

### Heaven and Hell

From The Mahabharata  
Anusasana Parva, Section CXI  
Translated by Sri Kisari Mohan Ganguli

Yudhishtira said: O grandsire, O thou that are possessed of great wisdom and conversant with all the scriptures. I desire to know those excellent ordinances in consequence of which mortal creatures have to travel through their rounds of rebirth. What is that conduct by following which, O king, men succeed in attaining to **high Heaven**, and what is that conduct by which one sinks in **Hell**? When abandoning the dead body that is as inert as a piece of wood or clod of earth, people proceed to the other world, what are those that follow them thither?

Bhishma said: Here comes the illustrious Vrihaspati of great intelligence! Do thou ask his blessed self? The subject is an eternal mystery. None else is capable of explaining the matter. There is no speaker like Vrihaspati.

Yudhishtira , approaching the illustrious Vrihaspati, asked him the question in proper form, desirous of knowing the truth.

Yudhishtira said: O illustrious one, thou are conversant with all duties and all the scriptures, Do thou tell me what is truly the friend of mortal creatures? Is the father, or mother, or son, or preceptor, or kinsmen, or relatives, or those called friends, that may be said to truly constitute the friend of the mortal creature? One goes to the next world, leaving one's dead body that is like a piece of wood or a clod of earth. Who is it that follows him thither?

Vrihaspati said: One is born alone, O king, and one dies alone; one crosses alone the difficulties one meets with, and one alone encounters whatever misery falls to one's lot. One has really no companion in these acts. The father, the mother, the brother, the son, the preceptor, kinsmen, relatives, and friends, leaving the dead body as if it were a piece of wood or a clod of earth, after having mourned for only a moment, all turn away from it and proceed to their own concerns. Only righteousness follows the body that is thus abandoned by them all. Hence, it is plain, that Righteousness is the only friend and that Righteousness only should be sought by all.

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One endued with righteousness would attain to that high end which is constituted by heaven. If endued with unrighteousness, he goes to hell. Hence, the man of intelligence should always seek to acquire religious merit through wealth won by lawful means. Piety is the one only friend which creatures have in the world hereafter. Let by cupidity, or stupefaction, or compassion, or fear, one destitute of much knowledge is seen to do improper acts, his judgement thus stupefied by cupidity.

[Note: One that is not possessed of much learning is liable to do improper acts. These acts are all done for another, viz., one's body and the senses and not oneself. The Sanskrit word **para** here is, the Not-self.]

**Piety, wealth and pleasure, - these three constitute the fruit of life. One should acquire these three by means of being free from impropriety and sin.**

Yudhishtira said: I have carefully heard the words spoken by thy illustrious self,-these words that are fraught with righteousness, and that are highly beneficial. I wish now to know of the existence of the body (after death). The dead body of man becomes unmanifest. It becomes invisible. How is it possible for piety to follow it?

Vrihaspati said: Earth, Wind, Space, Water, Light, Mind, Yama (the king of the dead), Understanding, the Soul, as also Day and Night, all together behold as witness the merits (and demerits) of all living creatures. With these, Righteousness follows the creatures (when dead).

[Note: When these leave the body, they are accompanied by Righteousness.]

When the body becomes bereft of life, skin, bones, flesh, the vital seed, and blood, O thou of great intelligence, leave it at same time. Endued with merit (and demerit) Jiva (Individual soul), after the destruction of this body, attains to another. After the attainment by Jiva of that body, the presiding deities of the five elements once more behold as witness all his acts good and bad. What else do thou wish to hear? If endued with righteousness, Jiva enjoys happiness. What other topic, belonging to this or that world, shall I discourse upon?

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Yudhishtira said: Thy illustrious self has explained how Righteousness follows Jiva. I desire to know how the vital seed is originated?

Vrihaspati said: The food that these deities, O king, who dwell in the body, viz., Earth, Wind, Space, Water, Light, and Mind eat, gratifies them. When those five elements become gratified, O monarch, with Mind numbering as their sixth, their vital seed then becomes generated, O thou of cleansed soul! When an act of union takes place between male and female, the vital seed flows out and causes conception. I have thus explained to thee what thou hast asked. What else do you wish to hear?

Yudhishtira said: Thou hast, O illustrious one, said how conception takes place. Do thou explain how the Jiva (individual soul) that takes birth grows (by becoming possessed of body)?

Vrihaspati said: As soon as Jiva enters the vital seed, he becomes overwhelmed by the elements already mentioned. When Jiva becomes disunited therewith, he is said to attain to the other end (viz., death). Endued as Jiva becomes with all those elements, he attains, in consequence thereof, a body. The deities that preside over those elements behold as witness all his acts, good and bad. What else do you wish to hear?

Yudhishtira said: Leaving off skin and bone and flesh, and becoming destitute of all those elements, in what does Jiva reside, O illustrious one, for enjoying and enduring happiness and misery?

Vrihaspati said: Endued with all his acts, the Jiva quickly enters the vital seed, and utilizing the functional flow of women, takes birth in time, O Bharata. After birth, the Jiva receives woe and death from the messengers of Yama (god of death). Indeed, misery and painful round of rebirth are his inheritance. Endued with life, O king, the Jiva in this world, from the moment of his birth, enjoys and endures his own previous acts, depending upon righteousness (and its reverse). If the Jiva, according to the best of his power, follows righteousness from the day of his birth, he then succeeds in enjoying, when reborn, happiness without interruption.

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[Abridged]

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If, on the other hand, without following righteousness, without interruption, he acts sinfully, he reaps happiness at first as the reward of his righteousness and endures misery after that. Endued with unrighteousness, the Jiva has to go to the dominions of Yama and suffering great misery there, he has to take birth in an intermediate order of being.

[Note: Intermediate, i.e., between deities and human beings; hence animals and birds.]

Listen to me as I tell thee what the different acts are by doing which the Jiva, stupefied by folly, has to take birth in different orders of being, as declared in the Vedas, the scriptures, and the (sacred) histories. Mortals have to go to the frightful regions of Yama. In those regions, O king, there are places that are fraught with every merit and that are worthy on that account of being the abodes of the very deities. There are, again, places in those regions that are worse than those which are inhabited by animals and birds. Indeed, there are spots of these kinds, in the abode of Yama which (so far as its happier regions are concerned) is equal to the regions of Brahman himself in merits. Creatures bound by their acts endure diverse kinds of misery. I shall, after this, tell thee what those acts and dispositions are in consequence of which a person obtains to an end that is fraught with great misery and terror.

If a regenerate person, having studied the four Vedas, becomes stupefied by folly and accepts a gift from a fallen man, he has then to take birth in the asinine order. He has to live as an ass for five and ten years. Casting off his asinine form, he has next to take birth as an ox, in which state he has to live for seven years. Casting off his bovine form, he has next to take birth as a Rakshasa (demon) of regenerate order. Living as Rakshasa of the regenerate order for three months, he then regains his status (in his next birth) of a Brahmana.

[Note: Brahma-Rakshasa is a Rakshasa that belongs, like Ravana and others, by birth to the regenerate order.]

A Brahmana (priest). by officiating at the sacrifice of a fallen person, has to take birth as a vile worm. In this form he has to live for five and ten years, O Bharata. Freed from the status of a worm, he next takes birth as an ass. As an ass he has to live for five years, and then a hog, in which state also he has to remain for as many years. After that, he takes birth as a cock,

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and living for five years in that form, he takes birth as a jackal and lives for as many years in that state. He has next to take birth as a dog and living thus for a year he regains his status of humanity.

That foolish disciple who offends his preceptor by doing any injury to him, has certainly to undergo three transformations in this world. Such a person, O monarch, has in the first instance to become a dog. He has then to become a beast of prey, and then an ass. Living his asinine form, he has to wander for some time in great affliction as a spirit. After the expiration of that period, he has to take birth as a Brahmana.

That sinful disciple, who even in thought commits adultery with the wife of his preceptor, has in consequence of such a sinful heart, to undergo many fierce shapes in this world. First taking birth in the canine order he has to live for three years. Casting off the canine form when death comes, he takes birth as a worm or vile vermin. In this form he has to live for a year. Leaving that form he succeeds in regaining his status as a human being of the regenerate order.

That son who disregards his father and mother, O king, has to take birth, after leaving off his human form as an animal of the asinine order. Assuming the asinine form he has to live for ten years. After that he has to take birth as a crocodile, in which form he has to live for a year. After that he regains the human form. .... That man who misappropriates what is deposited with him in trustfulness has to undergo a hundred transformations. He at last takes birth as a vile worm. In that order he has to live for a period of ten and five years, O Bharata. Upon the exhaustion of his great demerit in this way, he succeeds in regaining his status of humanity. That man of wicked understanding who becomes guilty of breach of trust has to take birth as a fish. Living as a fish for eight years, he takes birth, O Bharata, as a deer. Living as a deer for four months, he has next to take birth as a goat. After the expiration of a full year he takes birth then as a worm. After that he succeeds in regaining his status of humanity.

Having committed an act of adultery with the spouse of another man, one has to take birth as a wolf. After that he has to assume the forms of a dog and a jackal and vulture. He has next to take birth as a snake and then as a Kanka (a bird of prey) and then as crane.



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He who eats without having performed the rites in honour of the deities or those in honour of the Pitris (dead ancestors) or without having offered (even) oblations of water to both the Rishis and the Pitris, has to take birth as a crow. He next assumes the form of a cock. His next transformation is that of a snake for a month. After this, he regains the status of humanity.

The man who becomes guilty of ingratitude, O king, has to go to the regions of Yama and there to undergo very painful and severe treatment at the hands of the messengers, provoked to fury, of the grim king of the dead. Clubs with heavy hammers and mallets, sharp-pointed lances, heated jars, all fraught with severe pain, frightful forests of sword-blades, heated sands, thorny Salamis – these and many other instruments of the most painful torture such a man has to endure in the regions of Yama, O Bharata! The ungrateful person, O chief of Bhadrata's race, having endured such terrible treatment in the regions of the grim king of the dead, has to come back to this world and take birth among vile vermin. He has to live as a vile vermin for a period of five and ten years.

[Note: He is repeatedly struck with the clubs and hammers and mallets. He is frequently impaled. He is confined with fiery vessels. He is dragged with forests of sword-blades. He is made to walk over heated sand. He is rubbed against thorny Salamalis. The Salamalis is the Bombox Malabaricum.]

He has then to enter the womb and die prematurely before birth. After this, that person has to enter the womb a hundred times in succession. Indeed, having undergone a hundred rebirths, he at last becomes born as a creature in some intermediate order between man and inanimate nature. Having endured misery for a great many years, he has to take birth as a hairless tortoise.

That wretch who himself well armed, slays another while that other is unarmed, from motives of obtaining his victim's wealth or from feelings of hostility, has, after casting off his human body, to take birth as an ass. Assuming that asinine form he has to live for a period of two years and then meet with death at the edge of a weapon. Casting off in this way his asinine body he has to take birth in his next life as a deer always filled with anxiety (at the thought of foes that may kill him). Upon the expiration of a year from the time of his birth as a deer, he has to yield up his life at the point of a weapon. Thus casting off his form as a deer, he next takes birth

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as a fish and dies in consequence of being dragged up in net, on the expiration of the fourth month. He has next to take birth as a beast of prey. For ten years he has to live in that form, and then he takes birth as a tree in which form he has to live for a period of five years. Impelled by the change that is brought about by time, he then casts off that form, and his demerit having been exhausted he regains the status of humanity.

Indeed, having committed sins, O Bharata, one has to take birth in an order intermediate between that of humanity and vegetables. Those people are entirely unacquainted with righteousness, which has their own hearts for its authority. Those men that commit diverse acts of sin and then seek to expiate them by continuous vows and observances of piety become endued with both happiness and misery and live in great anxiety of heart. Those men that are of sinful conduct and that yield to the influence of cupidity and stupefaction, without doubt, take birth as Mlechchas that do not deserve to be associated with. Those men on the other hand, who abstain from sin all their lives, become free from disease of every kind, endued with beauty of form and possessed of wealth. Women also, when they act in the way indicated, attain to births of the same kind. Indeed, they have to take births as the spouse of the animals I have indicated.

**I have told thee all the faults that relate to the appropriation of what belongs to others. I have discoursed to thee very briefly on the subject, O sinless one. Having listened to all this, O monarch, do thou always set thy heart on righteousness.**

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Yudhishtira said: Thou hast told me, O regenerate one, what the end is of unrighteousness or sin. I desire now to hear, O foremost of speakers, of what the end is of Righteousness. Having committed acts of sin, by what acts do people succeed in attaining to an auspicious end in this world? By what acts also do people attain to an auspicious end in heaven?

Vrihaspati said: By committing sinful acts with perverted mind, one yields to the sway of unrighteousness and as a consequence goes to hell. That man who, having perpetrated sinful acts through stupefaction of mind,

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feels the pangs of repentance and sets his heart on contemplation (of the deity), has not to endure the consequences of his sins. One becomes freed from one's sins in proportion as one repents for them. If one having committed a sin, O king, proclaims it in the presence of Brahmanas (priests) conversant with duties, one becomes quickly cleansed from the obloquy arising from one's sin. Accordingly as one becomes cleansed therefrom fully or otherwise, like a snake freed from his diseased slough.

By making with a concentrated mind, gifts of diverse kinds unto a Brahmana, and concentrating the mind (on the deity), one attains to an auspicious end. I shall now tell thee what those gifts are, O Yudhishtira, by making which a person, even if guilty of having committed sinful acts, may become endued with merit. Of all kinds of gifts, that of food is regarded as the best. One desirous of attaining to merit should, with a sincere heart, make gifts of food. Food is the life-breath of men. From it all creatures are born. All the worlds of living creatures are established upon food. Hence food is applauded. The deities, Rishis (seers), Pitris (deceased ancestors), and men, all praise food. King Rantideva, in days of old, proceeded to Heaven by making gifts of food. Food that is good and that has been acquired lawfully, should be given, with a cheerful heart, unto such Brahmanas (priests) as are possessed of Vedic lore. That man has never to take birth in an intermediate order, whose food, given with a cheerful heart is taken by a thousand Brahmanas. A person, O chief of men, by feeding ten thousand Brahmanas, becomes cleansed of (his sins) and acquires piety and becomes devoted to Yoga practices

A Brahmana conversant with the Vedas, by giving away food acquired by him as alms, unto a Brahmana devoted to the study of the Vedas, succeeds in attaining to happiness here. A Kshatriya (ruling class and warriors) who, without taking anything that belongs to a Brahmana, protects his subjects lawfully, and makes gifts of food, obtained by the exercise of his strength, unto Brahmanas foremost in Vedic knowledge, with concentrated heart, succeeds by such conduct, O thou of righteous soul, in cleansing himself, O son of Pandu, of all his sinful acts.

**That Vaisya (farmers, merchant class, wealth producers) who divides the produce of his fields into six equal shares and makes a gift of one of those shares unto Brahmanas,**



**succeeds by such conduct in cleansing himself from every sin.**

**That Sudra (labour class) who, earning food by hard labour and at the risk of life itself, makes a gift of it to Brahmanas becomes cleansed from every sin.**

That man who, by putting forth his physical strength, earns food without doing any act of injury to any creature, and makes gift of it unto Brahmanas succeeds in avoiding all calamities. A person by cheerfully making gifts of food acquired by lawful means unto Brahmanas pre-eminent in Vedic lore becomes cleansed of all his sins. By treading in the path of the righteous one becomes freed from all sins. A person by making gifts of such food as is productive of great energy, becomes himself possessed of great energy.

The path made by charitable persons is always trod by those that are endued with wisdom. They that make gifts of food are regarded as givers of life. The merit they acquire by such gifts is eternal. Hence, a person should, under all circumstances, seek to earn food by lawful means, and having earned to make always gifts of it unto deserving men. Food is the great refuge of the world of living creatures. By making gifts of food, one has never to go to hell. Hence, one should always make gifts of food, having earned it by lawful means. The householder should always seek to eat after having made a gift of food unto a Brahmana. Every man should make the day fruitful by making gifts of food.

[Note: That day is sterile or lost in which no gift is made of food.]

A person by feeding, O king, a thousand Brahmanas all of whom are conversant with duties and the scriptures and the sacred histories, has not to go to Hell and to return to this world for undergoing rebirths. Endued with the fruition of every wish, he enjoys great felicity hereafter. Possessed of such merit, he sports in happiness, freed from every anxiety, possessed of beauty of form and great fame and endued with wealth. I have thus told thee all about the high merit of gifts of food. Even this is the root of all righteousness and merit, as also of all gifts, O Bharata!

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Heaven is rejected by Mudgala  
From the scriptures  
Paraphrased by Swami Shivananda, Rishikesh

Addressing Mudgala, Rishi Durvasa said:

You have gained great merits through your virtuous actions and virtuous qualities such as self-restraint, fortitude, justice, control of the senses, mercy, generosity, kindness, truthfulness and Dharma. Even the dwellers of heaven are proclaiming your great deeds of charity and divine qualities. You are going to be taken to the celestial world in this very physical body of yours.

While Rishi Durvasa was thus speaking, a celestial messenger arrived with a celestial car and said: O Mudgala, O virtuous Brahmin of great asceticism! Get into the car and come to heaven which you have obtained as the fruit of your asceticism.

Mudgala asked the celestial messenger: What is the nature of the inhabitants of heaven (swarga)? What is the nature of happiness there and what are its defects? What is the nature of their asceticism and what is their purpose? Virtuous men say that when two good men walk seven steps together, or when they speak seven words to each other, they become friends. I, therefore, take you as my friend. So I may freely put to you these questions. Tell me the truth and that which is good for me to know. After hearing your answers, I will decide about my going to heaven.

The celestial messenger replied: You wish to weigh the advantages and disadvantages of the life in heaven. This clearly shows the superiority of your intellect. Only those persons who have earned great merits on earth can go to heaven. The heaven is well provided with excellent paths. It is always frequented with celestial cars. Atheists and untruthful persons, those who have not performed asceticism and those who have not performed great sacrifices cannot go there.

Only virtuous souls and those of subdued minds, those who have controlled their senses, those who are free from malice, those intent on the practice of charity, and heroes and men bearing marks of battle and who have performed the most meritorious acts attain to the celestial regions.

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The celestial regions can be attained only by virtuous acts. The celestial regions are inhabited by pious men. They bestow every object of desire. The Siddhas, the Vaisnavas, the Gandharvas, the Apsaras, the Yamas and the Dharmas dwell there. There are many celestial gardens. Here sport persons of meritorious acts. Neither hunger nor thirst, nor heat, nor cold, neither grief nor fatigue, neither labour nor repentance, nor fear, nor anything that is disgusting and inauspicious; none of these is to be found in heaven. There is no old age either.

**Delightful fragrance is found everywhere. The breeze is gentle and pleasant. The inhabitants have resplendent bodies. Delightful sounds captivate both the ear and the mind. These worlds are obtained by meritorious acts and not by birth nor by the merits of fathers and mothers.**

There is neither sweat nor stench, nor excretion nor urine. The dust does not soil one's clothes. There is no uncleanness of any kind. Garlands (made from flowers) do not fade. Excellent garments full of celestial fragrance never fade. There are countless celestial cars that move in the air. The dwellers are free from envy, grief, ignorance and malice. They live very happily.

Such O Brahmana is the bliss of heaven. Now hear about some of its disadvantages. In the celestial region, a person, while enjoying the fruits of acts he had already performed, cannot perform any other new act. He must enjoy the fruits of the former life till they are completely exhausted. Further, he is liable to fall after he has completely exhausted his merit. These are the disadvantages of heaven. The consciousness of those about to fall is stupefied. It is also agitated by emotions. As the garlands of those about to fall fade away, fear possesses their hearts.

Mudgala said: The disadvantages are great (substantial) indeed. Can you tell me of any world where there are no such disadvantages?

The celestial messenger said: Above the abode of Brahma, there is the supreme seat of Vishnu (the Supreme Reality) which is pure, eternal and effulgent. It is known by the name of Para Brahman. O Brahmana, persons who are addicted to sensual objects or those who are subject to arrogance,

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covetousness, ignorance, anger and envy cannot go to that place. Those men who are free from conflicting emotions, who have restrained their senses, and who are given to meditation and Yoga can go there. O Mudgala, now kindly come with me without any further delay.

Mudgala reflected deeply over the matter and said: O celestial messenger! O bow to you. Sir, go back in peace. I have nothing to do with either happiness or heaven with such drawbacks or disadvantages. Men who enjoy heaven suffer great misery and extreme regret in this world. Therefore, I do not desire to go to heaven. I will try to reach that supreme abode of eternal bliss from where there will be no fall. I will seek that unfailing region, going to which people have not to lament, or to be pained or to be agitated.

After sending away the celestial messenger, Mudgala practised Jnana Yoga (Yoga of knowledge). He engaged himself in constant meditation on Para Brahman or the Supreme Self. He attained knowledge of the Imperishable and obtained the supreme state of emancipation, which is eternal. Thereafter censure and praise became equal to him. A brick, a stone and a piece of gold all became the same to him.

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Description of Hell  
From The Mahabharata  
Santi Parva Section CXCVIII  
Translated by Sri Kisari Mohan Ganguli

King Yudhishtira said: Tell me what description of hell is obtained by a Reciter (of sacred mantras)? I feel a curiosity to know this. It behoveth thee to discourse on this subject.

Bhishma said: Thou hast sprung from a portion of the god of righteousness. Thou art by nature observant of righteousness. Listen, O sinless one, with undivided attention, to these words resting on righteousness as their basis. Those regions that are owned by the high-souled gods, that are of diverse aspects and colours, of diverse descriptions and productive of diverse fruits, and that are of great excellence, those cars again that move at the will of the riders, those beautiful mansions and hells, those various pleasure-gardens embellished with golden lotuses, those regions that belong to the four Regents and other denizens of

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heaven, are O sire, spoken of as hells, when compared with the region of the Supreme Soul.

The region last spoken of (region of the Supreme Soul) is without any fear (of change for the worse), uncreate (and therefore, in its true nature), without pain of any kind (such as ignorance and delusion), without any agreeable or disagreeable element, beyond the reach of the three attributes (of Sattwa, Rajas and Tamas), freed from the eight incidents, (viz., the five primal elements, the senses, the mind, and the intellect), without the three (distinctions between the knower, the known, and act of knowing); freed also from the four attributes (seeing, hearing, thinking, and knowing), without the fourfold causes (of knowledge), without joy and delight and sorrow and disease.

**Time (in his forms of past, present and future) arises there for use. Time is not the ruler there. That supreme region is the ruler of Time as also of Heaven. That Reciter who becomes identified with his Soul (by withdrawing everything into it) goes there. He has, after this, never to feel any sorrow. This region is called Supreme. The other regions (of which I have first spoken) are hell. I have not told thee of all those regions that are called hell. Indeed, in comparison with that foremost of regions all the others are called hell.**