 jewels.

Since without suffering there is no determination to be free,  
You, mind, be fixed!

-Shantideva

## Contemplating the suffering of the hell denizens

### Contemplating the suffering of the great hells of living beings

In each the ground and the perimeter are like the white hot iron of a smith -- there is nowhere at all you could safely put your foot. Everything is a searing hot expanse of fiery flames.

There are 8 great hells.

1. **Reviving Hell** - the first, it lies 32,000 leagues beneath us. The other 7 are situated every 4,000 leagues beneath that. As the actions which drove them there were motivated by hatred, the effect similar to the cause makes them see each other as mortal enemies and they fight. The living beings of this hell assemble and hack each other with various weapons that appear one by one through the force of karma, until they swoon and fall to the ground. Then a voice from the sky yells 'Revive!' and they rise up again and hack

each other as before and experience measureless suffering.

2. **Black Line Hell** - The hell guardians use black lines to mark the bodies of the living beings born there into quarters, eighths, and many other smaller divisions. The beings experience the pain of being split and chopped along these lines with burning saws. These beings are crushed to death screaming and weeping in unimaginable agony and terror. As the hammers are lifted they come back to life only to experience it over and over again.
3. **Crushing Hell** - The hell guardians herd the hell beings in between 2 iron mountains shaped like goat heads and then squeeze them between the mountains, causing streams of blood to gush from all of their orifices. They are also pressed between sheep-headed, horse-headed, elephant-headed, lion-headed, and tiger-headed mountains, taking the form of animals the beings have killed in the past. When they are gathered together again they are inserted into a great iron machine and pressed like sugarcane. Then they reassemble on an iron surface where great iron boulders are hurled upon them, cutting, splitting, smashing, and flattening them, again causing torrents of blood to gush forth. 200 human years are equivalent to one day in this hell, and the being in this hell live 2,000 years.
4. **Howling Hell** - Living beings who search for a home are herded into an iron house and incinerated by blazing fire and conflagration. They are roasted in these iron houses with no exit. They scream and cry feeling that they will never escape.
5. **Great Howling Hell** - similar to Howling hell, except the beings are inside 2 iron houses, one within another. Both the inner and outer doors are sealed with molten metal and the hell-beings howl in torment to think that, even if they could get past the first door, they would never be able to get passed the 2nd door. 800 human years correspond to one day here. It's being have a lifespan of 8000 years.
6. **Hot Hell** - The hell-guardians throw living beings into a hot, blazing iron kettle many leagues across and boil them, deep frying them like fish in molten bronze. Their idea of happiness is the moments when they are grabbed by the workers and beaten over the head with hammers and sometimes lose consciousness and don't feel pain. Then they impale through their anuses with blazing iron skewers, which emerge through the crowns of their heads; blazing flames leap forward from their mouths, eyes, noses, ears, and from their pores. They are then placed either on their backs or their stomachs on a blazing hot surface where they are pounded with a blazing hot iron hammer. 1600 human years equals one day in this hell. Beings stay there 16,000 years.
7. **Extremely Hot Hells** - Guardians force iron tridents into their victims' anuses, the left and right prongs coming out of their shoulders and center prong out the crown of their head causes blazing flames to shoot from their mouths and from other orifices. Their bodies are caught in a blazing hot iron press; they are thrown head-first into a great blazing iron kettle full of boiling water, floating up and down and all around until their skin, flesh, and blood are destroyed and only their skeletal remains. The guardians then fish them out, spread them on the iron surface -- there their skin, flesh and blood regenerate -- and then throw them back into the kettle. The remaining torments are similar to those of the

hot hell. This continues for half an intermediate kalpa, a period of time immeasurable in terms of human years.

8. **Unrelenting Hell** - the ground blazes for many hundreds of leagues from the east. As this blaze increases, it assumes the force of a conflagration. It then incinerates the skin, flesh, intestines, and bones of the living beings, penetrating all the way to their marrow. The beings entire bodies are engulfed in flames as if they were wicks of butter lamps. The same thing occurs from the other three directions. When the fires combine from all 4 directions, they combine and beings experience uninterrupted suffering. Apart from the cries of distress there is no longer any indication of a physical body. You know them to be living beings only by the piteous wails they emit. On other occasions they are placed into blazing iron embers in an iron winnowing basket, and the basket is shaken violently. On other occasions they are forced to climb up great iron mountains, then fall from them onto an iron surface. On other occasions their tongues are pulled out of their mouths and stretched out with a hundred iron pegs, like ox hides until they have no wrinkles or ridges. At other times they are laid out on their backs on iron surfaces and their mouths are pried open with iron tongs, while blazing lumps of iron and boiling copper are forced in until their mouths, esophagi, and intestines are burned and the residue flows out below. The other torments are like those of the extremely hot hell. Lifespan here is a whole immediate kalpa. There could be no worse torment anywhere. It is the hell where those who have committed the 5 crimes of immediate retribution, and practioners of the mantrayana who develop adverse views regarding the vajra master, are reborn. No other actions have the power to cause rebirth here.

This is only a rough description, but there are many other sufferings aswell. This is how they are explained in the level of yogic deeds.

The duration of these is described in the Friendly Letter

Even though you experience  
Such horrible sufferings for a billion years,  
You do not die  
Until the nonvirtue is spent.

-Nagarjuna

Thus, you must experience these sufferings until the force your karma is exhausted.

50 human years  
Is a single day for the lower deities  
Of the desire realm;  
This is doubled for the higher deities

The life span of the desire realm deities is equal to a day  
In the 6 hells, the reviving hell and so forth, in sequence  
Thus their life spans  
Are similar to those of the desire realm deities.

The life span in the extremely Hot Hell is half of an intermediate eon.  
In the unrelenting hell, it is an intermediate eon.

## Contemplating the suffering of the adjoining hells

Each of the 8 hot hells has 4 walls and 4 doors and is encircled by an iron fence, which has 4 doors. At each of these doors there are 4 additional hells for living beings:

1. **The Pit of Embers** - contains embers in which the denizens sink up to their knees.  
When beings emerge from the unrelenting torment they see what looks to be a shady trench in the distance, so they go to it and jump in. When these beings go there in search of a home, they step into it, and their skin, flesh, and blood are completely destroyed, only to regenerate when they lift their feet again.
2. **The Swamp of Putrid Corpses or the Swamp of Excrement that Stinks Like a Corpse** - A swamp of excrement that stinks like a corpse, into which living beings seeking a home attempt to cross but fall sinking in over their shoulders. The swamp is inhabited by 'sharp-beaked worms' which pierce the skin, flesh, intestines, and bones, boring down to the marrow. They go to this thinking there is water because they are so thirsty.
3. **The Path of Razors and Such** - Where beings seeking a home walk a path filled with razor teeth. With each step, the teeth lacerate their skin, flesh, and blood, but each time they lift their feet, their bodies regenerate. Nearby is the **Sword Leafed Forest**. When beings rest there in the shade, swords fall from the trees, piercing and splitting their limbs, fingers, and toes. When they swoon they are attacked by mongrel dogs who carry them off by the scruff of their necks and eat them. Nearby is **Forest of Iron Silk-cotton Trees**. Being seeking a home come and climb these trees which are covered with thorns that point downwards on the way up and upwards on the way down so that the thorns split and pierce the beings limbs, fingers, and toes. Iron beaked crows sit on their shoulders and heads and pluck out and eat their eyeballs. Since all these places subject their inhabitants to harm by means of weapons, they should be counted as one adjoined hell.
4. **The River With No Ford** - The River with no Ford is filled with boiling water. Living beings seeking a home fall into it and are tossed about and cooked as if they were peas thrown into a pot of water over a great blazing fire. On both banks of this river sit beings armed with clubs, hooks, and nets who keep the tormented from escaping, or drag them out with the hooks and nets and lay them on their back on the great blazing ground

demanding to know what they want. When they replay "We do not understand at all and cannot see, but we are hungry and thirsty," they are fed blazing lumps of iron and boiling copper.

The life spans of living beings in the adjoining hells and occasional hells are not fixed, but they must suffer in these places for a long time until the power of their karma for experiencing these sufferings is exhausted.

Absorb all the pain and details of these 8 hells and 16 neighboring hells. Withdrawing to a quiet place close your eyes and image that you are really living in the infernal realms. When you feel as much pain and terror as you would if you were really there you should think:

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*I feel such intense terror and suffering when I just imagine all that pain, even though I am not actually there. There are countless beings living in those realms right now, and all of them have been my parents in past lives. There is no knowing whether my parents, loved ones and friends of this life will not be reborn there once they die. Rebirth in those realms is caused primarily by actions arising from hatred, and I myself have accumulated incalculable number of such actions in this present life as well as all my past lives. I can be certain I will be born in those hells sooner or later. At present I have a human life complete with all freedoms and advantages. I have met an authentic spiritual teacher and received the profound instructions which offer the possibility of attaining the level of a Buddha. So I must do my best to practice the methods that will save me from ever having to be born in those lower realms again*

Over and over reflect on the sufferings of hells. Confess your past misdeeds with intense remorse and make the unshakeable resolve that even at the risk of your life, you will never again commit acts that lead to rebirth in the lower hell realms. With intense compassion for the beings that are there now, pray that they all be freed from there this very instant. Put the teachings into practice, complete with the methods for the beginning, main part, and conclusion.

## **Contemplating the Sufferings of the Cold Hells.**

In all these hells, the environment is entirely composed of snow mountains, glaciers, and perpetually enveloped in blizzards. The beings there are all completely naked and tormented by the cold.

Each of the 8 great hells of living beings is 10,000 leagues wide and the 8 great cold hells lie outside of these.

1. **Blistering Hell** - The first cold hell. 32,000 leagues below the earth. The other 7 are situated every 2,000 leagues beneath that. Here the hell beings are blasted by a great wind that shrivels and then raises blisters all over their body.
2. **Popping Blisters Hell** - Similar to the above, except that the blisters pop as the body shrivels.
3. **Chattering Teeth** - The cold makes the teeth chatter
4. **Weeping** - The weeping never ends
5. **Moaning** -- Their voices are cracked and long groans escape from their lips.
6. **Splitting Water Lily Hell** - The denizens are blasted by a great wind which causes them to turn blue and split into 5 or 6 pieces.
7. **Splitting-like-a-Lotus Hell** - the beings turn from blue to red and split into 10 or more pieces
8. **Great Splitting-like-a-Lotus Hell** - The beings skin becomes very red and splits into 100 or more pieces. Worms penetrate the the cracked flesh and devour it with their metal beaks.

The Garland of Birth Stories says that these hell beings dwell in darkness.

An incomparable wind pierces your bones;  
Your body shakes and freezes; you bend over and shrivel.  
Hundreds of blisters rise and pop.  
Creatures born from them eat and claw you; fat, lymph, and marrow ooze out.

Exhausted, teeth-clenched, all hair standing on end,  
You are tormented by wounds in your eyes, ears, and gullet.  
Mind and body are stupefied by pain.  
You dwell in the cold hell and emit a pitiful wail.

-Nagarjuna - Friendly Letter

Understand that the life span of living beings born in the cold hells is 1 1/2 times as long as that of living beings born in the corresponding great hells of living beings.

Levels of Yogic Deeds

Imagine filling a vessel full of sesame seeds and throwing one out every 100 years until it is empty. This vessel becomes emptied much sooner than the complete life span of the living beings born in the blistering hell. 20 Life spans of the Blistering Hell make up a single life span in the Popping hell

20 Life spans of the splitting like a lotus equal one life of the great splitting like a lotus.

-Vasubandhu

## Contemplating the suffering of the occasional hells

The occasional hells adjoin the hot hells and cold hells, and the Levels of Yogic Deeds say that they exist in the human regions as well.

The 16 hells for living beings are created by the force of the karma of all living beings. The occasional hells are created by the individual karma of 1, 2, or many living beings and therefore are of many different types. They have no fixed location since they exist in rivers, mountains, wastelands, below the earth, and other places as well.

-Vasubandhu

**Thus, the conditions for being born in any of these hells are very easy to create, and every single day you acquire more of them. Since you have already accumulated innumerable causes in your past, your complacency is inappropriate. Therefore, after reflecting on these hells, be frightened -- nothing separates you from them after the mere cessation of your breath.**

Having created the karma for hell,  
Why are you complacent like this?

-Shantideva

Sinners who hear the boundless sufferings in the hells--  
Separated from them only until the more termination of their breathing --  
Are not completely terrified,  
Have hearts as hard as diamonds.

If you are frightened by seeing paintings of hell,  
By hearing of it, recalling it,  
Reading about it and by representations of it,  
What needs to mention experiencing the fierce actuality of it.

-Nagarjuna - A Friendly Letter

Among the sufferings of cyclic existence, those of the miserable realms are the most difficult to endure. **Among these, the sufferings of the hells are most unbearable, for the pain of being continually pierced by 300 sharp spears for a full day is nothing compared to even the mildest of the hells suffering.** Among these, the Unrelenting Hell is by the greatest.

Just as among all kinds of happiness  
The cessation of craving is the king of happiness  
So among all kinds of suffering  
The suffering of the unrelenting Hell is most fierce.

-Nagarjuna - A Friendly Letter

Know that the sole cause of such suffering is your physical, verbal, and mental wrongdoing.  
Strive with whatever human skill you have not to be defiled by even the slightest wrong doing.

The seed of these non-virtuous results  
Are you physical, verbal, and mental wrongdoing.  
Strive with whatever skill you possess  
Not to have even a bit of it!

-Nagarjuna

These 8 hot hells, 8 cold hells, adjoining hells, and ephemeral hells are called the 18 hells.

### **MEMORIZE THESE**

Carefully study these hells number, length of time spent there, the cause of being born there, and meditate with compassion on the other beings being born in them. Strive to ensure that no one, neither yourself or anyone else is ever reborn in any of those realms.



If you are content to just listen and know this intellectually without making it a living experience, you will just become one of those obdurate and arrogant practitioners criticized by sublime beings and condemned by the wise.

Whether or not you have practiced the teachings you have received is one thing, but not to know at least the words and terms involved is truly shameful.

## Contemplating the suffering of the Hungry Ghosts

Those who are exceedingly miserly are born as hungry ghosts. These beings are hungry and thirsty and their skin, flesh, and blood, are dessicated, giving them the appearance of burnt logs. Their faces are covered with hair, their mouths are extremely dry, and their tongues lick their lips constantly.

There are 3 types of hungry ghosts:

1. **Hungry Ghosts who have external obstacles for obtaining food and drink** - When these beings approach springs, lakes, rivers, etc. being holding long swords, knives, and spears block their way. Or else, the water appears to be blood and pus and they lose their desire to drink.
2. **Hungry Ghosts who have internal obstacles for obtaining food and drink** - the beings have goiters and great bellies, but their mouths, which spew flames are as small as the eye of a needle. Though others do not prevent them, they are unable to ingest food and drink even when they obtain it.
3. **Hungry Ghosts who have obstacles within the food and drink** - Some of these hungry ghosts, unable to make use of clean and wholesome food and drink, cut their own flesh and eat it. Those called **Possessing a garland of flames** are burned because whatever they eat or drink burst into flames. Those called **Filth-eaters** can only ingest dirty, stinking, harmful, and despicable things, and so they eat feces and drink urine.

Hungry ghosts never heal the suffering  
Of destitution due to desire  
They are subject to very fierce suffering  
Produced by hunger, thirst, cold, heat, exhaustion, and fear

Some, with mouths the size of mere needle's eye  
And stomachs as round as mountains,  
Are tormented by hunger, lacking the energy to search  
for even a bit of filthy garbage

Some have bodies of skin and bones, like a leafless tree,  
Like a palmtree without its top.  
Some, mouths on fire each night,  
Eat food that causes their mouths to blaze

Some wretched ones do not even find the filth  
such as pus, excrement, blood, and the like;  
Hitting each others faces' they drink the pus  
That oozes from the ripe goiters of their neck

For these hungry ghosts in summer  
the moon is hot, and in winter the sun is cold  
For them fruit trees turn fruitless;  
Their mere glance dries up a stream

-Nagarjuna

The first verse talks about the general suffering, and the rest talk about specific suffering. 'Exhaustion' comes from running after food. 'Fear' refers to the terror of seeing beings holding swords, clubs, and nooses. 'Garbage' refers to unwanted trash.

'At night' means flames come out of their mouths nightly. 'Causes their mouths to blaze' indicates that the food they eat causes their mouths to blaze. For some when they look at a stream it turns into pus with insects or embers.

The beings are confused by the fruition of terrible karma.

Hungry ghosts endure for 500 hundred ghost years, with each of their days being equal to 100 human months.

When you contemplate these sufferings of the miserable realms think like this: "At present it is difficult to endure sitting for merely a day with my hands stuck in burning coals., or to remain naked for that long in a cave of ice during the winter winds, or go for a few days without food and drink, for my body to be stung by a bee and the like. If even these are difficult to endure, how will I bear the sufferings of the hot hells, cold hells, and hungry ghost, or animals devouring

each other alive?"

After you have assessed your current condition, meditate until your mind is filled with fear and dread. Simply knowing about this, without conditioning your mind to it, or only meditating on it for a little while, will not accomplish anything

Meditation on suffering puts an end to laziness and generates joyful perseverance at accomplishing the path. It spurs you toward liberation and is the root cause for attaining it.

Examine whether or not you have previously created the conditions for being born in these miserable realms, whether or not you are currently creating them, whether or not you would consider creating them in the future. Since you will go there if you have created them, are creating them, or would consider creating them, think, "If I am born there, what would I do then; will I be able to do anything?" With your head pounding, or like a man struggling in the desert, consider that there will be absolutely nothing you can do, and develop as much fear and dread as possible.

-Neusurpa

**This is the key point. You currently have a good life for developing the path. Consequently, if you contemplate in this way, you will clear away previously accrued nonvirtuous karma and deter your future accumulations. Your prayers of fervent aspiration will redirect previously accrued virtues, causing them to increase. You will be able to enter many new avenues for engaging in virtuous actions. Therefore you will make your leisure and opportunity meaningful every day.**

**If you do not contemplate these things now, when you fall into a miserable realm, you will not find a refuge to protect you from these terrors even though you seek one. At that time you will not have the intelligence to understand what you should adopt and what you should cast aside.**

## **Contemplating the suffering of the Animals**

Powerful animals kill weaker ones. Deities and humans exploit animals. Since others control them, animals have no independence, and are harmed, beaten, and killed.

In rebirth as an animal there are various sufferings --  
Being killed, bound, beaten, and so forth.  
Those who have cast away the virtues of peace  
Horribly eat each other.

Some die because of their pearls, fur, meat, or skin.  
Other powerless animals are put to work  
By being kicked, hit, whipped, jabbed, with an iron hook, or prodded

-Nagarjuna Friendly Letter

Stupid and ignorant, these animals have no idea what to do or what not to do. They are born in places where suffering has no bounds.

The wild animals are always in fear, they cannot eat a single mouthful without being on guard.

Hawks kill small birds, small birds kill insects, on and on.. constantly amassing negative karma like this.

Hunters use vicious weapons like snares, traps, guns, nets, etc. Some animals are killed for their horns, fur, skins, and other products of their body.

It's a terrible affliction that the very body with which they are born is the reason for their being killed.

Cattle and sheep are exploited until they die. Once they are too old, they are sold off or killed by the owners themselves. Whatever the case, they are destined for the butcher and a natural death is unknown to them.

Whenever you see animals like this, put yourself in their place and imagine that you are experiencing their suffering. Meditate with fierce compassion upon all those reborn as animals.

In particular if you have animals as your own treat them with kindness and love. Since all animals right down to the smallest insect, have feeling of pleasure and pain, and since they all have been our father and mothers, develop love and compassion towards them.

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No matter where in these lower realms beings are reborn, they experience all manners of intense and long lasting sufferings. Beings born there are stupid, ignorant, and without any idea of dharma, and can only create further causes for more lives in the lower realms, so once reborn there it is difficult to get out.

In our previous and present lives we have accumulated numerous actions that are certain to lead us to rebirth in those states. So we should apply ourselves with great sincerity to regretting our wrong actions in the past, confessing them and vowing to avoid them from now on.

Thinking with great compassion of the beings who live in those worlds, dedicate to them the effects of all positive actions you have accumulated throughout the 3 times.

Pray that they be liberated from those realms. "Now that I have met the dharma of the great vehicle, and have the chance to practice the path that brings true benefit both to myself and others, i shall practice the Dharma with courage, scorning all difficulties, and lead all those beings of the 3 lower realms to the Buddhafields." Having cultivated bodhichitta with that thought, pray to your teacher and dieties, asking for their help and support, thinking "May my teacher and the 3 jewels bless me so that I may achieve this aim!" Dedicate the merit to benefit the beings, thus practicing the 3 methods.

Although rebirth in the 3 lower realms naturally entails suffering, one might expect that the 3 higher realms would be happy and pleasant. But in fact even the higher realms there is no happiness.