

Why does one go to hell?: Late 19th century perspectives seen in the murals of the Vihārayas of the Amarapura Nikāya in the Galle District

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As known *in* Suttas of the *Tripitaka*, hells called Niraya in Pali and Narakaya in Sanskrit, are the lowest of six or five paths of rebirth. In the Devadūta Sutta, hells are located under the realm of humans (Manussalōka). According to the narratives, “evil doers”, “the wicked” or “sinners” seem to fall into an endless pit ending up in the hell they will have to undergo immense suffering.

In some temples of the Southern and Western Maritime Region, scenes of hells seem to appear about 1870, at times covering the lowest register of the entire ambulatory. No other narrative cycle has been allotted so much space. The texts accompanying these hells explain why the person was reborn in a particular hell. The Akusala Kamma, (unskillful or unwholesome action) collected by the individual as human is meant to correspond to the thousands of years of suffering in particular hell tortured by Yamapallo, who are in service of the King Yama (Lord of the Dead).

Devadatta, who attempted to kill the Buddha three times and to create a split in the Sangha was reborn in the Avīchi Narakaya, where those who have committed the most grave misdeeds are born. In the temple walls, neither Devadatta, nor Ajatasatta who killed his father are seen in hell. Strangely Revatī, the wife of a benevolent merchant, is dragged to hell because she refused alms to the mendicants, the poor and Buddhist monks. It is also surprising that the sites of the hells selected for this study - Kathaluwē Pūrvārāma Purāṇa Vihāraya, Ranvelle Navamuṇisē Vihāraya, Dodamduwa Kumārakande Kumāra Mahāvihāraya and Randombe Samūdragiri Purāṇa Vihāraya - have some names of hells not mentioned in Pāli sources or their commentaries. The series of sins written on the wall vary from temple to temple.

The series of images of torture and suffering have been selected because they have complete sets of hells unseen elsewhere in Sri Lanka. Important monks of the Amarapura Nikāya have resided in these temples who spearheaded a breakaway from the Upcountry Siyam Nikāya in the first half of the 19th century. The short overview will present the vernacular list of hells. The punishments given together with the unwholesome deeds reflect the ethical and moral values upheld by the monks of these breakaway fraternities.