

8

Satta Suriya Sutta

The Discourse on the Seven Suns | A 7.62 [A:B 7.66]

Theme: The end of the universe and its significance

Translated by Piya Tan ©2011, 2014

1 Sutta summary and highlights

1.1 MODERN SCIENTIFIC VIEW. The **Satta Suriya Sutta** (A 7.62) is a reflection on impermanence on literally cosmic scale: the ending of our own solar system. Our solar system begins to be destroyed as the sun expands itself in 7 stages, causing progressively more massive destruction on earth. If our earth and the solar system can end in this way, what more to say of all the lives and things in them? They are all impermanent and subject to destruction.

According to science, this will indeed happen, but billions of years in the future, when the sun bloats up into a red giant, and then expel its outer layers. It will then expand and sweep through our solar system within 5 million years (a relatively short time in astronomical terms). It will then enter its relatively brief (130 million year) helium-burning phase. It will expand past the orbit of Mercury, and then of Venus. In the end, it is left a white dwarf, surrounded by a planetary nebulae.¹

By the time it approaches the earth, it will be losing 4.9×10^{20} tonnes of mass every year (8% the mass of the earth). But the habitable zone will be gone much sooner. Astronomers estimate that the sun will expand past the earth's orbit in just a billion years. The heating sun will evaporate the earth's oceans away, and then solar radiation will blast away the hydrogen from the water. The earth will never have oceans again. It will eventually become molten again.²

1.2 SUTTA SUMMARY

1.2.1 The Satta Suriya Sutta opens with the Buddha stating that **formations (all compounded things) are impermanent, unstable, insecure** [§3]. Formations here refer to all the contents of the universe, that is, its matter in one form or another.³ The purpose of this reflection is see directly into the true nature of reality, and not to be tricked by it [§4].

1.2.2 The Sutta then introduces Mount Sineru and its dimensions [§5], without giving any further details. Then follows **the 7 stages of the sun's devolution** [1.1], affecting the earth in these ways:

- (1) lack of rain so that all plant life and vegetation are destroyed [§§6-8];
- (2) all the streams and smaller lakes dry up [§§9-11];
- (3) all the great rivers dry up [§§12-14];
- (4) all the great lakes dry up [§§15-17];
- (5) the waters of the great oceans progressively recede, until only a man's height [§§18-24];
- (6) the earth, with Mount Sineru, begin to burn up [§§25-28]; and
- (7) the whole earth burns up without any remnants [§§29-36].

1.2.3 The next section relates the story of an ancient teacher, **Sunetta**, who is also alluded to in **the Dhammika Sutta** (A 6.54).⁴ It is said that he had hundreds of students, and taught "fellowship with the Brahma-world" (*brahma.loka,sahavyatā*), that is, some kind of lovingkindness meditation to attain the first dhyana, resulting in rebirth in the Brahma-world⁵ [§§37-40]. However, his students who did not fully understand his teachings were only reborn in one or other of the six sense-world heavens,⁶ or in the families of wealthy kshatriyas, brahmins, or householders [§41].

Sunetta, learning this, and not wanting to suffer the same fate, went on to further cultivate lovingkindness for 7 years, so that for 7 world-cycles, he did not return to this world, presumably he was reborn in

¹ Paul Murdin (ed), *Encyclopedia of Astronomy and Astrophysics*, 2001, sv Sun.

² See eg <http://www.universetoday.com/12648/will-earth-survive-when-the-sun-becomes-a-red-giant/>.

³ See SD 17.6 (6).

⁴ A 6.54/3:371,16-27 @ SD 47.7.

⁵ For the location of the Brahma-world in Buddhist cosmology, see SD 1.7 (Table 1.7).

⁶ For the location of the 6 sense-world heavens in Buddhist cosmology, see SD 1.7 (Table 1.7).

the 1st-dhyana Brahma world [§§43-44]. When the world was destroyed (presumably by the fire element which burned up to the 1st-dhyana Brahma world), he was reborn in the 2nd-dhyana Ābhassara world. When the physical sense-world re-evolved, he was reborn as Mahā,brahmā [§§45-47]. Then, he was reborn 6 times as Sakra (in the sense-world of Tāvatiṃsa, the heaven of the 33)⁷ as the king of the gods [§48]. After that, reborn on earth, he was world-monarch (*cakka,vatti*),⁸ in all his glory, many hundreds of times [§49].

Then comes the anticlimax:⁹ despite all of Sunetta's great divine and worldly attainments, "he was not liberated"! [§50]. What is the reason for this? He did not know, much less understand, the 4 noble truths [§§51-53]. The Sutta then closes with two verses, the first alluding to the 3 trainings, and the second on the nature of buddhahood [§§54-56].

2 Buddhist cosmology

2.1 BEGINNINGS.¹⁰ In the **Pāṭika Sutta** (D 24), the Buddha declares, "I know the beginning of things (*aggāṇṇa*), and not only that, but what is higher than this."¹¹ This statement is very significant when we consider the fact that a central concern of the Upaniṣadic thinkers of the Buddha's time concerns the beginnings, so that the creation stories beginning with "in the beginning" (*agre*) are common. Stories try to explain things or sell ideas, but do not always solve problems, especially those of sentient pain. Understandably, the Buddha declares that he not only knows the beginning of things, but also what is beyond that, that is, the way out of suffering (and more).¹²

2.2 MOUNT SINERU

2.2.1 Historically, Sineru is probably the Himalayas, "the king of the mountains." However, it is also possible that see it as some kind of axis mundi, or centre of our galaxy or the universe. The ancient Indians, in their cosmology, have some mythical notion that Mount Sineru is also the physical centre of their universe, which is geocentric. Here, the Sutta is alluding to the popular ancient Indian world view.¹³

2.2.2 The suttas, however, often speak of "solar systems," that is, a world-system centred around the sun.¹⁴ There are many such solar systems, and there are also parallel universes just like ours. Hence, we can see a tension between the old pre-Buddhist cosmology centred around Mount Sineru, and the sutta vision of numerous solar systems and parallel universes. We could say that the suttas are the basis of a new Indian cosmology.¹⁵

2.3 WORLD, WORLD SYSTEMS AND CHILIOCOSMS

2.3.1 Buddhist cosmology. The pre-Buddhist Indian cosmology had no notion whatsoever of planets actually revolving around the sun, as we understand it today. There was only the idea of what we today would call that of "fixed stars," common in other ancient cosmologies, including those of other major religions (even to this day). So far no modern religion has tried to revise or interpret such a pre-scientific notion, as this would mean revising, or at least reviewing, some vital dogmas. Hence, such religious cosmologies have generally and quietly receded into an embarrassing theological silence.

The early Buddhists were not interested in explaining the origin or nature of life or the cosmos. Whatever is stated in the suttas regarding the beginnings of life and the universe (such as in the **Aggaṇṇa Sutta**) [2.4.1] are always to highlight some universal moral principle or spiritual quality, even awakening itself. Despite the generality, even vagueness, of cosmological notions and descriptions, what we have of

⁷ For the location of Tāvatiṃsa, see SD 1.7 (Table 1.7).

⁸ On the world monarch, see **Cakka,vatti Siha,nāda S** (D 26), esp SD 36.10 (2).

⁹ For def, see §50 n.

¹⁰ This para is also at SD 2.19 (1.1).

¹¹ D 24,2.14/3:30.

¹² See eg **Siṃsapā S** (S 56.31/5:437 f), SD 21.7 & also P Olivelle (tr), *Upaniṣads*, 1996:xlvi.

¹³ Some scholars think that the origin of this cosmology lies in the Mesopotamian ziggurats of ancient Sumer, made possible given the early trade links between ancient India and the Euphrates region. See *Oxford Dictionary of Buddhism*, sv Meru.

¹⁴ For an anecdotal summary (without citations), see *The Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism*, sv Sumeru, Mount.

¹⁵ On ancient Buddhist cosmology, see SD 1.7 (Table 1.7); R Kloetzli 1983:23-72 (chs II-III).

early Buddhist cosmology even today parallels closer to the discoveries of modern science than the cosmologies of any other religious system or cosmological ideas as old as it, not so say of more ancient ones.

2.3.2 The Buddha's knowledge. Two points are worth noting here the source of knowledge of the Buddhist cosmology.¹⁶ (1) the Buddha's knowledge; (2) the purpose of the Buddha's teaching. We know from **the Simsapā Sutta** (S 56.31) that the Buddha's knowledge is vast like the leaves of the forest trees, but what we need to know for awakening is just a bit, like the leaves (probably only 4) in his hand, representing the 4 noble truths.¹⁷ The Buddha is omniscient in the sense that he is able to know whatever he wants by directing his mind to it.¹⁸

Such knowledge comes from the Buddha's wisdom gained from deep meditation, especially the first of the 3 knowledges,¹⁹ that of "**the knowledge of the recollection of past lives**,"²⁰ with which the Buddha or an adept dhyana-attainer is able to recall countless cosmic contractions and expansions, the arising and destructions of worlds and universes. Such a knowledge should affirm the fact that even the universe itself is impermanent, what more to speak of its contents, of life and ourselves. Hence, impermanence is a universal truth.

The purpose of the Buddha Dharma is to prepare and cultivate us for the wisdom that brings us full awakening. All we need to know for our awakening is the 4 noble truths. For this reason, the Buddha declares that he teaches only one thing, that is, "suffering and its ending."²¹ Indeed, as long as we have not attained at least streamwinning, we are still "outsiders" (*bāhira* or *bāhiraka*). However, when we try to work towards this goal, we are said to be "diligent noble disciples" (*appamāda ariya, sāvaka*).²²

2.3.3 Solar system. Some idea of worlds or planets revolving around a sun is clearly evident in the early Buddhist conception of the *cakka, vāla* (BHS *cakra, vāḍa*; Skt *cakra, vāla*). *Cakra* means "wheel," both literally and figuratively; it is here taken in the latter sense. *Vāla* or *vāḍa* is probably synonymous with *māla* or *māla*, meaning "garland," here used in a figurative sense. *Cakka, vāla* then literally translates as "wheel garland," or "garland of wheels."

Since both components have the sense of a circle, we can surmise that the "wheel" here also connotes a revolving motion. We cannot say for certain whether this revolving refers to the planets or the system as a whole. Or, it could simply mean a fixed circle of fixed planets with only the sun "rising" and "setting" around them. The irony is that it is in the vagueness of the description of *cakka, vāla* as used in the suttas that makes its notion of the "solar system" radically different from those of the pre-Buddhist systems and those of even later theistic religions.

The *cakka, vāla* are sufficiently described not to promote a new cosmology, but to highlight some teaching or universal truth, especially impermanence (as here in the Satta Suriya Sutta), or to debunk some false notion, such as the brahmin supremacy (as in the Aggañña Sutta, D 27) [2.4.2]. Although such notions can be mind-boggling, they do not seem fantastic or hyperbolic as in the imagination of later sectarian Buddhist writers of new "sutras." [2.3.4.2]

2.3.4 Circle of mountains

2.3.4.1 The later works and the Commentaries give a more definite idea of how the later Buddhists envisioned the universe, or at least of a *cakka, vāla*. They often speak of a *cakka, vāla* as a vast circular

¹⁶ A third possibility is that such knowledge was based on contemporary learning and imagination. However, we do not have any evidence (at the moment, anyway) for such a notion.

¹⁷ S 56.31 @ SD 21.7.

¹⁸ On the Buddha's omniscience, see **Kaṇṇaka-t,thala S** (M 90), SD 10.8 (2); **Sandaka S** (M 76), SD 35.7.

¹⁹ See **Cūḷa Hatthi, padōpama S** (M 27, 23-25) @ SD 40.5.

²⁰ *Pubbe, nivāsanānussati, ñāṇa*, lit "the knowledge of the recollection of past abidings [existences]."

²¹ **Anurādha S** (S 22.86/3:119), SD 21.13; also SD 40a.1 (11.1.1).

²² See (**Sotāpanna**) **Nandiya S** (S 55.40, 32-56) + SD 47.1 (1.1.2) & **Pamāda Vihārī S** (S 35.97, 11-30) + SD 47.6 (1).

plane covered with water, of which Mount Sineru or Meru stands in the centre.²³ Sometimes, the term refers to the mountain ranges that are believed to encircle the physical world.²⁴

In this ancient Buddhist geography (which often overlaps with cosmology), see the world of 4 continents (that is, huge islands) around Mount Sineru, Sumeru, Neru, or Meru, the cosmic mountain (sometimes identified with one of the Himalayan mountains). On the south is Jambu,dīpa (ancient India);²⁵ on the west, Aparā,go,yāna; on the north, Uttara,kuru; and on the east, Pubba,videha.²⁶

2.3.4.2 Such post-Buddha cosmologies were often based on the speculations and dogmatics of the times, and tend to be mythical and imaginative. Often enough, such accounts reflect worldly events: as on earth, so in heaven, or elsewhere in the universe. In the Mahāyāna texts, such world systems and the beings therein became even more numerous and fabulous to be taken as historical realities (such as the Buddha illuminating worlds “equal in number to the grains of sand in 108 myriads of *koṭi* (10M) of *nayuta* (100,000M) of Ganges rivers”!²⁷

These are the kinds of cosmologies that need to be re-interpreted, see in their proper contexts, or if they do not in any way highlight or clarify the Dharma, they should be simply set aside. These are conventional knowledges which are unnecessary for the spiritual training and awakening.²⁸

2.3.5 The universes of thousands of worlds. In the *Saṅkhār’upapatti Sutta* (M 120), we have a fascinating descriptions of cosmic beings who loom over vast stretches of world-systems or chiliocosms (*loka,dhātu*). The Sutta actually is about the possibility of willing ourselves—if we accomplished in the fivefold noble growth (*ariya,vaddhi*) of *faith, moral virtue, spiritual learning, charity, and wisdom*²⁹—to be reborn into any of the desirable rebirths on earth (in the families of wealthy kshatriyas, wealthy brahmins, or wealthy householders),³⁰ in the 6 heavens of the sense-worlds,³¹ in the 4 form-dhyana heavens of the Great Brahmas and their heavenly hosts, and in the 4 formless-dhyana heavens.

The Sutta gives a dramatic division of the Brahma worlds (*brahma,loka*) into multiples of thousands of worlds. Here, a “Brahma of a 1000 world system” (*sahassa,brahmā*) lords over a 1000-world system, and similar systems lorded over respectively by system-lords called “Brahma of a 2000-world system” (*dvi,sahassa,brahmā*), “Brahma of a 3000-world system” (*ti,sahassa,brahmā*), “Brahma of a 4000-world system” (*catu-s,sahassa,brahmā*), “Brahma of a 5000-world-system” (*pañca-s,sahassa,brahmā*), and “Brahma of a 100,000-world system” (*sata,sahassa,brahmā*).

If we visualize all this for a moment, we would probably see a concentric progression of ever-increasing circles of world systems. There is an hierarchy in all this, with the more powerful system lords above the lesser lords of smaller world systems. Magnificent and mind-boggling such systems may be, but they are all uncertain, changing and impermanent.³²

²³ Eg B 1:64; J 1:203,22; Ap 380,19; Vism 205,20; MA 3:373,19, 4:114,13, 121,16 f, 177,13, 5:7,18; SA 2:159,25 f.

²⁴ Eg DA 446,1; SA 3:76,1; AA 3:319,7 (within them); DhA 4:74,18 (within them); Vism 421,14. As “mountain,” *cakka,vāḷa pabbata*: MA 2:254,33; SA 3:6,14; J 3:32,16; Vism 421,9; mountain encircling a world: Vism 206,26*; VA 119,24 = DhsA 299,5*.

²⁵ On *Jambu,dīpa*, see SD 16.15 (3).

²⁶ For details on the 4 ancient continents and *Jambu,dīpa* (ancient India), see SD 16.15 (3). See also A Sadakata 1997:25-40, esp 30-38.

²⁷ From ch 24 of the Lotus Sutra (on Avalokiteśvara). Such hyperboles are often found in polemical or apotropaic (magical) works that seem bent on impressing and boggling the believers’ minds rather than in instructing. At best, we can say that the writers of such texts were perhaps aware of the mathematics of the times working with infinitesimals and large numbers. In our own times, we might try to present Buddhism in scientific terms, for example.

²⁸ See esp *Ney’attha Nit’attha S* (A 2.3.5-6), SD 2.6b.

²⁹ See *Vaddhi Ss* (A 5.63+4), SD 3.4 (4).

³⁰ M 120,3-5/1:99 f @ SD 3.4.

³¹ Ie, the heavens of the 4 Great Kings, of Tāvātimsa, of Tusita, of Nimmāṇa,rati devas, and of Para,nimmita,vassa.vatti devas (M 120,3-5/1:99 f), SD 3.4.

³² M 120,12-18/3:101-102 @ SD 3.4.

2.3.6 Parallel universes. Another important sutta concept is that of the *loka,dhātu* (literally, “the world element”), meaning “world system,” which refers to the physical universe as a whole. The term usually refers to huge collective systems of *cakka,vāla*. Otherwise, the two words are near-synonymous. The smallest *loka,dhātu* is that of our own world-system, just described as comprising 4 continents around Mount Sineru.

The Kosala Sutta 1 (A 10,29) gives this fascinating description of these varied world systems or galaxies, and parallel universes, thus:

Bhikshus, as far as the sun and the moon revolve, illuminating the quarters with their light, there extends **the thousandfold world-system**.³³ In that thousandfold world-system there are³⁴

- a thousand moons,
- a thousand suns,
- a thousand Sinerus, the kings of mountains,
- a thousand Jambu,dvipas [Rose-apple Continents],
- a thousand Western Goyana continents [Apara,go,yāna],
- a thousand Northern Kuru continents [Uttara,kuru],³⁵
- a thousand Eastern Videha continents [Pubba,videha],
- four thousand oceans,
- four thousand maharajahs [emperors],
- a thousand heavens of the Cātum,mahārājika [the four Great Guardian Kings],
- a thousand heavens of Tāvātimsa [the Thirty-three devas],
- a thousand heavens of Yāma [the Yāma devas],³⁶
- a thousand heavens of Tusita [contented devas],
- a thousand heavens of Nimmana,rati [the devas who delight in creating],³⁷
- a thousand heavens of Para,nimmita,vasavatti [the devas who lord over the creation of others], and a thousand Brahma worlds. [60]

And in that thousandfold world-system, **Mahā Brahmā** is regarded as the foremost.

Yet even in Mahā Brahmā there still is uncertainty, there is change. Seeing this, the instructed noble disciple is revulsed with that.

Being revulsed with that, he becomes dispassionate toward what is the foremost, not to speak of the inferior. (A 10.29,2), SD 16.15

Note that the Sutta declares that even the almighty overlord of such systems—Mahā Brahmā (the High God) himself—is subject to “uncertainty...change.” Their worlds and universes, too, are subject to the endless pulsating cycles of devolution and evolution. So, too, are we.

³³ A good intro to ancient Buddhist cosmology is Gethin 1998:112-132 (ch 5).

³⁴ On parallel universes, see also Kvu 13.1/476.

³⁵ Uttara,kuru. According to Indian Buddhist mythology, this is a region in Central Asia, where the lifespan is 120 years. In the early canon, it is described as a continent (*mahā.dīpa*) (north of Jambu,dīpa) along with Aparā,goyāna, and Pubba,videha (A 1:227, 5:59). **Āṭṭānāṭṭiya S** (D 32), in its detailed description, refers to Uttara,kuru (Skt *uttaraḥ Kuravaḥ*, “northern Kuru”) as a city (*pura*) (D 32.7/3:199). Along with 4 × 500 smaller “islands” (*dīpa*) surrounding them constitute a world system (*cakka,vāla*) (DA 2:678; SA 1:74; AA 2:34 f; KhA 176; SnA 2:443). Apparently, this is a metaphorical description in an ancient Buddhist conception of a world system. In later literature, described as a land of plenty, and it is often said that ascetics and monks would go there by their psychic power to obtain alms (SA 1:117 = AA 3:88; ThaA 1:42 ≠ AA 1:273; J 5:316, 6:100; BA 187). See DPPN sv & CPD sv for more refs. See also E W Hopkins, *Epic Mythology*, Strasbourg, 1905:186; R Kloetzli, *Buddhist Cosmology*, 1983: 25 f, 52-59, 81.

³⁶ The term *Yāma* refers to a class of devas. Comys explain the term as “those who have attained divine bliss” (*dibbam sukham yātā payātā sampattā ti yāmā*, ThaA 169; PmA 3:613; VbhA 519). In some context, *Yāma* seems to derive from *Yama*, the ruler of the underworld, eg *Yāmato yāva Akaniṭṭham* (“from the underworld to the highest heaven” (KhA 166 = SnA 1:278). The Buddhist *Yama* is clearly related, if not identical to, the Vedic *Yama*: see Bhattacharji 1970:48-108.

³⁷ Be & Ce have this line and the next, missing from Se.

2.4 EARLY BUDDHIST ACCOUNT OF WORLD BEGINNINGS

2.4.1 On the primary. The Aggañña Sutta (D 27) is an instructive and fascinating account of the origin or evolution of the world, society and universal values. The account is based on the popular Indian conception of the society and the universe. Its tone is humorous as ultimately the account playing on the Upaniṣadic notion of the world's "beginning" (*agga*; Skt *agra*).

The early Buddhists of course rejected any such beginning, and takes the word *agga* to mean "primary," what should come first in humanity and society, and what values or "dharma" (*dhamma*) are really "primary." The whole account is, in fact, a satirical take, based on principles of the monastic Vinaya and social realities. In other words, it is not really about cosmology as we know it today. However, if we read in between the lines, the hints at early Buddhist ideas of cosmology are quite evident (especially that of a pulsating ("contracting" and "expanding") universe [2.4.2].

In an important way, the Sutta explains that that social classes started off as occupational "circles" (*maṇḍala*), but had evolved (or devolved) into social classes of the Buddha's time. The Sutta also gives some interesting, and amusing, aetiologies (origin-stories) of various social practices and customs (such as work and marriage). It subtly but seriously works at debunking the social claims of the superiority of the brahmins as a class. The reality is that at that time, it was the kshatriya class that was supreme (at least in the central Gangetic plain).³⁸

2.4.2 A contracting universe

2.4.2.1 Underlying the mythology of the Aggañña Sutta is the notion of a pulsating universe elaborated by Buddhaghosa in his *Visuddhi,magga* [2.4.3]. The pulsating comprises a slow progressive cycle of contracting, stability, expanding, stability, with the cycle repeating endlessly (each stage taking an astronomically long period).³⁹ Here, we shall comment only on the "contracting" cycle.

2.4.2.2 When the universe "contracts" (*saṁvattati*, literally, "rolls back"), that is, devolves or collapses.⁴⁰ **The Brahma,jāla Sutta** (D 1), **the Pāṭika Sutta** (D 24) and **the Aggañña Sutta** (D 27) describes, in the same words, that "When the world is contracting [collapsing], beings mostly⁴¹ arise in the Ābhassara [streaming radiance] Brahmā world."⁴²

2.4.2.3 **Ābhassarā** is a celestial world, the highest of the 2nd-dhyana form worlds, populated by luminescent beings who live on zest (*pīti*) and emanate lightning-like radiance. When the physical universe devolves or "contracts" (*saṁvattati*) due to "fire," it destroys the whole physical or sense-world universe, and also the first two realms of the form worlds, that is, up to Ābhassara.⁴³

2.4.2.4 There is also a wordplay on *saṁvattati*, especially its adjective, *saṁvattanika*, as in *saṁvattanikam viññānam*, "evolving consciousness." This expression occurs only 8 times in the Pali Canon, and they are all found in **the Āneñja,sappāya Sutta** (M 106).⁴⁴ The Sutta commentary explains that here, *saṁvattanika* (or *saṁvattanika*) refers to one whose rebirth process is incapable of realizing arhathood (MA 4:61).⁴⁵

2.4.3 Buddhaghosa's cosmology. Buddhaghosa's magnum opus, **Visuddhi,magga**, not only contains passages relating to Buddhist cosmogony, that is, the re-arising of the universe,⁴⁶ but it twice quotes the Aggañña Sutta,⁴⁷ and even fills in an apparent hiatus in the sutta account of the world's re-evolution.

³⁸ D 27 @ SD 2.19.

³⁹ For details on the 4-stage pulsating universe of early Buddhism, see **Aggañña S** (D 27,10-17) + SD 2.19 (2.3 + Appendix).

⁴⁰ For diagrams, see App (2), SD 2.19. For a parallel, see **Brahmajāla S** (D 1,2.2), SD 25.2.

⁴¹ On the significance of this word, "mostly" (*yebhuyyena*), see SD 2.19 (2.5).

⁴² *Saṁvattamāne loke yebhuyyena sattā ābhassara,saṁvattanikā honti* (D 1:17,19 = 3:28,23 = 84,27), ie, respectively, **Brahma.jāla S** (D 1,39/1:17), SD 25.2 = **Pāṭika S** (D 24,15/3:28), SD 63.3 = **Aggañña S** (D 27,10.2/3:84), SD 2.19.

⁴³ CA 11; Vism 13.41/416 f.

⁴⁴ M 106,3-10/2:262-264.

⁴⁵ See SD 17.8a (11.1.1).

⁴⁶ Vism 13.30-65/414-423.

⁴⁷ Vism 13.44/417, 13.52/419.

Buddha,ghosa added the narrative of the origin cooking, and human digestion and waste elimination process. Otherwise, Buddhaghosa follows the traditional sutta accounts of the universe and its pulsating cycles.⁴⁸

3 Related suttas

3.1 The Kosala Sutta 1 (A 10.29) is closely related to the Satta Suriya Sutta. In the Kosala Sutta 1 the Buddha applies the words “foremost” or “primary” (*agga*) on two contrasting levels—the worldly and the spiritual—by declaring that in Kāsī-Kosala, “Pasenadi is foremost (*agga*), but even Pasenadi changes; in the ten-thousand-world-system, Brahmā is *foremost*, but even Brahmā changes; when the world contracts.

Ābhassara is *foremost*, but the Ābhassara gods, too, are subject to change. A monk or practitioner who sees this, turns away from what is *foremost*, and is disgusted with it.” Following this, and after each mention of one of the heavens being destroyed, there is the refrain, “How much more so in what is lesser” (*page’va hīnasmiṃ*).⁴⁹ The Sutta concludes with the Buddha declaring that the foremost (*etad-agga*) of all these things (mentioned earlier) is “nirvana here and now” (*diṭṭh’eva dhamme...nibbuto*).

3.2 There are many other suttas related to the Satta Suriya Sutta and its themes. For a fuller list, see SD 2.19 (3).

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The Discourse on the Seven Suns

A 7.62

1 Thus have I heard.⁵⁰

At one time the Blessed One was staying in Amba,pālī’s grove, near Vesālī.

Formations are impermanent

2 Then the Blessed One addressed the monks, “Bhikshus!”
“Bhante!” the monks replied to the Blessed One in assent.

The Blessed One said this:

3 (2) REFRAIN.

“Impermanent, bhikshus, are formations.

Unstable, bhikshus, are formations.

Insecure, bhikshus, are formations.

aniccā bhikkhave saṅkhārā

adhuvā bhikkhave saṅkhārā

anassāsikā bhikkhave saṅkhārā

4 Such as it is, bhikshus, this is enough for one to be revulsed with all formations, enough to let go of them, enough to be free from them.⁵¹

Mount Sineru

5 Sineru, bhikshus, the king of mountains, is 84,000 leagues⁵² long, 84,000 leagues wide, 84,000 leagues submerged below the great ocean, and 84,000 leagues rising above it.

⁴⁸ Vism 15.50 f/418 at D 27,16 @ SD 2.19. See further **Vāseṭṭha S** (M 98), SD 3.9) @ SD 37.1 (1.3.1).

⁴⁹ A 10.29/5:59-65 @ SD 16.15.

⁵⁰ Be Ee. Not in Ce Se.

⁵¹ *Yāvañ c’idaṃ, ānanda, alam eva sabba,saṅkhāresu nibbindituṃ, alam virajjituṃ, alam vimuccituṃ*: **Mahā Suddassana S** (D 17.2.16/2:198); **Anamatagga Saṃy** (S 15.1-20/2:178-193), **Go,maya S** (S 22.96/3:147), **Nakha,si-kha S** (S 22.97/3:149); **Satta Suriya S** (A 7.62,6/4:100 etc); Nc:Be 136.

⁵² A league (*yojana*), as an object, is the yoke of an Indian plough (J 6:38, 42). As a measurement of distance, it is as far as can be covered by a yoke of oxen, ie, about 11.25 km [7 mi] = 945,000 km [588,000 mi] (DhA 1:108, 2:-

The 1st sun

6 There comes a time, bhikshus, after a long time, when **there is no rain** for long time, for many hundred years, many thousand years, many hundreds of thousands of years.

7 Since rain does not fall, all plant life and vegetation, trees that medicinal plants, grasses, and fruit trees, become parched, dry up and cease to be.⁵³

8 REFRAIN. *Thus, bhikshus, impermanent are formations. Thus, bhikshus, unstable are formations. Thus, bhikshus, insecure are formations.*

Such as it is, bhikshus, this is enough for one to be revulsed with all formations, enough to become dispassionate towards them, enough to be liberated from them.

The 2nd sun

9 There comes a time, bhikshus, after a long time, **a second sun appears.**

10 (3) Bhikshus, with the appearance of the second sun, all streams and lakes are parched, dry up, and [101] become no more.⁵⁴

11 *Thus, bhikshus, impermanent are formations. Thus, bhikshus, unstable are formations. Thus, bhikshus, insecure are formations.*

Such as it is, bhikshus, this is enough for one to be revulsed with all formations, enough to let go of them, enough to be free from them.

The 3rd sun

12 There comes a time, bhikshus, after a long time, **a third sun appears.**

13 (4) Bhikshus, with the appearance of the third sun, all the great rivers—that is to say, the Ganges, the Yamunā, the Aciravatī, the Sarabhū and the Mahī⁵⁵—are parched, dry up, and become no more.⁵⁶

14 *Thus, bhikshus, impermanent are formations. Thus, bhikshus, unstable are formations. Thus, bhikshus, insecure are formations.*

Such as it is, bhikshus, this is enough for one to be revulsed with all formations, to let go of them, to be free from them.

The 4th sun

15 There comes a time, bhikshus, after a long time, **a fourth sun appears.**

16 (5) Bhikshus, with the appearance of the fourth sun, all the great lakes from which flow the great rivers—that is to say, the Anotattā, the Sīha, papātā, the Ratha, kārā, the Kaṇṇa, muṇḍā, the Kuṇālā, the Chaddantā and the Mandakinī⁵⁷—are parched, dry up, and become no more.⁵⁸

13). The number of “84,000” (12 × 7) represents a large number, often used for large objects, while “500,” too, represents “scores of” or “dozens of.” The distance from the earth to the sun (an astronomical unit = AU) is 149,597,871 [149M] km (92,955,807 [93M] mi). The distance from the earth to the moon is about 384,400 km [238,900 mi]

⁵³ *Deve kho pana bhikkhave avassante ye kec’ime bīja.gāma, bhūta.gāmā osadhi, tiṇa.vana-p.patayo te ussussanti visussanti, na bhavanti. Vana-p.pati* are the oldest trees in the forest (*vana.jeṭṭhaka.rukkhā*, AA 4:52).

⁵⁴ *Dutiyaassa bhikkhave sūriyassa pātubhāvā yā kāci kunnadiyo kusobbhā tā ussussanti visussanti, na bhavanti.*

⁵⁵ On the 5 great rivers, see (**Dasaka**) **Appamāda S** (A 10.15,19/5:22), SD 42.23.

⁵⁶ *Tatiyassa bhikkhave sūriyassa pātubhāvā yā kāci mahā, nadiyo, seyyathidaṃ gaṅgā yamunā acira, vatī sarabhū mahī tā ussussanti visussanti na bhavanti.*

⁵⁷ This list of lakes recurs at DA 1:164; MA 3:35; SA 2:344; AA 4:108; SnA 407; UA 300; Vism 416. There are variations, mostly with *Tiyaggaḷā* for *Mandākinī* (J 5:415). Majjhima Comy gives this list: *kaṇṇa, muṇḍa-ratha, kāra-anotatta-sīha, papāta, kuḷira-mucalinda-kuṇāla, dahe* (MA 3:232). Only *kaṇṇa, muṇḍaka* at DA 3:996; Pv 2.12 :: PvA 152-154, 159; J 2:104. With *haṃsa, pātanta* replacing *mandākinī* (KhpA 1:369). The famous Anotattā often occurs alone (Miln 286; J 1:50).

⁵⁸ *Catutthassa bhikkhave sūriyassa pātubhāvā ye te mahā, sarā yato imā mahā, nadiyo pavattanti, seyyathīdaṃ anotattā sihapapātā ratha, kārā kaṇṇa, muṇḍā kuṇālā chaddantā mandākinīyā tā ussussanti visussanti na bhavanti.*

17 *Thus, bhikshus, impermanent are formations. Thus, bhikshus, unstable are formations. Thus, bhikshus, insecure are formations.*

Such as it is, bhikshus, this is enough for one to be revulsed with all formations, to let go of them, to be free from them.

The 5th sun

18 There comes a time, bhikshus, after a long time, **a fifth sun appears.**

19 (6) Bhikshus, with the appearance of the fifth sun,

the waters of the great oceans recede	100 leagues,
the waters of the great oceans recede	200 leagues,
the waters of the great oceans recede	300 leagues,
the waters of the great oceans recede	400 leagues,
the waters of the great oceans recede	500 leagues,
the waters of the great oceans recede	600 leagues,
the waters of the great oceans recede	700 leagues,

20 The waters in the great oceans then stand at a depth of 7 palm trees.
 The waters in the great oceans then stand at a depth of 6 palm trees.
 The waters in the great oceans then stand at a depth of 5 palm trees.
 The waters in the great oceans then stand at a depth of 4 palm trees.
 The waters in the great oceans then stand at a depth of 3 palm trees.
 The waters in the great oceans then stand at a depth of 2 palm trees. [102]
 The waters in the great oceans then stand at a depth of a mere palm tree.

21 The waters in the great oceans then stand at a depth 7 men high.
 The waters in the great oceans then stand at a depth 6 men high.
 The waters in the great oceans then stand at a depth 5 men high.
 The waters in the great oceans then stand at a depth 4 men high.
 The waters in the great oceans then stand at a depth 3 men high.
 The waters in the great oceans then stand at a depth 2 men high.
 The waters in the great oceans then stand at a depth of only a man's height.

22 The waters in the great oceans then stand at a depth of only half a man.
 The waters in the great oceans then stand at a depth of only up to a man's hip.
 The waters in the great oceans then stand at a depth of only up to the knee.
 The waters in the great oceans then stand at a depth of only up to the ankle.
 The waters in the great oceans then stand at a depth of only a man's height.

23 Bhikshus, just as in autumn, when the rains shower in large drops, in the hoof-prints of cows, there are puddles, here and there,⁵⁹

even so, bhikshus, the ocean waters are but puddles the size of cows' hoof-prints, here and there.

24 *Thus, bhikshus, impermanent are formations. Thus, bhikshus, unstable are formations. Thus, bhikshus, insecure are formations.*

Such as it is, bhikshus, this is enough for one to be revulsed with all formations, to let go of them, to be free from them.

The 6th sun

25 There comes a time, bhikshus, after a long time, **a sixth sun appears.**

26 (7) Bhikshus, with the appearance of the sixth sun, this great earth and Sineru, the king of mountains, fume, smoke and belch forth clouds of smoke.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ *Seyyathāpi bhikkhave sarada,samaye thulla,phusitake deve vassante tattha tattha go,padesu udakāni ñhitāni honti.*

⁶⁰ *Chaṭṭhassa bhikkhave sūriyassa pātubhāvā ayañ ca mahā,pathavī sineru ca pabbata,rājā dhūmāyanti sandhū-māyanti sampadhūmāyanti.*

27 Bhikhus, just as a potter's kiln, when first lit, fumes, smokes, belches forth clouds of smoke, even so, bhikshus, with the appearance of the sixth sun, this great earth and Sineru, the king of mountains, fume, smoke and belch forth clouds of smoke.

28 *Thus, bhikshus, impermanent are formations. Thus, bhikshus, unstable are formations. Thus, bhikshus, insecure are formations.*

Such as it is, bhikshus, this is enough for one to be revulsed with all formations, to let go of them, to be free from them.

The 7th sun

29 There comes a time, bhikshus, after a long time, **a seventh sun** appears. [103]

30 (8) Bhikshus, with the appearance of the seventh sun, this great earth and Sineru, the king of mountains, burst into flames and burns as a single blaze.

31 And, bhikshus, this great mass of blaze from the burning of the great earth and, the king of mountains, thrown up by the winds, reaches even the Brahma world.

32 Bhikshus, with the burning, blazing, destroying in a huge mass of blaze, the peaks of Sineru, the king of mountains, towering 100 leagues high crumble away; the peaks 200, 300, 400, 500 leagues high, crumble away, too.⁶¹

33 Bhikshus, neither cinder nor ash is to be seen from this burning and blazing of the great earth and Sineru, the king of the mountains.

34 Bhikshus, just as out of burning, blazing ghee or oil, neither cinder nor ash is found, even so, bhikshus, neither cinder nor ash is to be seen from this burning and blazing of the great earth and Sineru, the king of the mountains.

35 *Thus, bhikshus, impermanent are formations. Thus, bhikshus, unstable are formations. Thus, bhikshus, insecure are formations.*

Such as it is, bhikshus, this is enough for one to be revulsed with all formations, to let go of them, to be free from them.

36 “Now here, bhikshus, who but those who have seen the true state,⁶² who are wise, who have faith,⁶³ that this earth and Sineru, the king of mountains, will burn up, be destroyed, cease to be?”⁶⁴

Story of the past: Sunetta

37 (9) Once upon a time, bhikshus, there was a teacher named **Sunetta**, a ford-maker, free from lust for sensual pleasures.⁶⁵

38 Now, bhikshus, [104] there were many hundreds of disciples of the teacher Sunetta.

⁶¹ *Sinerussa bhikkhave pabbata,rājassa jhāyamānassa dayhamānassa vinassamānassa mahatā tejo,khandhena abhibhūtassa yojana,satikāni pi kūṭāni palujjanti dvi,yojana,satikāni pi, ti,yojana,satikāni pi, catu,yojana,satikāni pi, pañca,yojana,satikāni pi kūṭāni palujjanti.*

⁶² “But those who have seen the true state?” *aññatra diṭṭha,padehi*. Comy: This means, “Who is the wise (*añña*) will believe this except the noble disciples, the streamwinners, who have seen the true state” (*diṭṭha,pade sotāpanne ariya,sāvake thapetvā ko añño saddahissatīti attho*, AA 4:52). The “true state” (*pada*) seen (by way of a glimpse), that is, understood, by the streamwinner is nirvana, the ending of suffering.

⁶³ Or, “who will think or believe...” These 2 are, respectively, the one strong in the wisdom faculty (the Dharma-follower, *dhammānusārī*) and the one strong in the faith-faculty (the faith-follower, *saddhā'nusārī*), who become streamwinners. See (**Anicca**) **Cakkhu S** (S 25.1) + SD 16.7 (1).

⁶⁴ *Tatra bhikkhave ko mantā ko saddhātā ayañ ca pathavī sineru ca pabbata,rājā dayhissanti vinassissanti, na bhavissantī ti aññatra diṭṭha,padehi?* Lit tr: “Now here, bhikshus, who is the thinker, who is believer [the one with faith], that this earth and Sineru, the king of mountains, will burn up, be destroyed, cease to be, except one who has seen the truth?” Comy: Who is the thinker, who is the faithful capable for the sake of faith in this, or who has faith in this? (*ko tassa saddhā,pan'atthāya mantetum samattho, ko vā tassa saddhātā*, AA:Ce 4:52; Be omits *mantetum*), For Chinese parallel, see MĀ 8 @ T1.429b7-11.

⁶⁵ He is also referred to in **Dhammika S** (A 6.54/3:371,16-27), SD 47.7.

39 The teacher Sunetta, bhikshus, taught his disciples the teaching of fellowship with the Brahma world.⁶⁶

40 Now, those who understood everything that the teacher Sunetta taught in his teaching of the fellowship with the Brahma world, after death, with the body's breaking up, arose in heaven, in the Brahma world.

41 But those who did not understand the teaching in full, after death, with the body's breaking up,⁶⁷ some were reborn in fellowship with the gods of Para,nimmita,vasavattī, some were reborn in fellowship with the gods of Nimmāna,raṭī, some were reborn in fellowship with the gods of Tusita, some were reborn in fellowship with the gods of Yāma, some were reborn in fellowship with the gods of Tāvātimsa, some were reborn in fellowship with the gods of Cātum,mahā,rājika, some were reborn in fellowship with the kshatriyas of the great halls, some were reborn in fellowship with the brahmins of the great halls, some were reborn in fellowship with the householders of the great halls.

42 <10> Then, bhikshus, this occurred to the teacher Sunetta:

‘It is not proper that I should have the same realization [breakthrough] as my own disciples. What now if I were to further cultivate the lovingkindness?’⁶⁸

43 Then, bhikshus, the teacher Sunetta cultivated a heart of lovingkindness for 7 years.

44 Having cultivated a heart of lovingkindness for 7 years, the teacher Sunetta did not return to this world for 7 world-cycles.

45 Bhikshus, when the universe has devolved [collapsed], [105] he went to **the Ābhassara world**.

46 When the universe re-evolved, he was reborn in the empty Brahma-mansion.

47 Then, bhikshus, this Brahma became **the Great Brahma**, the Vanquisher, Unvanquished, Who Sees All, the Overlord [the Almighty].⁶⁹

48 Six times, bhikshus, he was **Sakra**, king of the god.

49 Many hundreds of times was he **a wheel-turner**, just, a Dharma-rajah [just king], conqueror of the 4 quarters, with a stable and secure country, endowed with the 7 jewels.

More than a thousand sons, brave, heroic in form, crushing alien armies.

Having conquered this earth bounded by the oceans, he ruled justly [by the Dharma],⁷⁰ with neither rod nor sword.

50 Yet, bhikshus, although the teacher Sunetta has such a long life, lasted for so long, he was not liberated:⁷¹

he is not free from birth, decay, death, sorrow, lamentation, physical pain, mental pain, despair—he is not liberated from suffering, I say!⁷²

⁶⁶ “Fellowship with the Brahma world,” *brahma.loka,sahavyatā*, ie, rebirth in the Brahma world.

⁶⁷ These are the 6 sense-world heavens in a descending order.

⁶⁸ *Na kho m'etaṃ patirūpaṃ yo 'haṃ sāvakānaṃ sama,sama,gatiyo assaṃ abhisamparāyaṃ, yan nūnāhaṃ uttari mettāṃ bhāveyyan'ti.*

⁶⁹ *Tatra sudāṃ bhikkhave brahmā hoti mahā,brahmā abhibhū anabhibhūto añña-d-atthu,daso vasa,vattī: Brahma,jāla S (D 1,5/1:18,7), SD 25.2; Bhaddaji S (A 5.170/3:202,9); (Puñña) Mettā S (A 7.58a,3/4:89,9), SD 2.11a; (Satta) Suriya S (A 7.62,47/4:105,3), SD 67.3; Comy: DA 1:111. These epithets are attr to Buddha: Pāsādika S (D 29,29.4/3:135,20 = Nc 276); (Tathāgata) Loka S (A 4.23,3/2:24,13 = It 4.1.13/122,7), SD 15.7(2.1.2).*

⁷⁰ In brahmanical terms, *dhamma* (Skt *dharma*) refers to “class duties,” but in the Buddhist sense, it means “justice,” ie, in keeping with the Buddhist idea of kingship.

⁷¹ *So hi nāma, bhikkhave, sunetto sathā evaṃ dīghāyuko samāno evaṃ ciraṭṭhitiko aparimutto ahoṣi.*

⁷² This whole section is a scriptural and literary example of an anticlimax, ie, “an abrupt lapse from growing intensity to triviality in any passage of dramatic, narrative or descriptive writing, with the effect of disappointed expectation or deflated suspense” (C Baldick, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, 1991:11).

The 4 noble truths

51 What is the reason for this? The non-penetration, the not awakening, to the four truths.

52 What are the four truths?

There is no penetration, no understanding, regarding the noble moral virtue.

⟨12⟩ There is no penetration, no understanding, regarding the noble mental concentration.

There is no penetration, no understanding, regarding the noble wisdom.

There is no penetration, no understanding, regarding the noble liberation.

53 This is it, bhikshus,

when the noble moral virtue has been understood and realized,

when the noble mental concentration has been understood and realized,

when the noble wisdom has been understood and realized,

when the noble liberation has been understood and realized,

then, the craving for existence has been uprooted, the leader to existence has destroyed, there is no more of this again-becoming.”⁷³

Closing verses

54 This is what the Blessed One said. Having said this, the well-farer, the Teacher further said this:

55 *Sīlam samādhi paññā ca
vimutti ca anuttarā
anubuddhā ime dhammā
gotamena yasassinā.*

Moral virtue, mental concentration and wisdom,
and the supreme liberation,
these truths have been understood
by Gotama, the famous one.

56 *Iti buddho abhiññāya*

*dhammam akkhāsi bhikkhunam
dukkhass ’anta,karo satthā
cakkhumā parinibbuto ’ti.*

Thus is he “buddha” [understood], through direct
knowledge,
he speaks the Dharma to the monks:
the teacher who has made an end of suffering,
the one with the eyes has attained nirvana.

— evaṃ —

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⁷³ *Ucchinnā bhava,taṇhā, khīṇā bhava,netti, n’atthi dāni puna-b,bhavo ’ti.*