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Buddhist Hells: Two Interpretations

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Abstract

In this essay, I explore how teachings about hell functions within Buddhist cosmology and how they were developed within various Buddhist monastic traditions. I discuss, in particular, two different possible interpretations of these teachings; a literal one and a metaphorical one. By pointing to some problems with literal (realist) interpretations of what hells are, the essay indirectly argues for a metaphorical one.

Keywords: *Buddhism, suffering, the path to liberation, six realms of existence, dukkha*

Słowa kluczowe: *buddyzm, cierpienie, droga do wyzwolenia, sześć sfer istnienia, dukkha*

Preliminaries: Buddhism and its "Minimalistic" Approach to Suffering

According to the Buddha, *dukkha* (suffering, unease, unfulfillment) is one of *three marks of existence*. As the Awakened One asserted in numerous sermons, delivered over about 35 years, birth, life, aging, death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, despair, association with the unbeloved, separation from the loved, not getting what is wanted, and so on are all *dukkha* caused by such *poisons* (*kleśa*) as anger-hatred-aversion (*dveṣa)*, cravings-attachment-greed (*raga*), and at the core of all of this, ignorance-delusions (*moha* or *avidya*).

The dukkha can be overcome or dissolved. To do so one has to follow the *Noble Eightfold Path* including the right (correct) view (or understanding), the right resolve (right motives and intentions), the right speech, the right action, the right livelihood, the right effort, the right mindfulness, and the right concentration.[1] To wit, Buddhism recognized suffering as the basic problem of human existence; all Buddhist teachings revolve around this problem.[2]

One of the Buddhist Sutras (spoken words of the Buddha), *Majjhima-nikaya Sutta 63*, reports that on one occasion his student, Mālunkyāputta, was concerned that many things remained "undeclared." Specifically, he wanted to know whether or not the world is eternal, the soul (*jiva*) is different from the body, the fully awakened sage exists after death, and so on.[3] The Buddha

[1] The Noble Eightfold path covers all aspects of human existence, from intellectual (the first two folds), to ethical-social (the next four folds), to meditational (the last two folds).

[2] Keith E. Yandell (2016) defines religion as, at the core, providing answers to "the basic problem around which the religion organizes itself" (p. XX, cf. pp. 10–11). This seems to be intended a purely formal account. That is, it implies that all religions a) identify some problem(s) as essential or fundamental and then b) attempt to provide answers to so identified problem(s). For Buddhism, this central problem is the problem of suffering. The essentially same problem is also identified as central withing all Abrahamic religions and many other (if not all) religions. But, in principle, Yandell account allows that some other problems could be identified as central by a religious tradition.

[3] Pali sources, *Majjhima Nikaya Suttas* 63 and 72, give the same list of ten "propositions that defy assertion"; namely: 1) The world is eternal (has no beginning in time). 2) The world is not eternal. 3) The world is (spatially) infinite. 4) The world is not (spatially) infinite. 5) The soul (*jiva*) is identical with the body. 6) The soul is not identical with the body. 7) The Tathagata (a buddha, a perfectly awakened being) exists after death. 8) The Tathagata does not exist after death. 9) The Tathagata both exists and does not exist after death. 10) The Tathagata neither exists nor does not exist after death. The Sanskrit sources add to this list 4 additional propositions; namely: 11) The world is both eternal and not eternal. 12) The world is neither eternal nor not eternal. 13) The world is both finite and infinite. 14) The world is neither finite nor infinite.

made clear immediately that he has never promised answers to these sorts of questions. Then he put Mālunkyāputta's inquiry in a broader context:

> It is as if a man had been wounded by an arrow thickly smeared with poison, and his friends, companions, and relatives were to get a surgeon to heal him, and he were to say, 'I will not have this arrow pulled out until I know who wounded me, of what caste he is, what his name is, whether he is tall, short or of medium height, what color his skin is, where he comes from, what kind of bow I was wounded with, what it was made of, whether the arrow was feathered with a vulture's wing or a heron's or a hawk's….' Surely the man would die before he knew all this.' Whether the view is held that the world is eternal or not, Malunkyaputta, there is still re-birth, old age, death, grief, suffering, sorrow, and despair – and these can be destroyed in this life![4]

There are two things immediately apparent in this and similar fragments. First, the Buddha routinely declines to address questions formulated grand "absolutistic" terms and claims such as the world is infinite (or not). Second, he also avoids using dualistic "either-or" terms such as "exists" or "does not exist."

Third, it is a matter of interpretation, and much scholarship, whether the Buddha maintained that such questions are *unanswerable in principle* (because, perhaps, of our epistemic limitations or the limitations inherent in any conceptual discourse), or that they are only *not worthy* of being pursued on purely practical grounds. Hick and Siderits (2007) argue for the former. But the text suggests the latter. As the Buddha explicitly states, "I have not explained these other things because they are not useful, they are not conducive to tranquility and Nirvana." Either way, it is crystal clear that the Buddha takes a very minimalistic and pragmatic approach to the problem of suffering. That is, he identified the problem he promised to address and then attempted to provide a solution to this problem formulating it in very practical terms. Thus, the sutra concludes as follows:

> 'What I have explained is suffering, the cause of suffering, the destruction of suffering, and the path that leads to the destruction of suffering.' This is the very essence of Buddhism. It is called The Four Noble Truths. Everything else is an elaboration. The Buddha has never departed from these four truths.

With time, Buddhists developed more elaborate answers to the problem of *dukkha*. There may be numerous reasons for that in addition to simple human

[4] I rely here on the translation provided by John Hick (2004).

curiosity. For example, we recognize that there are dramatic differences between the conditions into which we are born (including differences in someone's health, the matters of prestige and power associated with someone's position, and the material wealth, and the levels of someone's well-being associated with these conditions. (As the saying goes, "It is better to be young, wealthy, and healthy than old, poor, and sick.") We also realize that there are various kinds and degrees of suffering. And we wonder whether there is any explanation for these sorts of disparities. Some intermediary (or partial) explanations were provided, e.g., by the teachings about karma and reincarnation.

They are partial because they attempt to explain various instances or types of suffering and not the problem of *dukkha* in general. And they are intermediary because they eschew the explanation in terms of ultimate causes like *dveṣa*, *raga*, and *moha-avidya* and attempt to provide instead explanations in terms of some more finely defined conditions (caused by *karma*), and how these conditions are related to specific forms of desires and cravings leading to specific forms of suffering. One way of bringing together these sorts of explanations involves the myth of the wheel of life and death.

The Wheel of Life and Death

Both the Buddhist and Vedic traditions accept the teachings about karma and reincarnation. Reincarnation is caused by our deeds (also known as *karma*) that determine a position, or a form of rebirth, in one of the "Six Realms of Existence;" i.e., as humans, *devas* (heavenly dwellers), *asuras* (jealous and power-hungry demi-gods or titans), animals, *pretas* (hungry and thirsty ghosts), or as beings tormented in one of the numerous hells.

Three qualifications are immediately in order. The first is purely semantic; the term "devas" is usually translated as deities or gods. On this topic, Bhikku Bodhi (2000) observes in his introduction to *Connected Discourses of the Buddha* what follows:

> *Devata* is an abstract noun based on *deva*, but in the Nikayas it is invariably used to denote particular celestial beings, just as the English word "deity," originally an abstract noun meaning the divine nature, is normally used to denote the supreme God of theistic religions or an individual god or goddess of polytheistic faiths (Bhikku Bodhi 2000, 79).

Second, by combining the realms of devas and asuras, some interpretations reduce the scheme to only five realms. This stems from a recognition

that pure god-like saints are as rare as pure demons, and most beings exemplify both characters in varying degrees. Consequently, in his seminal commentary on the Vedic mythology, Ceylonese Tamil philosopher Ananda Coomaraswamy observed that *devas* and *asuras* exemplify different orientations and inclinations, rather than separate kinds of beings. *Devas* represent the powers of light while *asuras* represent the powers of darkness. Both kinds of powers exist in every human being and our choices can be influenced by varying dispositions and intentions:

> [T]he Titan is potentially an Angel, the Angel still by nature a Titan; the Darkness in *actu* is Light, the Light in *potentia* Darkness; whence the designations Asura and Deva may be applied to one and the same Person according to the mode of operation, as in Rigveda 1.163.3, "Trita art thou (Agni) by interior operation" (Coomaraswamy 1935, 373–4).

Interestingly, many visual representations of the Wheel of Life and Death blur or obscure (by, e.g., by a branch or a cloud) a "boundary" between the realms of devas and asuras.

On the opposite side, third, some interpretations expand the schema to ten worlds by adding to it the realm of *śrāvakas* (i.e., beings who entered to some extend the path to liberation), the realm of *pratyekabuddhas* (i.e., beings who achieved a liberation without the aid of teachers and who are not engaged in teaching others), the realm of bodhisattvas (i.e., deeply awakened beings who, out of compassion, postpone entering the full nirvana in order to help others), and the realm of fully awakened buddhas. These four additional realms are treated as superior to the already discussed six. Thus, they are treated as (metaphorically speaking) "located above" other states of existence. This extended ten-fold approach became a foundation for the teaching about "3000 worlds in one instant thought" introduced in Buddhist context by a Chinese *tiantai* patriarch Zhiyi (538–597) who postulated that every realm, and each aspect of every realm, inter-penetrate (and are contained in) every other world and its aspect.[5] This generates 3,000 conceptually separable realms that are not treated, however, as ontologically separate but rather as interpenetrating aspects of every mental state. We'll return to this idea shortly.

What drives us from one realm to another are emotions, dispositions, and blind desires, such as anger-hatred-aversion (*dveṣa)*, cravings-attachment-greed (*raga*), and at the core of all of this, ignorance-delusions (*moha* or

[5] On this topic see Swanson (1989) and Bowring (2008).

avidya). To clarify, Buddhist thinkers recognize a difference between "good" (or at least acceptable) anger and a "bad" one. "Good" anger may be characterized as an attitude of disagreement with or resistance to various forms of injustice and wrongdoing. This form of anger corresponds, roughly, to what Aristotle and stoics might characterize as "righteous indignation." It is not the main cause driving us through the world of suffering. What is problematic is more blind and atavistic lashing out at others for no apparent reason and without any real cause justifying such a reaction. This is the anger that needs to be confronted and dissolved.[6]

Similarly, there is an identifiable difference between desires grounded in needs and desires grounded in cravings. No human being can flourish without clean air and water, adequate food, security, friendship, absence from prolonged intense suffering, and so on. We need these things, and we want to have these needs fulfilled. Once they are fulfilled, we move on without worrying and obsessing about them. At least, that is how we are supposed to function according to philosophical traditions going back to at least Aristotle's concept of *eudaimonia* and compatible with Buddhist traditions.

Cravings are different in at least one important respect; namely, they have nothing to do with our needs and are not related to our flourishing at all. They impede flourishing because they are not grounded in anything; they are self-perpetuating. Consequently, they cannot be fulfilled. The best we may hope for is to push a craving a little bit behind the horizon of consciousness and keep it there for a short while. But soon, it sneaks upon us again with a vengeance. And, unfortunately, once we give in to our cravings there is no end to it, we give in again and again, and soon things start to collapse causing even more suffering. The only way to resolve *dukkha* caused by cravings is not to suppress them but to dissolve them.

In graphic representations of the wheel, its central detail represents these grave poisons or afflictions (*kleśa*) as a snake (representing *dveṣa*), a cock (representing *raga*), and at the core of all of this a hog (representing *moha*). They are frequently portrayed as entangled in a vicious circle of simultaneously devouring and creating each other. Interestingly, sometimes the hog is given a more prominent place; the cock and the snake emanate from its mouth. This way of representing the central fragment seems to emphasize the primacy of ignorance as the main cause of suffering and is consistent with other aspects of Buddhist teachings.

[6] And this distinction and related topics, see Dalai Lama (1999, esp. chapter 6) and Thurman (2005).

For example, early Buddhist texts postulate that reality consists of basic 'atomic' existents, named *dharmas*, that are grouped into five *skandhas* (literally, heaps or aggregates); namely, form or body (*rūpa*), feelings (*vedanā*), mental formations and volitions (*saṃskāra*), perceptions (saṃjñā), and consciousness or awareness (vijñāna). All schools of Buddhism postulate also that these conditions depend on each other and none of them has an independent existence or essence; this is known as the doctrine of dependent co-origination (Sanskrit *pratītyasamutpāda*; Pali *paṭiccasamuppāda*).[7] It is interesting to realize, however, that almost all *expositions* start with ignorance as the root cause of getting entangled in the cycle of life, death, rebirth, and suffering. Indeed, Buddhist practice involves many forms of meditation aiming directly at eradicating our illusions and ignorance.[8]

No matter what drives us through the *Wheel*, no matter what obstacles and temptations we may encounter, and no matter what we are inclined to do, ultimately it is up to us to respond to it in one way or another. Yes, sometimes we yield to our cravings and attachments, and driven by the winds of karma we keep continuing to be reborn. Ultimately, however, we can transcend these desires, inclinations, cravings, and attachments and freely choose to follow the path of wisdom-compassion.

Being re-born as a human is considered the most auspicious in terms of the possibility for spiritual awakening. Some sources go as far as to claim that it is the *only* condition allowing for such awakening or enlightenment. *Devas* tend to be too preoccupied with pleasure to care about spiritual needs. *Asuras*, or jealous demigods, are obsessed with gaining power. Animals lack intellectual abilities, and their minds are not sophisticated enough to reach liberation. There is too much hunger and thirst in the lives of *pretas* (hungry and thirsty ghosts). And the enormous suffering in the realms of various hells makes spiritual practice borderline impossible.

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[7] As Mathieu Boisvert asserted, dependent origination is 'the common denominator of all the Buddhist traditions throughout the world, whether Theravada, Mahayana or Vajrayana' (Boisvert 1995, 6–7). There are numerous different and arguably conflicting renditions of this doctrine presented in the Buddhist canon, ranging from six to twelve causal steps. Most likely, it attempts to combine several other conflicting accounts. Consequently, it is doubtful that this version is fully coherent. On this topic see Siderits 2007, chapter 2; and *Gombrich 2009, chapter 9.* The core common to all accounts implies that all phenomena depend on each other. As the point is expressed in *Assutavā Sutta*: "When this is, that is. From the arising (*uppada*) of this comes the arising of that. When this isn't, that isn't. From the cessation (*nirodha*) of this comes the cessation of that" (tr. by Thanissaro Bhikkhu, 2005).

[8] Sencerz (2022) explores some aspects of Buddhist meditation and experiences (such as *samadhi* and awakening) one can gain by doing meditation.

Naraka (Hells): A Literal ("Realist") and a Metaphorical Interpretations

The myth of the *Realms of Existence* is frequently interpreted in two different yet compatible ways. One view, which may be called a "literal" or "realist" interpretation, is frequently taken to imply that the six realms denote real "places" where various beings are reborn or, even better, various "modes of existence" (instead of places) determined by our deeds.

Some texts conceptualize hells as a series of concentric spheres nested within each other inside of the earth (cf. Buswell and Lopez 2014) while others deny it. A Buddhist scholar and Theravada monk Sri Dhammananda Maha Thera observed that the Buddha himself maintained that it is a mistake to think of hell as a place:

> 'When the average ignorant person makes an assertion to the effect that there is a Hell (*patala*) under the ocean he is making a statement which is false and without basis. The word 'Hell' is a term for painful sensations.' The idea of one particular ready-made place or a place created by god as heaven and hell is not acceptable to the Buddhist concept. The fire of hell in this world is hotter than that of the hell in the world beyond. There is no fire equal to anger, lust or greed and ignorance. According to the Buddha, we are burning from eleven kinds of physical pain and mental agony: lust, hatred, illusion sickness, decay, death, worry, lamentation, pain (physical and mental), melancholy and grief. […] [Where] there is more suffering, either in this world or any other plane, that place is a hell to those who suffer. And where there is more pleasure or happiness, either in this world or any other worldly existence, that place is a heaven to those who enjoy their worldly life in that particular place (Dhammananda Maha Thera, n.d.).

A primary source frequently quoted in the context of discussing various kinds of hells is the *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* (lit. "Commentary on the Treasury of Abhidharma") written in the 4th or 5th century CE by the Indian Buddhist scholar and sage Vasubandhu.[9] It describes the most common scheme, as the *Eight Cold* and *Eight Hot Narakas* and two additional "independent" hells.[10] The differences between various hells are explained in terms of the

[9] *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* and numerous other canonical sources are gathered in Gardiner 2012. An identical classification is offered in "The Sutra of Eighteen Hells," in Gardiner 2012, 21–6.

[10] Other sources list numerous other hells; sometimes as 158 of them.

severity of punishment and the length of the lifetime within each naraka; the lifespan is supposed to increase eight-fold relative to the hell before. The scale is inconsistent, however, and the only clear thing is that this time is unimaginably long yet finite. That is, unlike Christian and Moslem hells, punishment in Buddhist hells is impermanent. When beings exhaust their hellish karma, they are reborn in a different realm.

Even though texts tend to be rather vague about the length of a lifetime within various *narakas*, they are extremely vivid and visual in describing details of punishments. In a very interesting essay, Marino (2019) describes how some early Buddhist texts, composed and compiled during South Asia's Iron Age, contain many references to iron and other metal technologies, and how the iron ball becomes a torture device in hell reflecting anxieties about undisciplined and deceitful monks and nuns providing karmic retribution for lacking discipline.

The suffering experienced in *narakas* often resembles the suffering of *pretas*; the realm of hungry and thirsty ghosts is sometimes confused with the realm of hells. The simplest distinction is that *narakas* are more isolated. Consequently, beings in hells or confined to them; they can interact only with fellow occupants. By contrast, the *pretas* are free to move about. Their hunger and suffering can be alleviated by the dharma food we offer to them in a little ceremony that accompanies each meal.

Another interpretation sees the realms of existence as a symbolic representation of our mental states and dispositions. In this interpretation, it is conceivable that various states sometimes coexist in one person, possibly even at the very same time. We might call this a "metaphorical" or "humanistic" interpretation of the myth. These two interpretations are compatible, and both were adopted in various canonical Buddhist scriptures and by renowned teachers. Leaning towards one interpretation rather than another is frequently a matter of emphasis rather than accepting it exclusively and rejecting the other.

Broadly metaphorical interpretations are suggested by teachers who use the term *pretas* to chide their students' attachment to fleeting pleasures with neglect of what is truly spiritually important. Roshi Bernie Glassman, a contemporary American Zen teacher and founder of the Zen Peacemakers takes a similar approach in his description of his awakening:[11]

> He was driving to work one morning when he had a vision of hungry ghosts everywhere. Called pretas in Buddhist cosmology, these are beings who experience

[11] According to Glassman, the essence of Zen Buddhist practice is to make peace. This means, in turn, to realize the wholeness and interconnectedness of life.

> (and represent) endless and unfulfillable desire. At first, he saw these hankering, unsatisfied beings as existing outside himself. But suddenly he had the keen sense that there was no separation: he was those beings, they were him. Glassman knew then that his life's calling was to feed the hungry, literally and figuratively. He would not stay forever holed up in a zendo but would take the realizations won on the cushion out into the world (Miller 2013).

There are also examples of famous Patriarchs strongly supporting the metaphorical-humanistic interpretation thus shedding quite interesting light on how Buddhists think about paradise and hell. For example, according to the Chinese Master Dahui Zonggao (1089–1163)

> Addicted to their taste for petty desires, [sentient beings] willingly receive immeasurable suffering. Day after day, even before they've opened their eyes and gotten out of bed, while they're half awake and half asleep, their minds are already flying around in confusion, pursuing a torrent of vain thoughts. Although their good and bad doings are not yet manifest before they've gotten out of bed, heaven and hell have already instantly formed within their hearts. And when their actions do come forth, they've already fallen into the storehouse mind.
>
> Heaven and hell are nowhere else but in the heart of the person while he's half awake and half asleep before he's gotten out of bed – they don't come from outside. When you're getting started but are not yet underway, when you're awakening but are not yet awake, you must diligently reflect back on this [...].
>
> This is how a person achieves Buddhahood and becomes an ancestral teacher, this is how a person changes hell into heaven, this is where a person sits in peace, this is where a person gets out of birth and death, this is where a person becomes sovereign above the ancient emperors Yao and Shun, this is where a person raises the weary people from misery, this is where a person brings prosperity to his adopted descendants (Cleary 2006, 48–49).

The same spirit is expressed in the following famous story involving one of the greatest Japanese Zen Patriarchs, Hakuin Ekaku (1686–1769):

> A samurai came to Hakuin and asked, "Is there really a paradise and a hell?"
> "Who are you?" inquired Hakuin.
> "I am a samurai," the warrior replied.
> "You, a samurai!" exclaimed Hakuin. "What kind of ruler would have you as his guard? Your face looks like that of a beggar!"
> The soldier became so angry that he began to draw his sword, but Hakuin continued. "So, you have a sword! Your weapon is probably as dull as your head!"

> As the soldier drew his sword Hakuin remarked "Here open the gates of hell!" At these words, the samurai, perceiving the discipline of the master, sheathed his sword and bowed.
> "Here open the gates of paradise," said Hakuin.[12]

On the Metaphorical Interpretation of Hell

Considering the difference between literal and metaphorical interpretations of the *Six Realms*, I am more "at home" with the latter. (Again, let us remind ourselves that these interpretations are compatible and, thus, someone can maintain both.)

When my mother took me on a tour of Auschwitz, where she had been imprisoned after the Warsaw Uprising of 1944, it was obvious to me that she had endured and survived hell. She told me that what kept her sane was strong faith and continuously doing the Rosary. I will say more about our common experience of revisiting Auschwitz in the last part of this essay.

During my first trip to Auschwitz, when I was still a high-school student, I recognized at a visceral level the connection between what the Nazis did to us and what we do to animals. Jewish Nobel Prize laureate, Isaac Bashevis Singer, mentions it in several places speaking through the mouths of his protagonists. For example, in a short story "The Letter Writer" he says that "in relation to animals, all people are Nazis; for animals it is an eternal Treblinka."[13] John Maxwell Coetzee (2007), also a Nobel laureate in literature, compared the Nazis' treatment of Jews to methods used to herd and slaughter cattle. What we do to animals, especially on factory farms, looks to me like condemning them to hell, too.[14]

Returning to Zhiyi's teachings about "3000 worlds in one instant thought," we might say that each of us simultaneously occupies all planes of existence implied by the *Wheel of Life and Death*. I am both a human and an animal, both a hungry ghost and (at least sometimes) someone who endures hell, both a deva preoccupied with pleasure and an asura driven by

[12] A version of this story appears in Reps and Senzaki 1998, 80. A search for this story in Japanese returns many slightly rephrased results but no one cites a source. It seems like it is an oral teaching. For generations, people have been retelling it with slight alterations before it was written down.)

[13] Quoted in Patterson (2002).

[14] I describe my first trip to Auschwitz, and my though process leading me to recognizing parallels between the abuse of people and the abuse of animals in Appendix to Sencerz, 2020.

anger, hate, and jealousy. The ultimate meaning of the myth may be that all the time, various dispositions and aspirations coexist in each of us. Its meaning is also that, to resolve the problem of suffering, we need to dissolve (dissolve and not just suppress) our greed-craving and hatred and to achieve wisdom.

Coda: "I've Been to Auschwitz" (a poem for my mother)[15]

I

It is a hot, sweaty, sunny day when I hit the road. I hitchhike up the Vistula River to the ancient city of Krakow, then further into the mountains, Auschwitz on the way

The buildings of the main camp made of red bricks, still look solid

The iron gate welcomes with the inscription: *ARBEIT MACHT FREI -- WORK LIBERATES*

Inside, several huge rooms, each filled with hair, combs, razors, eyeglasses, toothbrushes, belts, buckles, prosthetics, shoes, many of them children's shoes, and toys

I could not speak
for several days

II

Years pass. My mother gives me a tour of the sister camp of *Brzezinka – Birch Forest*. The forest of chimneys spread for miles along the railway tracks welcomes us. At the end of the war, most barracks were burned down to cover the crimes. Only a few survived and the dead forest of chimneys

Gas chambers at the end of the tracks, crematoria furnaces right behind. All's neat and efficient. More than a million people were killed here

My mother stops by the crematorium and says: "Sometimes we heard the cries of children thrown alive into the furnace." I want to embrace her; I want to tell her I know. But what do I know? I only read about it. She lived here

[15] An earlier version of this poem appeared in Woods and co., 2003.

Still, I want to embrace her. But she's already taken off, marches, measures her steps like someone who knows exactly where she is going. I follow her into one of the barracks

She stops by an alcove 6 feet by 6 feet, three shelves of wooden planks inside, points to the top one, and says: "Here's where I slept." "Alone?" I ask. "No, 8-10 women shared the bunk. One blanket, sometimes two. It wasn't all bad. We cuddled when it was cold"

She leads to a central place where the roll call was taken, twice a day. "We would stand for hours in cold, wind, snow, and rain, especially when anyone had tried to escape. Sometimes the guards would bring them back and torture them in front of us," she says

We walk to the parking lot. My mother stops by the Wall of the Dead, kneels down, pulls out her cherry wood rosary worn thin by the touch of generations: "*Święta Maryjo, Matko Boża, módl się za nami grzesznymi teraz i w godzinę naszej śmierci*," she whispers, and I join her with Zen chant: "*Namu Dai Bosa!* Homage to the Great Compassionate One!"

"Holy Maria!"

"*Namu Dai Bosa!*"

"Mother of God!"

"*Namu Dai Bosa!*"

"Pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death!"

I raise my eyes. Calm mountain tops loom on the horizon

III

My mother and I watch "The Trial in Nuremberg" in her tiny apartment overlooking the Vistula River. Hermann Goering, second in the *Reich* only to Hitler, claims to be oblivious to what happened in the camps. My mother says, "Let's take a walk along the river. Wild geese may need food"

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