

The Living Word of the Buddha
The Buddha's Teachings in the Oldest Texts
Translations, essays & notes by Piya Tan ©2018e



GUIDE TO THE GODS

Saṅkhitta Devatā Dīpanī
A short guide to deity:
humanity, divinity and awakening

being an offprint from SD 54.3a
Nandana Sutta (S 1.11) and commentary (2019a)

by
Piya Tan

2018
The Minding Centre
Singapore

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The Sutta Discovery (SD) series started with **the NUS Buddhist Society** weekly Sutta Study Group (SSG) classes in February 2002, and **the Buddhist Fellowship** SD series started in February 2003. The SD materials are now freely available worldwide on **dharmafarer.org**. There is an on-going global team of volunteer **Sutta readers** who regularly study the suttas and essays, and proof-read them at the same time.

Piya Tan, who works on these Suttas and notes, and teaches them, was a former **Theravada monk** for 20 years. Today he is a full time lay Dharma teacher specializing in early Buddhism. He was consultant and regular lecturer to the Buddhist Studies Team (BUDS) that successfully introduced **Buddhist Studies in Singapore Secondary Schools** in the 1980s. After that, he was invited as a visiting scholar to **the University of California at Berkeley, USA**. He has written many ground-breaking and educational books on Buddhism (such as *Total Buddhist Work*) and social surveys (such as *Buddhist Currents* and *Charisma in Buddhism*).

As a **full-time Dharma teacher**, he runs Buddhist, Sutta and Pali classes like the basic Pali course series, the Sutta Study Group (NUSBS), Dharma courses (the Singapore Buddhist Federation), Sutta Discovery classes (Buddhist Fellowship and elsewhere), and Sutta-based (including meditation) courses (Brahm Education Centre), besides his own full-time **Pali translation and research project**, the Pali House, and doing a comparative study of the Pali Nikāyas and the Chinese Āgamas. As a Theravāda monk, he learned insight meditation from **Mahasi Sayadaw** himself in the 1980s. As a lay teacher, he learned forest meditation from the **Ajahn Brahmavamso**. He has run numerous **meditation courses and retreats** for students and adults (including non-Buddhists) since 1980s. In 1992, he taught meditation at the University of California at Berkeley, USA, and also to BP, JPMorgan, the Defence Science Organization, GMO, HP and SIA. He is doing all this for the love of Dharma and of Ratna and their two children.



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Preface & Introduction

This book, popularly titled, “Guide to the Gods,” is “**a short guide to deity**” (*saṅkhitta devata dīpanī*), a study of “humanity, divinity and awakening.” It is an introduction to early Buddhist mythology and cosmology describing the nature of the gods—devas and brahmas—culled from the Pali suttas and Commentaries, and a reflection on their significance.

The purpose of this study is to highlight that within our **humanity** lies the potential of **divinity**; that though we are defined by our 5 senses and mind, they are capable of refining our consciousness to higher, even transomatic and transhuman levels. This reflects our growing understanding of space and time, and how we are transformed by the process of change and impermanence, leading us closer to **the path of awakening** taught by the Buddha.

This study forms Sections 3-4 of the introductory notes (commentary) to a translation and study of **the Nandana Sutta** (S 1.11) in the Sutta Discovery series. It was added at the request of **Tom Anderson** of Canada, an avid student of the suttas and early Buddhism. Due to its length, it appropriately serves as a useful handbook in itself for those interested in early Buddhist mythology, or more specifically, **a psychology of Buddhist mythology**.

Devatā and deity

Devatā is taken both as a common noun as “deity,” encompassing gods, devas and brahmas. More importantly, it is taken as an abstract noun, as **deity**, meaning “divinity or godliness,” a more detailed study of which is found, for example, in **Brahma, vihāra (the divine abodes)** (SD 38.5) and in **Devatā’nusati** (SD 15.13), both of which should be read in this connection.

“**Deity**” (*devatā*) is a helpful concept used by the Buddha himself to accommodate a powerful extra-Buddhist virtual reality that we resort to before we are more firmly rooted in a clearer and deeper understanding of the **truths** of impermanence, suffering and non-self. It is a skillful means, a bridge, used by the Buddha to bring us across from external worship to **internal cultivation**, from devotion to **diligence**, from faith to **wisdom**, regarding human nature, the nature of world of time and space, and how we can transcend them for the unconditionality of **nirvana**.

Dedication

This study is possible—and it celebrates—the persistent love, care and generosity of so many earthly devas in my life who have made possible our full-time lay Dharma work dedicated to the study and teaching of **the suttas**, and the practice of their teachings that empower us with the spirit of the historical Buddha, his awakening and the noble sangha of streamwinners, once-returners, non-returners and arhats.

I dedicate the merits of this work to the blessed well-being of my most diligent wife, Ratna Lim, and to my Dharma family and friends in Singapore, Malaysia and worldwide who share a common love for the Buddha Dhamma. May this work, the Sutta Discovery series and works like them, move us to **aspire for streamwinning** in this life itself. There is other purpose—not even sovereignty over the whole world with its humans and devas—that is more vital to our spiritual growth and awakening than this.

Pali House
22nd November 2018

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3 The devas

3.1 DEVA

The Pali word **deva** (ts) refers to mostly disembodied beings with superior physical and mental faculties in a worldly sense, meaning that they inhabit the same universe as human beings. Hence, they dwell in the same time-space continuum or are somehow connected in the same time-space reality as ours. Hence, their experiences closely reflect what we imagine or hope for.

It should also be understood that **Buddhist mythology** is a living tradition. In other words, over time, the mythologies of different sects and traditions tend to overlap or merge, and aspects of Buddhist mythology¹ are still evolving as we deepen our understanding of time and space, and of the Buddha’s teaching, grow deeper. Hence, in our times, we tend to think of these realms as covering over deeper and wider space than the universe as imagined by the ancient Indians.

3.2 THE 26 HEAVENS

3.2.1 In the 31 planes of the early Buddhist cosmology, there are **26 heavens** of the devas and the brahmas.² They span all **the “3 worlds”** (*ti,loka*), that is:

- the sense-world 6 heavens of subtle sense-based existence; [3.4-3.6]
- the form world 16 heavens of refined materiality and radiance; and [3.7-3.10]
- the formless world 4 heavens of formless mental existence of subtle energy. [3.11]

3.2.2 The 5 destinies

3.2.2.1 According to **the (Pañcaka) Gati Sutta** (A 9.68), the “devas” form the highest of the 5 rebirth destinies or destinations (*gati*, “going”), thus (the *italicized* numbering refers to the realms’ locations in the schema of 31 planes of existence):³

			<u>predominantly</u>		
(1) 1-26	devas	<i>deva</i>	blissful	}	good (happy) destinies (<i>sugati</i>)
(2) 28	humans	<i>manussa</i>	mixed		
(3) 29	animal birth	<i>tiracchāna, yoni</i>	predictable	}	bad (suffering) destinies (<i>duggati</i>)
(4) 30	preta-realm	<i>petti, visaya</i>	addictive		
(5) 31	hell-beings	<i>nerayika</i>	crowded, violent		

Diagram 3.2. The 5 realms

¹ Only early Buddhist mythology is considered here but this applies to the mythologies of other sects and traditions, too.

² For a full-scale diagram of the 31 planes, see SD 1.7 App.

³ A 9.68/4:459 + SD 2.20: for the 6 realms, see Diagram 2.3.2.

In later lists, we have what is unofficially known as **the “6 realms,”** that is, with the inclusion of the titans or asura (*asura*) [Diagram 3.5] as number (2) in the list of 5 rebirth destinies, thus:

(1) 1-26	devas	<i>deva</i>	blissful	}	good (happy) destinies (<i>sugati</i>)
(2) 27	humans	<i>manussa</i>	mixed		
(3) 28	titans	<i>asura</i>	mixed	}	bad (suffering) destinies (<i>duggati</i>)
(4) 29	animals	<i>tiracchāna</i>	predictable		
(5) 30	pretas	<i>peta</i>	addictive		
(6) 31	hell-beings	<i>nerayika</i>	crowded, violent		

Traditionally, we should insert the titans (*asura*) between the devas and the humans, since the asuras are clearly the “fallen gods”; hence, they are more powerful than humans. However, psychologically, humans are, as a rule, in a happier position than asuras are. They are habitually violent, belligerent and exploitative beings. They are listed as “**mixed**” in psychological terms because of their godly powers but they are persistently seeking to reclaim Tāvatiṃsa so that they are ceaselessly at war with Sakra and the Tāvatiṃsa devas.⁴ [3.5.4.2]

3.2.2.2 All these 5 destinies form **the sense-world** (*kāma,loka, kāma,dhatu* or *kāmâvacara*), which stretches from the lowest hell (*niraya*) to the highest sense-heaven, that of the lords of others’ creation (*para.nimmita,vasavatti*).⁵ Above and beyond them are the form-dhyana world (*rūpa,loka* or *rūpa,dhātu*) and the formless dhyana world (*arūpa,loka* or *arūpa,dhātu*).

However, only 6 of the heavens—the 4 great kings, the 33, the Yāma, the contented, those who delight in creation and the lords of others’ creations—are located in it [Diagram 3.5]. These sense-world heavens are populated by **devas** (*deva*), also called **deities** (*devatā*), or generically as “gods.”

The gods of the form-world and the formless world are usually called **brahmas** (*brahmā*), or simply “gods,” although both *deva* and *devata* can apply to them, too, depending on the context, such as when discussing the “recollection on deity” (*devatā’nussati*) [4.3.2].

3.2.3 Etymologies of deva. The Khuddaka,pāṭha Commentary gives 2 etymologies of *deva*, thus:

- (1) “they play” (*dibbantīti devā*), that is, they delight in the 5 cords of sensual pleasure;⁶
 (2) “they shine in their own glory” (*attano vā siriyaṃ jotantīti*). KhpA 123,9-10

We see here the root √DIV or √DĪV, “to play,” is also taken as a root for “shine.”⁷ These etymologies highlight the twin nature of **the sense-world gods**, such as those of Tāva,tiṃsa, who delight in play [2.2.1.1(2)] and are physically radiant. The brahmas of the form world are radiant, too, but play is not characteristic of them. The brahmas of the formless world are not usually radiant since they are formless: they are highly energized beings.

3.2.4 Meanings of deva. The same Commentary, quoting the Vibhaṅga, adds that, broadly speaking, there are **3 meanings of deva**, “god,” as follows:

⁴ SD 39.2 (1.3); SD 40a.1 (11.2.2).

⁵ Pm 1:83; Vbh 83, 421; DA 3:987; MA 4:106; SA 2:136; NmA 1:16, 43; PmA 1:67; DhSA 61; VbhA 78.

⁶ *Pañcahi kāma,guṇehi kīlanti* (KhpA 123,10).

⁷ The root √DIV is related to the Latin *deus, divus*, from which we get words like “divine,” “divinity,” etc.

- | | | |
|-------------------------------------|-----------------------|--|
| (1) “gods” by convention , | <i>samutti,deva,</i> | that is, kings, queens and princes; |
| (2) “gods” by rebirth , | <i>upapatti,deva,</i> | that is, gods, such as the 4 great kings, and so on; |
| (3) “gods” by purification , | <i>visuddhi,deva,</i> | that is, the arhats. (Vbh 422,1-4; KhpA 123,11-16) |

3.2.5 Etymology of *manussa*. Another interesting point raised by the Commentary is the etymology for *manussa*, “humans,” that is, “they are humans because of prominence of mind” (*mana,ussanatāya man-ussā*) (KhpA 123,16 f). The significance of this is that as humans, we are capable of thinking, feeling and discerning. We are able to experience bad and good, feel pain and pleasure, and discern right and wrong. Above all, we are able to know, to tame and to free our minds so that we can awaken to true reality. [2.4.1.2]

3.3 LIVING CONDUCT OF THE DEVAS

3.3.1 Food

3.3.1.1 The suttas distinguish **4 kinds of food** (*āhāra*), thus:⁸

- | | | |
|--------------------------|------------------------|---------------|
| (1) material food; | <i>kabaliṅkārahāra</i> | |
| (2) contact; | <i>phassāhāra</i> | |
| (3) mental volition; and | <i>saṅkhārahāra</i> | |
| (4) consciousness. | <i>viññāṇāhāra</i> | (SD 20.6 (2)) |

The suttas say, “**All beings are sustained by food**” (*sabbe sattā āhāra-ṭṭhitikā*).⁹ If we take this as referring to the 4 kinds of food mentioned above, this is true of all the suffering destinies and the 6 sense-world heavens [Diag 3.5]. The brahmas of **the form-world** do not consume any *material food* but are nourished simply by sense-contacts of the senses they possess [3.72]. The brahmas of **the formless world** do not feed even on contact but are nourished by mental volition (past karma) and the consciousness (present conditions). Both the “sense-contacts” and the “mental volition” refer to various grade of **joy** that nourishes these divine beings. In short, their food is joy.

3.3.1.2 The inhabitants of the different deva-realms are distinguished by differences not only in food but in the mode of dressing themselves. **Clothes** are said to be used in all inhabitants of the deva worlds except in those of the formless world since they are without any form. For those devas who do wear clothing, it is said that it appears magically, as it were, on trees. This is an interesting way of saying, perhaps, that like many of our clothing, its materials are derived from trees and like us buying them from display trees at shopping malls or getting them from the tailor’s clothes-hangers or coat-racks.

The brahmas of the form-world heavens are “born” or *arise fully clothed*. It is as if they have been transported from another realm right and ready. Hence, we should not think of their divine clothing to be like our own. We should recall that we are relating to narratives in myths, allegories and symbolic language.

⁸ **Saṅgīti S** (D 33,1.11(17)/3:228); **Das’uttara S** (D 34,1.5(3)/3:276); (**Nīvaraṇa Bojjhaṅga**) **Āhāra S** (S 46.51/5:102-107), SD 7.15; **Mahā Pañhā S 1** (A 10.27/5:52), SD 85.15, **Mahā Pañhā S 2** (A 510.28/5:56), SD 85.16; Pm 1.46/1:22.

⁹ D 3:211 = 273; A 5:51 = 55; Khp 2; Pm 1:5 = 122 = 174 = 2:34.

3.3.2 Abode

3.3.2.1 The gods above Tāvātimsa heaven, that is, those of the Yāma heaven and the rest of the sense-world heavens, and of the form-world heavens dwell in **celestial mansions** (*vimāna*).¹⁰ These are basically like mobile living space-capsules, floating in space, the size of which depends on the karma of the deva or brahma. Their sizes range from that of a small mansion to a huge palace. We may imagine them to be some kind of karmic aerial residence.

We may imagine a *vimāna* to be somewhat like Jonathan Swift's hilarious description of a floating island called **Laputa** in *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), some 4.5 miles in diameter, with an adamantine base, which its inhabitants can manoeuvre in any direction using magnetic levitation. Its inhabitants, however, is populated by wise men so wrapped up in their speculations as to be utter dotards in practical affairs—just as the gods of the realms of the 4 great kings and Tāvātimsa are wrapped in sensuality and battling.

Or, these gods, in their better selves, are like the Nox in the *Star Gate SG-1* series, episode 1.8. The Nox are the galaxy's oldest and most advanced inhabitants: seemingly vegetarian forest-dwelling pacifist beings residing in a massive floating city. They are more like the gods of the space-bound heavens who enjoy subtler pleasures of divine life.¹¹

3.3.2.2 The Brahma,jāla Sutta (D 1) tells us that when the universe re-evolves into habitable space, the first celestial karmically object to appear is the "**Brahma-mansion**" (*brahmā,vimāna*), that is, a divine dwelling or "celestial mansion" for Mahā Brahmā who has "fallen" (*cuti*) from the 2nd-dhyana Ābhassara heaven. He thinks he has created this empty brahma-mansion by his own divine fiat.¹²

In fact, Brahmā, seeing that he is the first to appear in the newly evolved universe and that he has his own brahma-mansion, imagines that he has created the universe himself. And the other brahmas who after after him, seeing that he has arisen before them, are similarly deluded into believe that he has created them! The Buddha declares to Brahmā that he is mistaken about this, because the Buddha understands the nature of the cycle of the cosmic evolution, as stated in **the Brahma,jāla Sutta** (D 1) and **the Pāṭika Sutta** (D 24).¹³

3.3.3 Sexuality and procreation

3.3.3.1 Each of the 6 heavens of the sense-world has its own lord or ruler. All or almost of these divine lords have a wife and, often, children, too. However, such details, found mostly in the Commentaries are scanty.

Here is a list of names of the lords of the 6 sense-world heavens, their wives and children: [3.4.2]

	<u>Wife</u>	<u>Children</u>
Vasavatti ¹⁴	[***]	[unattested];
Sunimitta ¹⁵	Visākhā ¹⁶	[unattested];
Suyāma ¹⁷	Sirimā ¹⁸	[unattested];

¹⁰ Abhdk 2:69a-b (Abhdk:P 2:465). For McGovern summaries, see 1923:79 f (a dated work).

¹¹ <https://www.gateworld.net/wiki/Nox>.

¹² **Brahma,jāla S** (D 1,39 f/1:17), SD 25.1; **Mā Puñña Bhāyī S** (It 22,3/15 (SD 2.1.1b).

¹³ **D 1,2.2-2.6/1:17-19** (SD 25.2) = **24,2.15-17/3:29 f** (SD 63.3).

¹⁴ D 1:219; S 40.11/4:280; A 8.36/4:243; VvA 315.

¹⁵ S 40.11/4:280; A 4:243; J 1:81; cf Divy 140.

¹⁶ VvA 189.

¹⁷ D 1:217; S 40.11/4:280; A 8.36/4:242.

¹⁸ Sirimā is a courtesan of Rājagaha and younger sister of Jīvaka (SnA 1:244). On her life as courtesan, see SD 3.8 (II).

Santusita ¹⁹	[celibate?]	[unattested];
Sakra ²⁰	Sujā	[none recorded];

The 4 great kings²¹

Dhataratṭha	[]	numerous sons called Inda (Skt <i>indra</i>) ²² and a daughter, Siri (J 3:257);
Virūlhaka	[]	[];
Virūpakkha	[]	daughter Kālakaṇṇī (J 3:257);
Vessavaṇa	Bhūnjati ²³	5 daughters: Latā, ²⁴ Sajjā, Pavarā, Acchimatī and Sutā. ²⁵

3.3.3.2 Sexual differences are only evident amongst the sense-world devas, especially amongst the inhabitants of the realms of the 4 great kings and the heaven of the 33, where there are male gods or female goddesses. Both are often simply referred to as *deva* or *devata*, or simply as “gods.” They copulate with one another in almost like the way the humans do. These gods are mentioned as having a wife each and the couples have children [3.3.3.1].

In sexual terms, the gods and beings of the earth-bound or ground-based [3.5.1] heavens behave very much like humans. They seem to more frivolous than average humans in their playfulness, cavorting around freely like the carefree affluent or elite on earth. However, they are never as licentious nor debauched as the Greek gods Zeus and Apollo.

The Greek god of agriculture, wine, ritual madness and religious ecstasy, **Dionysus**, or his Roman counterpart, **Bacchus** (perhaps more of the former) closely depicts the sense-world gods’ devotion to pleasure. The earth-bound gods are more Dionysian than Bacchanalic. Recall that Sakra is himself not pleased with the Bacchanalic conduct of the old gods (the asuras) of Tāvātimsa [3.5.4.2].

There is a hint in their lives that they are not sensually limited like the humans—sexuality to these gods is truly a divine pleasure—but still not as refined and satiating as the sexuality or sensuality amongst the higher sense-world gods [3.3.3.2].

3.3.3.2 Sexual intimacy in the higher heavens seem subtler. The devas of the Yāma heaven (the 3rd sense-world heaven) engage in sexual union by simply embracing one another. The devas of the Tusita heaven (the 4th heaven) become intimate by merely holding hands. The devas of the Nimmana,ratī heaven (the 5th heaven) become intimate by just smiling at one another; and those of the Para,nimitta,vasavatti heaven (the 6th and highest of the sense-world heavens) need only exchange a single glance at another.

The reason for such brief displays of intimacy is simple and logical: the greater their sensitivity to pleasure, the shorter duration they need to resolve the fire of their lust!²⁶ In other words, the more sensitive they are to pleasure, the more quickly and fully they feel satisfied and at peace with themselves.²⁷

¹⁹ D 1:218; A 8.36/4:243; S 40.11/4:280. It is the Bodhisattva’s name when he dwells in Tusita (BA 53; J 1:48), and the name of his successor (BA 10, 272, 291; J 1:81).

²⁰ A 8.36/2:241.

²¹ In Māyā’s dream, the 4 great kings bring her to lake Anotattā and their wives attended to her cleansing therein: see SD 52.1 (2.4).

²² D 2:207, 220, 257 f, 3:197.

²³ D 2:270.

²⁴ Latā, Sajjā and Pavarā are protagonists of Vv 3.4; VvA 131-137.

²⁵ VvA 134.

²⁶ Abhdk 69b-d (Abhdk:P 2:465).

²⁷ Abhdk 3:69b-d, 70a-c (Abhdk:P 2:465 f).

3.3.4 Birth

3.3.4.1 In all the celestial realms, devas are born apparitionally or spontaneously (*opapātika*). In the sense-world heavens, devas appear on the laps or knees of the parent (may be a male or a female deva). The Abhidharma,kośa says that when they are born, they appear to 5-10 years old.²⁸ The Pali tradition, however, says that they arise almost fully mature, that is, about 16 years old.²⁹

The brahmas of the form-world and the formless world, on the other hand, do not need the help of any parents. The few form-world brahmas simply appear fully grown, while those of the formless world do not appear at all because they have no form.³⁰

3.3.4.2 Since rebirth in the form-world and the formless world is the result of very good karma and dhyana meditation, the devas who arise here are aware of their prior existence and of the specific karma that bring about their rebirth in that heaven. The brahmas of the form-world heaven, as we have noted, are born fully clothed [3.3.1.2].

3.3.5 Death and rebirth

3.3.5.1 Although the lives of devas are, as a rule, very long, **any of these 4 conditions** brings about their “fall” (*cuti*) or death:

(1) the exhaustion of lifespan,	<i>āyu-k,khaya</i>	
(2) the exhaustion of merit,	<i>puñña-k,khaya</i>	
(3) the exhaustion of food, or	<i>āhāra-k,khaya</i>	
(4) through anger.	<i>kopena</i>	(DhA 1:173,15-16)

One with great merit (a full store of good karma) is born into a deva realm, remaining there according to his karmic duration, and is then reborn higher and higher. Thus, he passes through “**exhaustion of lifespan.**” One with little merit, soon exhausts that merit, just as a 3 or 4 pint-pots of rice tossed into a royal storehouse just disappear, and he thus soon dies, passing through “**exhaustion of merit.**” The third, while enjoying sense-pleasures, forgets through failing memory to consume food, thus through loss of his bodily strength, dies through “**exhaustion of food**” [3.4.4.2]. A fourth, jealous of the glory of another, becomes angry and, through his **anger**, dies³¹ [3.4.4.3].

3.3.5.2 At the point of dying, a deva sees signs (*nimitta*) or visions of his rebirth venue. For a deva, used to long ages of pleasures, this is clearly one of the most fearsome visions, since these signs starkly reveal the terrible opposite of his pleasurable life. Since he lacks spiritual training or has long forgotten it, his mind is badly tormented. This momentum karmically propels him into that very state he hates and fears. When we stare into the abyss of life, it stares back at us and consumes us. [2.4.1]

3.4 THE 4 GREAT KINGS

3.4.1 In the early Buddhist mythology and its post-Buddha developments, the lowest of the heavens is that of **the 4 great kings** (*cātum,mahā.rājika*), guardians of the 4 quarters. Their role is related to the fact

²⁸ Abhdk 70a-c (Abhdk:P 2:466).

²⁹ DA 3:1024; Abhp 741, Abhp:Be 481 (AbhT:Be ad loc). Cf deva death: MA 2:428, 4:170. Also Abhdk 8c-d (Abhdk:P 380); DPPN 1:1118.

³⁰ Abhdk 69b-d, 70c-d (Abhdk:P 465 f).

³¹ DhA 2.1/1:173,15-174,1; ItA 75-77 (ItA:M 2:591 f). See SD 23.8a (2).

that they are the very first of the heavens that stretch well beyond the physical world of humans and the lower worlds. As guardians of the quarters, they are often depicted with symbols of royal power and martial prowess. Sometimes, they are depicted displaying a terribly fierce countenance and martial postures, which are related to the ancient self-defence martial arts of Asia.

The realms of the 4 great kings share the same space as earth and Tāvatiṃsa, lorded over by **Sakra**. Hence, the 4 kings are thus vassals and attendants of Sakra who is superior to them in celestial terms. Hence, Sakra has, under his command, both the 4 great kings and their armies of the 4 quarters—they are, as such, his generals or commanders-in-chief and the 4 army regions. In this sense, we can see Sakra as the de facto lord of all the earth-bound [3.5.1] celestial realms—hence, he is called Sakra, lord of the devas, *sakka devānam inda*.³² For this reason, in Asia, Sakra is the most worshipped of all the celestial deities.³³

3.4.2 The world of the 4 great kings

3.4.2.1 The 4 kings, their armies and the quarters they respectively protect are as follows:³⁴

	<u>the great king</u>	<u>Sanskrit name</u>	<u>their army</u>	
• the east	Dhataratṭha	Dhṛtarāṣṭra	<i>gandhabba</i> ³⁵	elf-like warriors
• the south	Virūlhaka	Virūdhaka	<i>kumbhaṇḍa</i> ³⁶	orc-like dwarves
• the west	Virūpakka	Virūpākṣa	<i>nāga</i> ³⁷	serpent-beings
• the north	Vessavaṇa (Kuvera)	Vaiśravaṇa	<i>yakkha</i>	yaksha, troll-like beings

The lifespan of the devas of the realm of the 4 great kings is 500 celestial years. A celestial day of theirs is 50 human years, and their lifespan is 9 million human years. Vessavaṇa is said to be a streamwinner;³⁸ presumably, so are the other 3 great kings. They each have a wife and children. [3.3.3.1]

3.4.2.2 The 4 great kings are the guardians of the quarters, and each have their own armies of foot-soldiers and warriors, reminiscent of the Trolls, Orcs, Uruk-Hai, Dragons, Dwarves and Balrogs of Middle-Earth.³⁹ In fact, the realms of the 4 great kings, being co-spatial with earth, is the most cosmopolitan in terms of inhabitants.

Besides the gandharvas, kumbhandas, nagas and yakshas, their realms are populated by a motley of deities and beings,⁴⁰ such as gaiads (earth-deities), oreads (both of the land and of the forests), dryads (tree deities), naiads (nymphs of the river, lakes and waters), and household deities, and also pretas,

³² D 1:216, 217, 2:221, 275; S 1:219.

³³ 帝釋天 *dishitiān* or 釋提桓因 *shìtí huányīn*; Jap 帝釈天 *taishakuten*. In China, Śakra is often identified with the Daost “Jade emperor” (玉皇大帝 *yùhuáng dàdì*, often simply as 玉皇 *yùhuáng*): this is an example of borrowing of deities by the Daoist from Buddhism. Hence, both have their birthday on the 9th day of the 1st lunar month of the Chin calendar (usu in February).

³⁴ SD 52.1 (2.4.1.3).

³⁵ D 2:257 f.

³⁶ D 3:198; Divy 126, 148.

³⁷ D 2:258, 3:199; Divy 126, 148.

³⁸ VA 2:440; AA 4:36; SnA 1:370. Vessavaṇa is the best known of the various names of Kuvera (PmA 3:613,10). He is attr with the power to grant children: see eg Rāja,datta Tha (Tha 2:134).

³⁹ In J R R Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* (1954) and *The Hobbit* (1937): <https://screenrant.com/lord-rings-most-powerful-races-ranked/>.

⁴⁰ On “deities” (*devatā*), see SD 54.2 (3.2.2.2(1)).

goblins (*pisāca*), yaksha demons,⁴¹ spirits (*bhūta*)⁴² and so on.⁴³ All these form the bases for traditional ethnic beliefs and superstitions throughout Asia.

3.4.3 Since the 4 great kings and their armies inhabit realms just “above” the earth, they are said to have undertaken the protection of the Buddha since his conception, and are not only his protectors, as stated in **the Mahā,samaya Sutta** (D 20)⁴⁴ but also of his followers, as stated in **the Āṭānāṭiya Sutta** (D 32).⁴⁵ Mahā Brahmā of the 1st-dhyana form-realm and Sakra, lord of Tāvātimsa, along with numerous other gods, are also Dharma-protectors.⁴⁶

3.4.4 Other beings inhabiting the 4 great kings’ realms

3.4.4.1 Amongst **the celestial inhabitants** in the realms of the 4 great kings are the following hosts of devas:⁴⁷

(1) <i>khiddā,padosikā</i>	“defiled by play”
(2) <i>mano,padosikā</i>	“defiled by mind”
(3) <i>sita,valāhakā</i>	“the cool-cloud riders”
(4) <i>uṇha,valahakā</i>	“the warm-cloud riders”
(5) <i>candimā deva,putta</i>	the moon deity
(6) <i>suriya deva,putta</i>	the sun deity

Like the Tāvātimsa gods, the inhabitants of the 4 great kings’ realms habitually indulge in sensual pleasures and frolicking. Often, through their sensuality and forgetfulness, they prematurely fall from their heaven. **The Brahma,jāla Sutta** (D 1) mentions two such cases, that is, those of the Khiddā,padosikā and the Mano,padosikā. [3.4.4.2; 3.4.4.3]

3.4.4.2 The Khiddā,padosikā (“defiled by play”) devas spend long ages in the delights of laughter, play and sensual lust. It is said that they would frolick in such pleasantries of the Nandana grove [2.2.1.2] and the Phārusaka grove⁴⁸ in Tāvātimsa, and the Cittalatā grove⁴⁹ in Tusita. The Khiddā,padosikā are so called because they are corrupted and destroyed by **play** (*khiddāya padussanti vinassanti*, DA 1:113,23).

In consequence of their **self-possession** (*atta,sañcetanā*),⁵⁰ their minds are corrupted and they fall from their divine state.⁵¹ They are, as it were, lost in heat of their lust and dark of delusion, as a result of

⁴¹ Pv 3.5.2.

⁴² On *bhūta*, see Sn 222 (*amanussa*, “non-human”); also VvA 8 n47.

⁴³ On the deities, see SD 54.2 (3.2.2.2(1)); on the pretas, see VvA:M xxxii.

⁴⁴ D 20/2:253-262 (SD 54.4).

⁴⁵ D 32/3:194-206 (SD 101.1).

⁴⁶ The gods, being unawakened, can only be “Dharma-protectors” in name. In the suttas and Comys, they are esp engaged in the Bodhisattva’s life, but once the Buddha has arisen, their role is mostly that of a student. Apparently, even the gods fear Māra, against whom they seem powerless. See SD 52.1 (16.5.2).

⁴⁷ Vbh 519,17-19.

⁴⁸ Phārusaka grove is mentioned (often alongside Nandana grove and Cittalatā grove) at DA 2:482,3:698; MA 1:225; J 6:278; VbhA 439,20.

⁴⁹ Cittalatā grove is mentioned (often alongside Nandana and Phārusaka) at DA 2:482, 3:698; MA 1:225; NmA 2:379; VbhA 439,20. Tusita is “space-based” [3.5.2]. Apparently, these devas have the power to visit it, too.

⁵⁰ On *atta,sañcetanā*, see DA 3:1024; AA 3:147,11-12. See also **Saṅgīti S** (D 1,11(38)/3:231); **Cetanā S** (A 4.171/2:-159), SD 51.20.

⁵¹ D 1,2.9/1:19 (SD 25.2); NmA 1:108.

which they become bewildered (*mohassa anudahanatāya, mohana, vasena hi tesam sati, sammoso*) (VbhA 498). On account of their bewildered mind, they fall from that realm and is reborn in the hells.⁵² [3.5.5.1]

3.4.4.3 The Mano, padosikā (“defiled by mind”) devas spend much of their time contemplating one another covetously and thus defile their minds with **anger** (*dosa*). Hence, they are said to be corrupted through **other-possession** (*para, sañcetanā, hetu*).⁵³ As a result of their defiled minds, their bodies weaken and they fall from that realm. Falling from that realm, they go directly to the hells. [2.4.1]

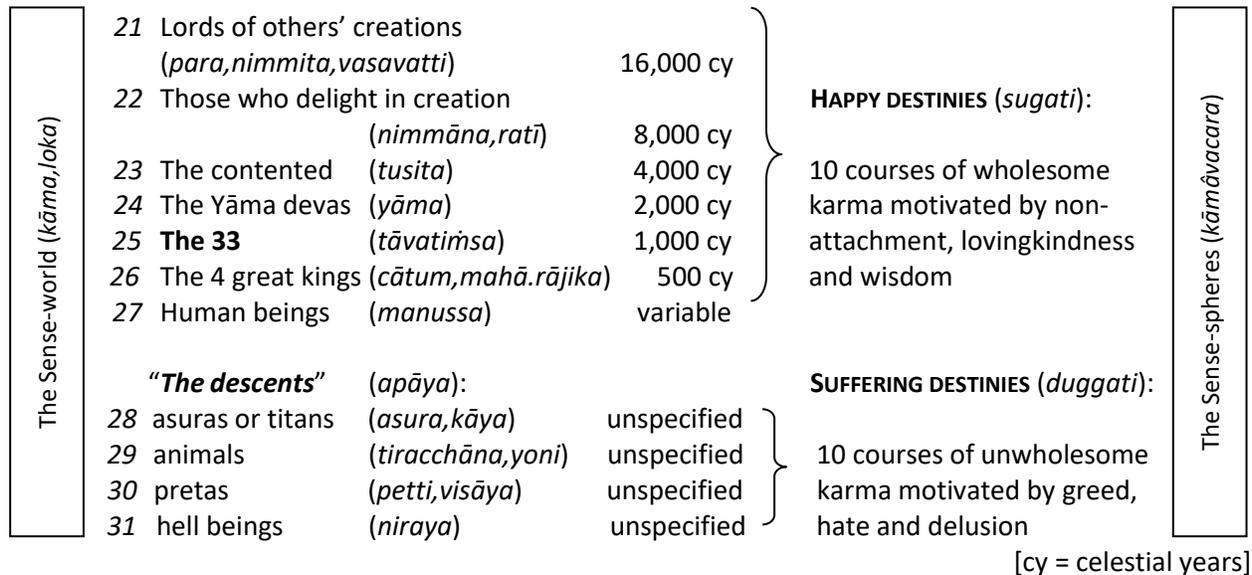


Diagram 3.5. The sense-worlds (the heavens are numbered)⁵⁴

3.5 THE HEAVENS: EARTH-BOUND AND SPACE-BASED

3.5.1 The earth-bound heavens. The lowest two of 6 sense-world heavens—those of **the 4 great kings** (*cātum, mahā. rājika*) and **the 33** (*tāva, tiṃsa*)—are regarded as “earth-bound” or “ground-based,” that is, they are native to the ground or earth (*bhummāni bhūtāni*) because they dwell on Mt Sumeru.⁵⁵ The asuras (the “old gods” of Tāvatiṃsa) that Sakra and his 33 have driven out of that heaven dwell at the foot of Sumeru, that is, far below Tāvatiṃsa. [3.5.4.2]

We can thus see that the sense-world heavens, especially the lowest two of them—the 4 great kings and Tāvatiṃsa—are **geocentric** heavens. It is unlikely that these gods would occupy the earth’s atmosphere which is today filled with planes, spaceships and other flying objects, and air pollution. We must imagine

⁵² D 1,45-46/1:19 f (SD 25,2).

⁵³ D 1,45-46/1:19 f (SD 25,2); DA 1:114,9-23; AA 3:147,17.

⁵⁴ The **lifespans** here follow the Vibhaṅga scheme, which progressively doubles for each of the 6 heavens [2.2.1.1]. The Abhidhammattha, saṅgaha scheme progressively quadruples (*catuḅgga*) for each of them (Abhs:BRS 196). Ge-thin’s diagram has a list of different figures for the sense-world heavens, ie, respectively (in celestial years), 500, 2,000, 8,000, 16,000, 64,000 and 128,000 (1998:117), prob following the Abhs scheme. See (2.2.1.1; 3.9.1).

⁵⁵ KhpA 166,17-20. Apparently, just as the Olympian gods of Greek mythology dwell on “Mt Olympus.” However, “Sumeru” later came to be regarded as the axis mundi, a galactic centre upon which the galaxy revolves. Further on the earth-bound deities, see Abhs:BRS 195.

them to dwell well beyond the earth's atmosphere in outer space, but not too far away in astronomical distance.

Beyond them, the form-world and the formless world are said to be **extraspacial** ("outer space") heavens. These are (in the imagination of contemporary space-fiction narrative and movies) located much farther away in far-flung quadrants of outer space. [3.5.2]

3.5.2 The space-based heavens

3.5.2.1 The next-level heavens—those "from Yāma to Akaniṭṭha" (*yāmato yava akaniṭṭham*)—that is, Yāma, Tusita, Nimmāna, ratī and Para, nimmita, vasavatti [Diagram 3.5] up to the form-world heavens, are said to dwell in "air," the sky or in space. They are "space-based beings," those native to the sky (*antalik-khe bhūtāni*) because they dwell in the space "above" Mt Sumeru.⁵⁶ The higher we ascend into the sense-world heavens and form heavens, the larger and more splendid and more refined are the gods' bodies and the longer their lifespans.⁵⁷

Interestingly, it seems that the cosmos in the imagination of the ancient Indians has today grown much more immense. Mt Sumeru, the axis mundi, has shifted from some vague location in the heights of the Himalayas to the centre of the Milky Way. The heavens are more far-flung, vaster, more spacious, and farther away from us. Yet, through our meditation, we can access them in a thought-moment, as it were—that is through dhyana [3.3.4.2; 3.6.5.3].

3.5.2.2 Māra's heaven. According to the early Buddhist cosmology, Māra the bad one or Death personified, the real lord all of samsara, resides in the highest of the sense-world heaven, that of **Para, nimmita, vasavattī**, the "gods who lord over others' creations," with a lifespan of 128,000 celestial years. There he is known as **Vasa, vatti** (MA 1:33 f),⁵⁸ which is also the name of the lord of that heaven. [3.3.3.1]

In short, as long as we are unawakened, we carry around with us an existential monitoring device (like the one that prisoners or probationers wear), or some kind of lightning-rod, ready to attract and conduct Māra to take over our lives. The suttas record Māra as being able to infiltrate even the 1st-dhyana brahma heaven (where there are some remnants of thinking).⁵⁹ In short, Māra's power extends over the whole of the three-world universe.⁶⁰

3.5.3 Space and crowdedness

3.5.3.1 An interesting characteristic of the Buddhist divine cosmology is that as we get higher in the celestial realms, they become less crowded and **more spacious**. Indeed, the trend is just the opposite in the 4 lowest realms, that is, "the suffering destinies" (*duggati*) or "the descents" (*apāya*):⁶¹ they get more crowded or more cramped [Diagram 3.5].

The **animals**, which include beasts, birds, insects, fishes and other non-human life on earth generally tend to be live in crowded groups—described by collective terms such as herd, pride, swarm, school and

⁵⁶ KhpA 166,15-17.

⁵⁷ This is a Sarvāstivāda explanation: see Vasubandhu's Abhidharma, kośa ch 3: 69b-d (Abhdk:P 2:465); Sadakata 1997:57.

⁵⁸ The devaputra Vasavatti Māra attacks the Bodhisattva under the Bodhi tree just before the Great Awakening, in an attempt to prevent him from becoming Buddha (BA 287 f).

⁵⁹ **Brahma Nimantanika S** (M 49) @ SD 11.7(8.2).

⁶⁰ On Māra, see **Māra**, SD 61.8; SD 36.4 (2.3); **Sela S** (M 92,19 = Sn 561b = Tha 831b n (SD 45.7a); SD 52.1 (9.1.2.2).

⁶¹ On *āpaya*, see *A Comprehensive Compendium of Abhidhamma*, Abhs:BRS 189.

colony, known as **terms of venery** (“venery” is an ancient word “hunting”),⁶² that is, they are hunted for food and for sport by humans and other animals.⁶³

3.5.3.2 In the case of the **pretas**, who started off in Buddhist mythology as “the departed” (*petti*), the dead who have yet to find a suitable rebirth, they evolved into “shades⁶⁴ or ghosts” (*preta*) or collectively called “the shades,” who suffer from great hunger and thirst. Although pretas are often confined to some space or route they are habituated to, they do not have their own realm (like the gods), but wherever they dwell, they experience extremely sharp hunger and thirst: they are beings with a terrible inner clogging or mental crowding.⁶⁵

3.5.3.3 The most crowded realm in the universe is that of **the hells** (*niraya*). Today, however, we have generally outgrown the misconception that the hells are places of physical suffering; in fact, they *never* were. Even the various graphic descriptions of hellish torments⁶⁶ are implicit teachings (*neyy’attha*),⁶⁷ whose sense is to be drawn out. Such teachings are graphic lessons to help us visualize the mental sufferings that ceaselessly afflict the hell-beings. In other words, the sufferings are real and painful indeed.⁶⁸

The most crowded of these hells is **Avīci**, “uninterrupted,” and is sometimes called the “great hell” (*mahā,niraya*).⁶⁹ It is said to be the “lowest” point of the universe (NmA 2:425). Even then, hell is not a place we are relegated to but is a mental cramp and inner violence that constantly floods our being no matter where we are, even in the holiest or heavenliest place.⁷⁰

3.5.4 THE SPACE-BASED HEAVENS OF THE SENSE-WORLD

3.5.4.1 While the two lowest heavens of the sense-world—those of the 4 great kings [3.4] and of Tāvātimsa [2.2.1; 4]—are *ground-based*, the rest of the sense-world heavens are **space-bound**, that is, they are “air-borne” or floating in space. They each exist in their own time-space reality, and are not easily accessible by even the deities of the lower heavens.

3.5.4.2 **The asuras** (literally, “not-gods, anti-gods”) are a special class of the suffering-realm beings not usually listed as one of the 31 planes. The reason for this is simply that they were devas once but were overthrown from their heaven by the new gods of Tāvātimsa led by Sakra and his 33 devas. In other words, they are “fallen gods”⁷¹ and are classed amongst the “ground-based heavens.” [3.5.1]

An interesting characteristic of the asuras is that they are often at war with the Tāvātimsa devas on account of Sakra overthrowing them from that heaven. The asuras are very much like the Titans (the “old gods” of Greek mythology) who are banished by Zeus, lord of Olympus, to the depths of Tartarus.⁷²

⁶² The word venery also means “the practice or pursuit of sexual pleasure; indulgence of sexual desire” (OED).

⁶³ For other terms of venery, see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_English_terms_of_venery_by_animal.

⁶⁴ See OED, sv manes (1).

⁶⁵ On the evolution of the pretas, see SD 48.1 (6.4).

⁶⁶ See **Bāla Paṇḍita S** (M 129), SD 2.22; **Mahā Dukkha-k,khandha S** (M 13), SD 6.9; (**Yāma**) **Deva,dūta S** (A 3.35), SD 48.10; (**Majjhima**) **Deva,dūta S** (M 130), SD 2.23.

⁶⁷ See **Neyy’attha Nī’tattha S** (A 2.3.5+6), SD 2.6b.

⁶⁸ See **Pātāla S** (S 36.4), SD 2.25; SD 2.23 (3); SD 89.10 (1); SD 53.16 (2).

⁶⁹ DA 3:855; AA 2:256.

⁷⁰ Further on suffering states, see Abhs:BRS 189 f.

⁷¹ On the origins of the asuras, see SD 15.5 (3.7.1)

⁷² See SD 54.2 (3.2.2.2 (6)).

3.5.4.3 The two lowest heavens—those of the 4 great kings and the 33 gods—and **the asuras** are “ground-based” realms, accessible to one another like the various countries of earth since we are all on the same planet. From their descriptions thus far, we can imagine them to be a celestial version of human society. The ground-based gods are either indulging in sensual pleasures or battling with foes or amongst themselves (especially the Tāvātimsa gods and the asuras).

These gods and their exploits remind us of **Norse mythology**, where the gods of Asgard,⁷³ led by Odin, Thor and others, constantly battle the “giants” or “devourers” from Utgard (our world is called Mitgard, “inhabited,” the world in between) to keep the peace. Asgard is like Tāvātimsa, while Utgard like the asuras. The Norse, however, went on to develop their own complex mythology reflecting their views of nature and life.

3.6 THE YĀMA DEVAS

3.6.1 Meaning of yāma. The Yāma heaven is the first of the “space-bound” realms; hence, they are not involved in the worldly exploits of the ground-based heavens of the 4 great kings and of Tāvātimsa. In fact, compared to these two lower heavens, the Yāma realm seems austere, unlike the next heaven, Tusita, where the gods rejoice in contentment. The laid-back character of the Yāma devas is because of their capacity to easily enjoy sense-pleasure and be fully satiated with much less stimulation than the devas of the realms below them.⁷⁴

The Tibetans, in fact, interpret the name *yāma* to mean “conflict-free.” The Commentaries explain the meaning of Yāmā, thus: “Those that are gone to, wholly arrived at divine bliss” (*dibbariṃ sukhariṃ yātā pa-yātā sampattā’ti yāmā*).⁷⁵ 200 years of human life are but a day in Yāma heaven, and 2,000 years of such days is their lifespan. In human time, their lifespan is 144 million years.⁷⁶

3.6.2 Those reborn in Yāma. **Sirimā**, doctor Jīvaka’s sister, after her death, is born in the Yāma world and becomes the wife of Suyāma, king of Yāma heaven, also called “Yāma’s dwelling” (*yāma, bhavana*).⁷⁷ She is said to have visited the Buddha with 500 deities (SnA 1:244,20).

The Dvāra, pālaka Vimāna, vatthu (Vv 5.5), “the mansion-story of the door-keeper,” relates the story of a lay-disciple living in the outskirts of Rāja, gaha, infested by robbers so that he has to keep his doors closed and locked, which prevents the monks from obtaining alms from his house for his regular offerings. Learning of this, he bravely leaves his door open so that the monks are able to come for their daily alms. Upon dying, the layman is reborn in the Yāma world and his mansion has high doors and gem-studded pillars.⁷⁸

The Hatthi, pāla Jātaka (J 509) relates how 4 former weavers of Benares constantly donate a fifth of their earnings to charity. They are first reborn in Tāvātimsa and then progressively arise up and down through the 6 sense-world heavens. When they are Yāma devas, Sakra seeks them, inviting them to be reborn in the womb of the chief queen of Esukārī, king of Benares (J 4:475).

⁷³ *Asgard* is derived from Old Norse *āss*, “god” and *garðr*, “enclosure”; from Indo-European roots *ansu-*, “spirit, demon” (see cognate *ahura* (cognate of *asura*) meaning “mighty, lord” in Proto-Iranian) and *gher-*, “grasp, enclose,” essentially meaning “garden of gods.” (*American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*. 4th ed 2000), where see also *ansu-* and *gher-*¹ in “Appendix I: Indo-European Roots.”

⁷⁴ V 1:12; A 1:228, 3:287; M 2:194, 3:100.

⁷⁵ VbhA 519,25 = PmA 3:613,32.

⁷⁶ A 1:213, 4:253.

⁷⁷ J 4:475; SnA 1:244.

⁷⁸ Vv 5.5/86 (VvA 246-248) :: VvA:M 379-382.

3.6.3 Yāma and Yama

3.6.3.1 The name **Yāma** is sometimes confused with king **Yama**, who counsels the hell-being before the hell-wardens drag them to their allotted hell to be tormented, as described in **the (Majjhima) Deva,dūta Sutta** (M 130) and **the (Yama) Deva,dūta Sutta** (A 3.35).⁷⁹ This may be due to their common origin as the Vedic deity **Yama** with whom the dead was united (Rg 10.14.8). What was one deity, in the Buddhist context evolved into two distinct deities: Yama, the lord of the hells (M 130) and Suyāma, the lord of Yāma devas (VvA 246).

Although Yama is usually associated with the hells, he is sometimes mentioned in connection with the pretas, amongst whom he is said to reside: this aspect of him is unclear⁸⁰ since the pretas do not form a *realm* but exist “free-range” (*visaya*); hence, they are collectively called the “preta-range” (*petti-visaya*).⁸¹ In other words, they may exist anywhere in the sentient world, including the earth-bound heavens [3.4.2.2].

3.6.3.2 Yāma is clearly an allegory⁸² for *karma and rebirth*. In the older **(Yama) Deva,dūta Sutta** (A 3.35), he has 3 divine messengers (*deva,dūta*), that is, an old man (decay), a sick man (disease) and a corpse (death).⁸³ In a more developed discourse, **the (Majjhima) Deva,dūta Sutta** (M 130), there are 5 divine messengers: a young tender infant (birth), an old man, a sick man, a criminal being punished (*karma*), and a dead man.⁸⁴

While Yāma or Suyāma is lord of Yāma heaven, king Yama, although a deva, has no official residence in any of the heavens. In fact, he seems to be the only deva who resides or works in hell! Understandably, it is a very repetitive job, having to ask the same questions to millions of hell-beings daily! He aspires to change his job, to become human and renounce before the Buddha so that he will awaken to true reality and freedom.⁸⁵

3.6.3.3 Although Yama is called a king (*yama,rāja*),⁸⁶ he is not even the “lord of death,” a role given to **Māra** as *maccu,māra*.⁸⁷ While Māra is the personification of Death and the world, Yama is an allegory of karma and rebirth. They stand in diametrical opposition to one another: Māra seduces us to stay in the world, his realm; Yama, urgently warns us not to fall into *his* own world, the hells! In that sense, Yama wants us to be from of suffering.

3.6.4 THE TUSITA DEVAS

3.6.4.1 Tusita, the heaven of the contented gods, is the 4th of the 6 sense-world heavens.⁸⁸ 400 human years is a single day in Tusita, and 4,000 years is a Tusita deva’s lifespan. In human time, this is 576 million years!⁸⁹ The Tusita devas are so called because they are full of joy (*tuṭṭhā pahatthāti tusitā*).⁹⁰

⁷⁹ M 130 (SD 2.23); A 3.35 (SD 48.10).

⁸⁰ See VvA:M xxxi f; SD 2.23 (4).

⁸¹ Also *petā,visaya, petā,yoni*: D 3:234; It 93; J5:186; Pv 2.2.2, 2.7.9; Miln 310; DhA 1:102, 4:226; Vism 427; VbhA 4, 455; PvA 25 f, 29, 59 f, 214, 268; Sdhp 9.

⁸² See SD 2.23 (3.2).

⁸³ A 3.35 (SD 48.10).

⁸⁴ M 130,5-8 (SD 2.23).

⁸⁵ M 130,28-29 = A 3.35,28-29. See SD 48.1 (3.4).

⁸⁶ M 130,4 etc (SD 2.23); A 3.35,4 etc (SD 48.10).

⁸⁷ See **Māra**, SD 61.8.

⁸⁸ A 1:210.

⁸⁹ A 1:214, 4:261.

Santusita, the lord of Tusita, says **the Puñña,kiriya,vatthu Sutta** (A 8.36), excels his fellows in 10 respects: longevity, beauty, happiness, glory, power, form, sound, smell, taste and touch.⁹¹ In other words, the Tusita gods—like the other gods of the sense-world heavens—fully enjoy the pleasures of all the 5 senses.

3.6.4.2 Tusita heaven is considered the most beautiful of the celestial realms, and the faithful love to be born there because of the presence of the Bodhisattva (Mahv 35.72 f). It is the rule that all Bodhisattvas (buddha-to-be), in their penultimate birth, are born in Tusita.⁹² When the time comes for the Buddha to arise in the world, the devas of the 10,000 world-systems joyfully assemble here and invite the Bodhisattva to take birth among humans.⁹³

Gotama arises in Tusita as **Seta,ketu**,⁹⁴ and the coming future buddha, Metteyya, is now living there, too.⁹⁵ Tusita is also the abode of every Bodhisattva's parents.⁹⁶ We have already noted that the once-returned brothers, **Purāna and Isi,datta**, are reborn there [2.1.1.2].⁹⁷ The inhabitants of Tusita, called Tusitā, are present at **the Mahā,samaya** (D 2:161).

3.6.5 THE NIMMĀNA,RATĪ DEVAS

3.6.5.1 The Nimmāna,ratī, “those who delight in creation,” are a class of devas inhabiting the 5th of the 6 sense-world heavens.⁹⁸ They are so called because they delight in their own creations. They can create any form in any colour.⁹⁹ The lord of the Nimmāna,ratī heaven is called Sunimmita.¹⁰⁰

The lifespan of the Nimmāna,ratī devas is 8,000 celestial years. 800 human years constitute a single day of the Nimmāna,ratī heaven. In human time, their lifespan is 2,304 million years.

3.6.5.2 The Kāmūpapatti Sutta (It 95), whose teachings are summarized in **the Saṅgīti Sutta** (D 33), describes the beings in terms of the kinds of rebirth in the sense-world (*kām'upapattiya*) as being of the following 3 kinds:¹⁰¹

- (1) beings who desire what arises before them (*paccuppaṭṭhita,kāma*), and are in the grip of that desire, such as humans, some devas, and some in the suffering states;
- (2) beings who desire what they have created (*nimmita,kāma*), that is, the Nimmāna,ratī devas; and
- (3) beings who delight in what others have created (*para.nimmita,kāma*), that is, the Para.nimmita,vasavatti devas.

The Nimmāna,ratī devas, as such, form their own unique category of beings who have power to create their own objects of pleasures.

⁹⁰ VbhA 519 = PmA 3:613 = ThīA 169 = NmA 1:155; cf Nm 2:447.

⁹¹ A 8.36/4:243 (SD 22.17); but cf Cūḷavaṃsa: Cuv 53.47, where the Bodhisattva Metteyya is called the lord of Tusita.

⁹² For the reasons for this, see SD 52.1 (2.1).

⁹³ A 2:130, 4:312; J 1:47 f.

⁹⁴ VA 1:161; MA 1:125; J 1:401, 3:232.

⁹⁵ Mahv 32.73.

⁹⁶ DhA 1:110,23-25.

⁹⁷ A 6.44/3:348 (SD 3.2), 10.75/5:138; cf UA 149, 277.

⁹⁸ D 1:218; M 1:289; S 1:133; A 1:210.

⁹⁹ NmA 1:16, 109; VvA 80; VbhA 519.

¹⁰⁰ D 1:219

¹⁰¹ It 95/3.5.6/94-96; D 33,1.10(40)/3:218.

3.6.6 THE PARA,NIMMITA,VASAVATTI DEVAS

3.6.6.1 The Para,nimmita,vasavatti are a class of devas inhabiting the highest realm of the sense-world (*kāma,loka*).¹⁰² They are described as “beings who desire the creation of others so that they have them under their power” (*parehi nimmite kāme vasarā vattentīti paranimmita,vasavattino*)¹⁰³ [3.6.4.2(3)]. **The Puggala Paññatti** explains that these gods are those who “live on the fruit of merit but not on that of exertion” (*puñña,phal’upajīvī no uṭṭhāna,phal’upajīvī*) (Pug 4.18/51).

3.6.6.2 The Commentaries explain that the objects of their desires are created by other devas who know their weakness, just as a cook, knowing the king’s favourite dishes, will prepare them for him. It adds that, according to some authorities, their desires are fulfilled by a mere look, a smile, an embrace, but this statement is rejected by the ancient Commentary.¹⁰⁴

3.6.6.3 The lifespan of the Para,nimmita,vassavati devas is 1,600 celestial years. 16,000 human years constitute a single day of the Para,nimmita,vassavati heaven. In human time, their lifespan is 9,216 million years [Diagram 3.5]. This heaven is the highest quadrant of the sense-world. Beyond this, cosmologically, are the form-world heavens, and then the formless heavens.

The suttas distinguish these worlds as “spheres” (*avacara*) of beings populated by sense-world beings (including humans and gods) (*kāmāvacara*), and the gods of the form-world (*rūpāvacara*) and the formless world (*arūpāvacara*) [3.11.1.2]. Normally (in the traditional sense of ancient Indian mythology), beings are reborn (through the karmic process) into the realms of these worlds

However, with proper dhyanic meditation, any human can access the form world or the formless world. The very same worlds are then respectively called the form-sphere (*rūpāyatana*) and the formless sphere (*arūpāyatana*). They are accessible at any time—without the necessity of rebirth—through dhyana meditation.¹⁰⁵

3.6.6.4 Meditation, then, is a direct way to **heaven** via the “inner space” of dhyanic calm. If the meditator should die during such a meditation, or as a result of his habitual dhyanic practice, he will attain that same *sphere* that he is so familiar with. In this sense, meditation is a process of the “divinization” (the attaining of the heavenly state) of humanity. **Divinity** does not arise in heavens but within our own heart of inner peace (*samatha*), focused and empowered by dhyana (*jhāna*).

“**Divinity**” or godliness (*devatā* as an abstract noun) is best understood in the practice and spirit of the 4 “divine abodes” (*brahma,vihāra*): the cultivation of lovingkindness, compassion, gladness and equanimity.¹⁰⁶ Instead of looking externally to the heavens or some godly agent, we should be cultivating it *within* ourself. We should live like the gods, even be empowered to become gods, that is, by the cultivation of moral virtue and good works.

Such morality and goodness prepare our body and speech to be the foundation for a calm heart and clear mind, so that we have the wisdom for insight into the true reality of things which awakens us to spiritual freedom. The recollection of deity (*devatā’nussati*), then, is not a meditation on the “deities” (plural collective noun for the “gods”) but a recollection on deity (singular abstract noun), on **divinity or godliness**, as a bridge to the path of awakening.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰² A 3.70/1:210; S 55.54/5:410, 56.11/423.

¹⁰³ ItA 2:122,7.

¹⁰⁴ DA 3:1001; ItA 2:122; VvA 80; NmA 109; VbhA 519.

¹⁰⁵ See **Dhyana**, SD 8.4.

¹⁰⁶ See **Brahma,vihara**, SD 38.5.

¹⁰⁷ See SD 54.2 (3.2.3.1(2)).

3.7 THE 1ST-DHYANA BRAHMAS

3.7.1 Station of consciousness

3.7.1.1 Just above (in qualitative sense) the 6 sense-world heavens are the spacious 4 dhyana-based heavens of the brahmas (*brahmā*).¹⁰⁸ These brahmas have attained their state on account of having cultivated the dhyanas in their previous life-time. Those brahmas, born into the 1st-dhyana form-realm, have mastered **the 1st dhyana** before.

In terms of “abode” (*āvāsa*), they are beings of **the 2nd station of consciousness**, that is, they are different in body but the same in perception [Table 3.13.3]. They each have their own body but they all experience the same bliss of the 1st dhyana but at different intensity, that is, strong or at full strength (*mahā brahma*), medium (*brahma, purohita*) and weak (*brahma, kāyikā*) [3.7.1.2].

3.7.1.2 They comprise 3 levels of brahma-realms (with their lifespans listed):¹⁰⁹

19	great Brahmā;	<i>mahā brahmā</i>	1 aeon
20	Brahmā’s ministers;	<i>brahma, purohita</i>	½ aeon
21	Brahma’s assembly or retinue.	<i>brahma, kāyikā, brahma, pārisajja</i>	¼ aeon

The key distinguishing factor for these 3 levels of brahmas is that great Brahmā arises from having full-strength 1st dhyana; Brahma’s ministers from medium-strength 1st dhyana; and Brahma’s assembly from a weak 1st dhyana.

3.7.2 Nourishment. These brahmas lack the senses of smell and taste which they do not need. They do not consume material food like humans do. However, they have supernormal sense of **sight, hearing, touch** and **the mind-faculty** (*man’indriya*). Their food is refined **joy**. This is understandable: when we ourselves feel joyful, we are energized to work and do our best.

3.7.3 Mahā Brahmā. According to the suttas, **Mahā Brahmā**, the lord of the 1st-dhyana Brahma realm, presumed himself, thus: “I ... am Brahmā, the Great Brahmā, the Conqueror, the Unconquered, the All-knowing, the All-powerful, the Lord God, the Maker, the Creator, the Chief, the Ordainer, the Almighty, the Father of all that are and that will be.”¹¹⁰ The Buddha explains to Brahma himself how his wrong views about being a creator, etc, arose,¹¹¹ and explains to us about it, too.¹¹²

3.8 THE 2ND FORM DHYANA BRAHMAS

3.8.1 Lifespans

3.8.1.1 Those brahmas born into the 2nd-dhyana form-realm have mastered **the 2nd dhyana** before. They comprise 3 levels of these brahma-realms (with their lifespans listed):¹¹³

¹⁰⁸ *Brahmā* (meaning “perfect” or “holy”) specifically refers to the 4 form-dhyana heavens but may refer to the 4 formless dhyana realms, too; but are never used to refer to the deva of the sense-world.

¹⁰⁹ For their lifespans and location, see SD 1.7 App.

¹¹⁰ **Kevaḍḍha S** (D 11,81/1:221), SD 1.7.

¹¹¹ **Brahmā Nimantanika S** (M 49/1:326-331), SD 11.7.

¹¹² **Brahma, jāla S** (D 1,39-44), SD 25.2.

¹¹³ For their lifespans and location, see SD 1.7 App.

15 Streaming radiance;	<i>ābhassara</i>	8 aeons
16 Boundless radiance;	<i>appamāṇ'ābha</i>	4 aeons
17 Limited radiance.	<i>paritt'ābha</i>	2 aeons

3.8.1.2 Beginning with Mahā Brahmā [19] we have the gods' lifespans are measured in aeons or world-cycles. An aeon (*kappa*) is an astronomically lengthy age; in fact, it is an unimaginable duration, declares **the (Catukka) Kappa Sutta** (A 4.156).¹¹⁴ In the famous "rocky mountain" analogy, we are told that even when a man with a soft cloth were to gently swipe at a solid rocky mountain, a yojana (11.3 km = 7 mi) high, wide and deep, and a time were to come when the whole mountain has been levelled, an aeon has not passed!

Such an unimaginable long duration might have captured the imagination of the ancient Indian audience. However, we are better aware today of how old the universe may be, but it is still difficult to imagine the time it will take from the beginning to the end of the universe, simply because it has the ended. And when it does end, then, we have no way of knowing the duration.¹¹⁵

3.8.1.3 The 3 levels of these brahmas [3.8.1.1] are differentiated according how they have previously mastered the 2nd dhyana. They experience 3 levels of dhyana: the Ābhassara experience the full strength of the 2nd dhyana; the Appamāṇ'ābha, a medium strength; and the Paritt'ābha, at a weak level.

Even then, the bliss of these Ābhassara gods profoundly reflects their 2nd dhyana ambience highlighted by the presence of zest (*pīti*), a spirited joy. They are so joyful that from time to time they exclaim, "Oh what bliss!" (*aho sukham*). To be able to hear this is hear the best of sounds.¹¹⁶

3.8.2 Station of consciousness

3.8.2.1 In terms of "abode" (*āvāsa*), they are beings of **the 3rd station of consciousness**, that is, they are the same in body but different in perception [Table 3.13.3]. They share the same mental body, that is, their consciousness merge like a lake or sea of water, but feel the bliss of the 2nd dhyana at different intensity, as already noted [3.8.1.3].

3.8.2.2 This state of the 2nd dhyana gods is very well portrayed in *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*, by the Changelings (known as the Founders), a Gamma Quadrant race of gelatinous orange liquid lifeforms capable of shapeshifting. In their natural state, they exist in totality to form a large lake of living viscous liquid with a shared memory.¹¹⁷

3.8.3 Bodies of light

3.8.3.1 Although they share the same mental body, they may appear as separate bodies of light. They are described in their heavenly state, thus: "There they dwell, mind-made,¹¹⁸ feeding on zest [joy],¹¹⁹ self-

¹¹⁴ SD 2.19 (9); SD 49.8 (15.2).

¹¹⁵ On the aeon, see SD 23.8a (3). Ency Bsm has a long rambling entry on Ābhassara (1:13-16).

¹¹⁶ **Bhaddaji S** (A 5.170/3:202), SD 95.4.

¹¹⁷ *Deep Space Nine*, DS9 447, The Search, Parts 1+2 (Season 3, 1995).

¹¹⁸ They are said to be "mind-made" (*mano,mayo*) because they are reborn by way of the dhyana-mind (*jhāna,-manena*) (DA 1:110).

¹¹⁹ "Zest," *pīti*, alt tr "rapture, joy"; this term refers to a factor of the first 2 dhyana. It is not a sensation and hence does not belong to the feeling aggregate (*vedanā-k,khandha*) but a mental factor (*cetasika*) belonging to the formation aggregate (*saṅkhāra-k,khandha*), and it may be described as "joyful interest."

luminous,¹²⁰ moving about through space, glorious—and they stay like that for a very long time.”¹²¹ Their fine-form bodies emanate light in all directions like the flame of a torch or like lightning.

3.8.3.2 Compared to the life of habitually frolicking and battling in the two lowest sense-world heavens [3.5.4.3], nothing really happens here in these 2nd form dhyana heavens. The gods here enjoy a profound state of dhyanic bliss, almost like an on-going sweet dream-state.

Understandably, they are able to emerge from their sea of dhyanic bliss and interact with one another as individuals, or even visit the earth to meet the Buddha. Otherwise, it is highly unlikely that they would even venture near such relatively foul world like earth.

3.9 THE 3RD FORM DHYANA BRAHMAS

3.9.1 Lifespans

3.9.1.1 Those brahmas have mastered **the 3rd dhyana** in their previous life so that they are born into the 3rd-dhyana form-realm.¹²² They comprise these 3 levels (with their lifespans listed).¹²³

12 Radiant glory;	<i>subha,kiṇṇa</i> [Comy <i>subha,kiṇṇa</i>]	64 aeons
13 Boundless glory;	<i>appamāṇa,subha</i>	32 aeons
14 Limited glory.	<i>paritta,subha</i>	16 aeons

3.9.1.2 Although **the Nānā Karaṇa Sutta 1** (A 4.123) states that the Subha,kiṇṇa lifespan is only 4 aeons, its Commentary (AA 3:126) actually states that it is 64 aeons to conform with later Theravāda cosmology.¹²⁴ The trend seems to be that the sutta’s durations were extended by the Commentaries, which were later extended still longer by the Abhidhamma tradition. As the ancient Indians became more aware of large numbers, it seemed, they saw the gods as having progressive longer lifespans relative to one another. [3.5]

3.9.2 Radiance

3.9.2.1 These 3rd-dhyana brahmas are called Subha,kiṇṇa, “radiant glory” or “pervasive radiance,” because radiance emanates from their bodies with a steady brightness, not in flashes. The radiance of the other two levels of “Subha” gods, as they are called, are of progressively weaker quality. Nevertheless, their radiances are remarkably brilliant by earth standards.¹²⁵

3.9.2.2 In terms of **abode** (*āvāsa*), the Subha brahmas share the same mental body and feel the same 3rd-dhyana bliss¹²⁶ [Table 3.12.3]. The 3 levels of Subha gods only differ in the intensity of their radiance.

¹²⁰ On the Abhassara devas’ self-luminosity and *pabhassara*, see SD 2.19 (7.3).

¹²¹ **Brahma,jāla S** (D 1,40/1:17), SD 25.2; **Pāṭika S** (D 24,17/3:28), SD 63.3; **Aggañña S** (D 27,10/3:85).

¹²² D 2:69; M 1:2, 3:102.

¹²³ For their lifespans and location, see SD 1.7 App.

¹²⁴ A 4.123/2:127 (SD 23.8a (3.2).

¹²⁵ DA 2:511; VbhA 520.

¹²⁶ A 9.24/4:401 (SD 67.3); MA 1:35; AA 1:35, 2:193, 4:27; PmA 1:110, 112, 114; BA 37; cf A 7.44/4:40 (SD 3.16).

The joy of the Subha,kiṇha brahmas reflect their 3rd-dhyana ambience, where zest (*pīti*) has settled, leaving a more placid **joy** that is serenely pervasive and absorbing,¹²⁷ unlike the 1st-dhyana Ābhassara brahmas who express their exuberant joy aloud (D 3:219).

3.9.3 Destruction of the universe. According to Buddhaghosa, when the world is destroyed by the fire element, that is, some kind of cosmic nuclear reaction, the destruction reaches up to Ābhassara heaven, the highest of the 2nd-dhyana sphere [3.8.1.1]. When it is destroyed by the water element, that is, a cosmic meltdown, the destruction reaches up to the Subha,kiṇha heaven [3.9.1.1].¹²⁸ When it is destroyed by the wind element, that is, a cosmic storm, its destruction reaches just below the Veha-p,phala (“abundant fruit”) heaven, the first of the 4th-dhyana realms [3.10.2.2].¹²⁹

It is interesting to note here that only the physical universe is affected by the cosmic destruction. The greatest extent of the destruction is only to just above 3rd-dhyana form-world. The rest of the 4th-dhyana world (the pure abodes) and the whole of the formless world remain intact because of their non-physical nature.¹³⁰

3.10 THE 4TH FORM DHYANA BRAHMAS

3.10.1 The 4th-dhyana brahmas have cultivated dhyana to an excellent or “subtle” (*paṇīta*) degree (AA 3:125). This heaven is mostly taken up by **the pure abodes** (*suddh’āvāsa*) [5-9], that is, the 5 abodes that serve as “way-stations” for non-returners to finish off the karma of their final life and attain nirvana:

5	The peerless	<i>akaniṭṭhā</i>	16,000 aeons	} The pure abodes (<i>suddh’āvāsa</i>) non-returners only
6	The clear-visioned	<i>sudassī</i>	8,000 aeons	
7	The clear-beauty	<i>sudasā</i>	4,000 aeons	
8	The serene	<i>ātappā</i>	2,000 aeons	
9	The durable	<i>avihā</i>	1,000 aeons	
10	The non-percipient beings	<i>asañña,satta</i>	500 aeons	
11	Abundant-fruit	<i>veha-p,phala</i>	500 aeons	

3.10.2 The 4th dhyana heaven contains the abode of the unique **Asañña,satta** or non-percipient beings [3.10.2.1], and the highest realm of the form-world, **Veha-p,phala** [3.10.2.2]. Both these realms are located just below the pure abodes.

3.10.2.1 The non-percipient beings (*asañña,satta*) are those erstwhile meditators who have developed dispassion towards perception (*saññā,virāgaṃ bhāvetvā*).¹³¹ After death, they become non-percipient beings, where they continue to exist in a kind of suspended animation as in cryogenic hibernation (A 4:401). The moment any thought arises in such a being, he falls from that state.¹³² Their lifespan is 500 aeons.

¹²⁷ AA 2:193.

¹²⁸ PmA 1:373 f.

¹²⁹ AA 3:134 (given in brief, but quotes Vism for details): Vism 13.29-44/414-417; ItA 2:135; CA 11; PmA 1:367, 373; VA 1:159. On the various realms, see chart at SD 1.7 (Appendix).

¹³⁰ SA 2:204; Vism 13.59-62/420 f. See SD 1.7 (App).

¹³¹ Vbh 419; Abhsv 5.85/142 = Abhs:WG 200.

¹³² See **Brahma,jāla S** (D 1,2.31/1:28 f); **Pāṭika S** (D 24,2.20/3:33 f). See SD 53.23 (2.1.5).

3.10.2.2 The Abundant-fruit devas (*veha-p,phala*) dwell just below the pure abodes in the form-world. They are said to be reborn there as a result of their attainment of the “5th” dhyana, which is the Abhidhamma term for the 4th dhyana.¹³³ The lifespan is 500 aeons.¹³⁴ Non-returners who are reborn there attain nirvana without going anywhere else (VbhA 376). When the universe is destroyed by wind, Vaha-p,phala forms the limit of the destruction.¹³⁵ (CA 11).

3.11 THE 4 FORMLESS DHYANA BRAHMAS

3.11.1 Attainments

3.11.1.1 Unlike the 4 form-dhyanas (*rupa-j,jhāna*) which are rooted in the 1st dhyana and are progressively more refined forms of it,¹³⁶ **the 4 formless attainments** (*arūpa,samāpatti*) are all rooted in the 4th dhyana, that is, they are progressively finer levels of it.¹³⁷

1	The base of neither-perception-nor-non-perception	<i>n’eva,saññā,nāsaññ’āyatana</i>	84,000 aeons
2	The base of nothingness	<i>ākīñcaññ’āyatana</i>	60,000 aeons
3	The base of infinite consciousness	<i>viññāṇañc’āyatana</i>	40,000 aeons
4	The base of infinite space	<i>ākāsānanc’āyatana</i>	20,000 aeons

3.11.1.2 The 4 highest heavens are said to be “**formless**” (*arūpī*) because they are totally without any physical form and are populated by purely mental beings. Their state is said to be a formless attainment (*arūpa,samāpatti*)—they are not normally called “dhyana” because they arise differently. As we have already noted, these formless attainments are all finer states rooted in the 4th dhyana [3.11.1.1].

3.11.1.3 They can be distinguished either as *meditative states* or as *spheres of being*. As meditative states, they are known as “**bases**” (*āyatana*), as evident from their names of the 4 formless bases (above), which are collectively called the “formless bases” (*arūpāyatana*).¹³⁸

As inhabited realms where beings with formless dhyana dwell, they are known as “**spheres**” (*avacara*, “moving down or about”). These inhabited realms are, as such, known as the “formless spheres” (*arūpāvacara*). [3.12.2.3]

3.11.1.4 The spheres of infinite space [4], of infinite consciousness [3] and of nothingness [2], are progressively finer “stations of consciousness” (*viññāṇa-ṭ,ṭhiti*). The sphere of neither-perception-nor-non-perception [1], however, is *not* a “station” because consciousness there is simply too subtle to be noticed [3.12.2.2].

¹³³ Gethin: “Another example of a common innovation is the Abhidhamma system of five *jhānas* as opposed to the Suttanta system of four. The additional *jhāna* is achieved by distinguishing between *jhāna* that has both *vicāra* and *vitāka*, and *jhāna* that has only *vicāra*; the latter kind of *jhāna* corresponds to what is called the *dhyānāntara* to Sarvāstivādin Abhidharma literature, though *avitakko vicāra-matto samādhi* is distinguished at S 4:363.” (2001: 14 n59). See Abhs:BSR 218. Effectively, the 5th dhyana of the Abhidhamma is the same as the 4th dhyana of the suttas.

¹³⁴ A 2:128 f; ThaA 2:42.

¹³⁵ VA 1:159; MA 1:2; AA 3:135; ItA 2:135; CA 11; PmA 1:367, 374.

¹³⁶ On how this occurs with the letting go of the dhyana-factors, see SD 24.11 (3 + 4).

¹³⁷ For suttas related to the progression from one attainment to another, see SD 24.11 (3.2).

¹³⁸ On how one progresses through the formless dhyanas, see SD 24.11 (5).

3.11.2 The bliss of the attainments

3.11.2.1 Basically, a **formless attainment** (*ārūpa*) is a dhyanic or transomatic¹³⁹ state that is free from both the “perception of sense-reactions” (*paṭigha,saññā*) and the “perception of diversity” (*nanat-ta,saññā*). This means that the mind is fully free from having to deal with any sense-experience (that is, any external sense-objects)—there are no sense-stimuli to react to. There is also no more idea of the diversity of “otherness”: the mind does not even have any of its own sense-experiences.

3.11.2.2 The brahmas of the 1st formless-dhyana heavens neither have to process any sense-experiences nor to deal with any mentally projected ideas. This is the realm of “infinite space” [4], that is free from all other perceptions: they only have a subtle experience of **infinite space** (*ākāśānanca*). These brahmas blissfully experience *boundless space*: they are, as it were, “all space.”

3.11.2.3 The brahmas of the 2nd formless heaven, that of “infinite consciousness” [3], have let go of even the idea of “infinite space,” so that they are blissfully left with only consciousness *free* from even the idea of *infinite space*. This is their profound bliss of **infinite consciousness** (*viññāṇaṇca*). These brahmas blissfully experience only *boundless consciousness*: they are, as it were, “all pure mind.”

3.11.2.4 The brahmas of the 3rd formless heaven, that of “nothingness,” [4] have let go of even the notion of “infinite consciousness,” so that they are now free of that which is *conscious* of empty space. They are blissfully left with only nothingness in the real, blissful sense of the word. This is their profound bliss of **nothingness** (*ākiñcañña*). These brahmas blissfully experience only “nothingness”: they have, as it were, truly and blissfully, “nothing on the mind.” Psychologically, this existence is the pinnacle of consciousness: this is as far as consciousness can be purified and liberated.

3.11.2.5 In meditative or spiritual terms, however, there is another level, and this is the highest point of the formless heavens, and the peak of all existence. It comprises beings who are “**neither-percipient-nor-non-percipient**” (*n’eva,saññī,nāsaññī*). The consciousness of these beings are so subtle that it can neither be said to exist nor not exist.

How does one get to such a level? By letting go of the idea of “nothingness” itself! The mind, as we know it, does not even have any idea of *nothing*: there is neither conception nor perception for as long as that state or existence lasts.

Such a brahma lives for 84,000 aeons or world-cycles. Yet, despite their astronomically long lifespan, they still fall away (die) from their heaven, which means they will fare according to their past karma and be reborn in the lower realms, even in the hells.¹⁴⁰ In other words, all the realms are part of samsara, the cycle of rebirths and redeaths.

3.12 THE ABODES OF BEINGS AND STATIONS OF CONSCIOUSNESS

3.12.1 Classification of beings by consciousness¹⁴¹

3.12.1.1 All the beings of **the 31 planes of existence** we have been discussing are really different manifestations of “conscious bodies” (*sa,viññāṇaka,kāya*), that is, of bodies and consciousness in the different realms, from the lowest to the highest in the sentient universe. There are, however, as we have

¹³⁹ On “transomatic,” see SD 54.2e (2.3.5.1).

¹⁴⁰ On how heavenly beings fall into the hells, see (**Nānā,karaṇa**) **Puggala S 1** (A 4.123), SD 23.8a.

¹⁴¹ The same notes on the 9 abodes of beings differently arranged are given at SD 23.14 (3.1 + Table 3).

noted, 2 anomalies or exceptions—states that do not seem to have consciousness—that is, the “non-percipient beings” (*asañña,sattā*) [8] [3.10.2.1] and the “neither-percipient-nor-non-percipient” brahmas [1] [3.11.2.5].

3.12.1.2 The Mahā,nidāna Sutta (D 15) speaks of “the 7 stations of consciousness and 2 bases” (*satta viññāṇa-ṭ,ṭhitiyo dve āyatanāni*),¹⁴² which, by way of “delimitation by number” (*ganaṇa,pariccheda*, KhpA 86), are known as **the 9 abodes of beings** (*nava satt’āvāsa*), a classification beings according to their “abode” of consciousness.¹⁴³

The “9 abodes of beings” model comprises 2 submodels: the “consciousness” model which classifies beings according to the nature of their consciousness into **7 stations**, and the “bases” model unrelated to consciousness. The 1st submodel—**the 7 stations**—are as follows.¹⁴⁴

Station 1	beings different in body, different in perception (such as humans, the sense-world gods);	<i>nānatta,kayā nānatta,saññino</i>
Station 2	beings different in body, same in perception (that is, the 4 subhuman realms);	<i>nānatta,kayā ekatta,saññino</i>
Station 3	beings same in body, different in perception (such as the Ābhassara devas);	<i>ekatta,kayā nānatta,saññino</i>
Station 4	beings same in body, same in perception (such as the Vehapphala devas);	<i>ekatta,kayā ekatta,saññino</i>
Station 5	the base of infinite space;	<i>ākiñcaññāyatana</i>
Station 6	the base of infinite consciousness; and	<i>viññāṇaṅc’āyatana</i>
Station 7	the base of nothingness.	<i>ākiñcaññāyatana</i>

3.12.1.3 The 2nd submodel is that of **the 2 bases** (*āyatana*), which are not exactly “stations” for consciousness, since it is either absent or very subtle: they are as follows:

Base 1	the base of non-percipient beings; and	<i>asañña,sattā</i>
Base 2	the base of neither-perception-nor-non-perception. [Table 3]	<i>n’eva,saññā,nāsaññāyatana</i>

The last two—(11) *asañña,sattā* and (1) *n’eva,saññā,nāsaññāyatana*—are called “bases” (not “stations”) because therein consciousness ceases in a sort of suspended animation or total hibernation, or that consciousness is so subtle that it cannot be said to exist or not to exist.

Note also that **the 5 pure abodes** (*suddh’āvāsa*) are listed *neither* amongst the 7 stations *nor* amongst the 2 bases (see note in Table 3.12.3).

3.12.2.3 When the 2 submodels—those of the 7 stations and of the 2 bases—are combined, they are together called “**the 9 abodes of beings**” (*nava,satt’āvāsa*) [Table 3].¹⁴⁵

Here, **āyatana** is rendered as “base,”¹⁴⁶ referring to a realm or level of meditation, and also where it refers to the senses.¹⁴⁷ **Avacara** (literally, “wandering down”) is translated as “sphere” but sometimes as “realm.”¹⁴⁸

¹⁴² D 15,33-34/2:68-70 (SD 5.17); see also D 2:68 f :: DA 2:508 f.

¹⁴³ D 3:263, 288; A 4:401; Khp 4 :: KhpA 86 ff)

¹⁴⁴ See **Mahā Nidāna Sutta** (D 15,33-34/2:69 f), SD 5.17. At Sn 1114, the Buddha is said to know “all the stations of consciousness.”

¹⁴⁵ D 33,2.2(3)/3:288, 33,3.2(3)/3:263; A 9.24/4:401.

¹⁴⁶ Sometimes, *āyatana* is translated as “sphere” when referring to a meditative base.

¹⁴⁷ On *āyatana*, see **Pañca-t,taya S** (M102) @ SD 40a.12 (3.6).

¹⁴⁸ See **Viññāṇa**, SD 17.8a (5.2) & (11.2).

Table 3.12.2: The 9 abodes of beings: 7 stations for consciousness and the 2 bases¹⁴⁹

(1) FORMLESS REALM (*arūpâvacara*) or “formless base” (*arūpâyatana*), esp in meditation attainment

(Base only): ¹⁵⁰	Base of neither-perception-nor-non-perception	<i>n’eva,saññā,nâsaññâyatana</i>
7 th station for consciousness	Base of nothingness	<i>ākīñcaññâyatana</i>
6 th station for consciousness	Base of infinite consciousness	<i>viññāṇaṅc’âyatana</i>
5 th station for consciousness	Base of infinite space	<i>ākāsānaṅc’âyatana</i>

(2) FORM REALM (*rūpâvacara*) or “form base” (*rūpâyatana*), esp in meditation attainment

Not stations:	The pure abodes	<i>suddh’āvāsa</i> ¹⁵¹	} 4 th jhāna
Base only: ¹⁵²	Base of non-percipient beings	<i>asañña,sattā</i>	
4th station for consciousness:	Gods of abundant fruit	<i>vehapphala</i>	} 3 rd jhāna
beings same in body,	Gods of radiant glory	<i>subha.kiṇha</i>	
same in perception	Gods of boundless glory	<i>appamāṇa,subha</i>	
(<i>ekatta,kayā ekatta,saññino</i>)	Gods of limited glory	<i>paritta,subha</i>	
3rd station for consciousness:	Gods of streaming radiance	<i>ābhassara</i>	} 2 nd jhāna
beings same in body,	Gods of boundless radiance	<i>appamāṇ’ābha</i>	
different in perception	Gods of limited radiance	<i>paritta,subha</i>	
(<i>ekatta,kayā nānatta,saññino</i>)			
2nd station for consciousness:	Great Brahmā	<i>mahā brahmā</i>	} 1 st jhāna
beings different in body,	Gods of Brahmā’s ministers	<i>brahmā,purohitā</i>	
same in perception	Gods of Brahmā’s assembly	<i>brahmā,parisajjā</i>	
(<i>nānatta,kayā ekatta,saññino</i>)			

(3) SENSE REALM (*kāmâvacara*)

1st station for consciousness: ¹⁵³	Gods who lord over others’ creations	<i>para,nimmita,vasavattī</i>
beings different in body,	Gods who delight in creating	<i>nimmāṇa,ratī</i>
different in perception	The contented gods	<i>tusita</i>
(<i>nānatta,kayā nānatta,saññino</i>)	The Yāma gods	<i>yāma</i>
	The gods of the 33	<i>tāvatiṃsa</i>
	The gods of the 4 Great Kings	<i>cātum,mahārājika</i>
	Human beings	<i>manussa,loka</i>

THE LOWER REALMS (*āpaya,bhūmi*):

2nd station for consciousness:	The host of asuras [titans]	<i>asura,kāya</i>
<i>beings different in body,</i>	The realm of the departed [ghosts]	<i>pitti,visaya</i>
<i>same in perception</i>	The animal kingdom	<i>tiracchāna,yoni</i>
(<i>nānatta,kayā ekatta,saññino</i>)	The hells	<i>niraya</i>

¹⁴⁹ See D 15,33-34 (SD 5.17 Table 10); D 33,2.3(10)/3:253; *Viññāṇa-ṭ,ṭhiti*, SD 23.14; **Group karma?** SD 39.1 (1.4).

¹⁵⁰ This is called a “sphere” (*avacara*), not a “station” (*ṭhiti*), because the consciousness is extremely subtle here so that it cannot be said to exist or not exist.

¹⁵¹ **The pure abodes** (*suddh’āvāsa*), the 5 highest of the form worlds (*rūpa,loka*), are not “stations for consciousness.” They are inhabited only by non-returners who will reach their last birth to attain nirvana. Hence, it is not a rebirth-sphere but a “way-station.” For the abodes, see (3.10.1). See D 3:237, M 3:103, Vbh 425, Pug 42-46; cf D 3:253; A 4:39; also *Viññāṇa-ṭ,ṭhiti*, SD 23.14.

¹⁵² This is not a “station for consciousness” because all cognitive activities are suspended here. As soon consciousness arises in a being there, he vanishes from that world. (D 1,2.31/1:28, 24,2.20/3:33), SD 63.3.

¹⁵³ The first 6 are the sense-world deva-realms, the lowest of the celestial realms.

4 Tāvatiṃsa and the gods—evaluations

4.1 THE 3 WORLDS

4.1.1 Tāva,tiṃsa (Skt *trāyastriṃśa*) [2.2.1] is a heaven of the sense-world. Its beings are still sense-based, dependent on sense-pleasures, although these are much more refined than the physical pleasures of the humans. Even then, Tāva,tiṃsa is only 3rd of the 6 sense-world heavens, the lifespan of the highest of which is 128,000 celestial years. [2.2.1.1]

4.1.2 Beyond the sense-world are **the form world** (*rūpa,loka*) and **the formless world** (*arūpa,loka*). The natural state of the beings of these realms is that of constant dhyanic bliss, that is, an enjoyment of supra-sensual or transsomatic mental pleasure and peace, along with various psychic powers. The “form” beings are characterized by a beautiful *radiance*, while the “formless” beings highly energized beings.

In either case, they are, as a rule, invisible to us, but may materialize themselves so that they are visible to us when they visit earth, especially to meet the Buddha or the arhats, who are also able to visit these supra-sensual beings in their own realm. Unlike the Buddha or the arhats, most of these celestial beings are still unawakened.

4.2 A LIVING MYTHOLOGY

4.2.1 Buddhist mythology is one of the ancient mythologies that have survived to this day. The profoundly rich classical Greek mythology, sadly, has been supplanted by the Judaeo-Christian religions, and lies dormant in the dusty attics of western culture, making occasional but significant appearances in the metaphors and figures of language, literature and psychology.

Greek mythology clearly outshines the Judaeo-Christian theology in vital ways. While Judaeo-Christian theology is the language of power and dominance of God over man, Greek mythology celebrates our humanity and the ultimate triumph and liberation of the human spirit.

4.2.2 A recurrent theme in Greek mythology is that man (that is, us), despite our frailty and lack of divine foresight, have the capacity to endure great suffering and perform superhuman tasks that attests to our divine potential. The Greek gods may have died but they live on in us. Greek mythology lives on in our minds, unimposed by religious domination, but through our natural need and zeal for expressing our true divinity.

4.2.3 Christian theology sings of God’s greatness and good, and man’s insignificance. Its themes of power and dominance spur its believers to belittle, rape and plunder non-believers, the world, even the helpless young. Greek mythology relates the mischiefs and misgivings of the gods amongst themselves and towards humans. As a rule, humans live moral lives of heroic diligence and surprising wisdom. Such is the universal spirit of the great myths.

4.3 A PSYCHOSOCIOLOGICAL EVALUATION

4.3.1 A psychosociological evaluation of heavenly life, such as that of Tāvatiṃsa, is instructive for us. Those of us who, despite claiming to be Buddhist, are profoundly caught in the habit of measuring themselves and others, are like God-believers, immersed in the notions of power and plenty. Like in the Buddhism of imperial China,¹⁵⁴ we may claim to dream of the Gods, or even Buddhas,¹⁵⁵ which, by that very

¹⁵⁴ On how dreams legitimized Buddhist views and actions in imperial China, see SD 40b.4 (4.3.3.6).

“fact,” legitimizes our plans or power.¹⁵⁶ But then, we simply have failed to understand the nature of the gods and the Buddha’s teaching on impermanence.

4.3.2 Another wrong practice arising from a lack of Dharma understanding and a strong delusion is **the worship of the gods**, such as Sakra, the lord of the 33.¹⁵⁷ Instead of worshipping gods (who, even if they do exist, are unawakened), the Buddha teaches **the recollection of deity** (*devatānussati*). Note here that the recollection is on a state, *deity* (the goodness that makes a god), not an entity.¹⁵⁸

In other words, we should internalize **deity** (*devatā*), especially as love (*mettā*), ruth (*karuṇā*), joy (*muditā*) and peace (*upekkhā*), that is, **the 4 divine abodes**. This is not only for our own benefit, but should be cultivated boundlessly and to be spread unconditionally to all beings, to all existence.¹⁵⁹

4.3.3 Mythology in perspective

4.3.3.1 A **myth** is “literally a true story, meaning ancient or traditional stories that contain significant cultural meanings often conveyed through supernatural characters or events.”¹⁶⁰ **Mythology** is a set of such beliefs and truths that uses conceptual language but relates narratives of a deeper meaning and often distinct from its surface meaning relating to our daily experiences, often bringing into relief the true meaning and purpose of life. We can certainly say all this of Buddhist mythology.

4.3.3.2 Before we can examine the “**deeper meaning**” of a Buddhist myth, we should clear any misconception of the apparent realities of the Buddhist imagination. The early Buddhists, for example, imagined that the moon, the sun and the stars were lorded over or controlled by deities. In other words, they have personified these heavenly bodies—just as in ancient Greek mythology, Apollo or Helios (the personification of the sun) drives the golden chariot of the sun daily across the sky, returning to the east at night.

We have today better information on the astrophysics of heavenly bodies, their nature and movements. However, such an understanding is built on centuries of search, research and understanding of nature and science. Even today, we need to understand such science to really understand what we are talking about. Even science—our current understanding of the life and universe—is still evolving.

In this sense, knowledge is useful *for the time being*, that it is always provisional until we truly understand things for ourselves at our level. There are higher levels that we have not yet attained. The point is that there are many others, especially the young, who need to feel **the joy of stories** and **the spirit of fairy tales and myths** so that they have a rich start in experiencing and feeling the power and plasticity of global language and human culture, and master their truth and beauty as they mature.

¹⁵⁵ Gotama Buddha, who has passed away into nirvana, can clearly be subject of a dream, but it is impossible that he would be delivering a dream message. The latter-day Cosmic Buddhas or Transcendental Bodhisattvas may perhaps favour the ultra-pious but, then again, they are mythical figures like the gods themselves. When we pursue to believe in such “truths,” then we are invoking blind faith and pious superstition.

¹⁵⁶ A prominent local Buddhist in my own time who wrote Buddhist songs once told that his songs were “authentic” because the gods loved them! He dreamed it so. When we have a deep desire for fame or status, such dreams simply reflect our deep-set desires or are self-fulfilling prophecies.

¹⁵⁷ See SD 15.13 (2 + 5) & SD 2.1 (2-4).

¹⁵⁸ See *Devatānussati* + SD 15.13.

¹⁵⁹ On the 4 divine abodes, see *Brahma, vihara*, SD 38.5.

¹⁶⁰ D Matsumoto (ed), *Cambridge Dictionary of Psychology*, 2009: Myth.

4.3.3.3 We should not take a myth as a historical fact, although it may be based on history. For example, despite our claiming divine protection, Buddhism in Central Asia¹⁶¹ and in India¹⁶² was given the death-blow by Turkish marauders by the 13th century. Neither the 4 great kings nor their celestial armies, or any devas, or even worldly forces, came to the rescue of the Buddhists. Buddhism was effectively exterminated from these regions, just the Holy Roman Empire in Europe collapsed, and neither God nor his angels (if they existed) could come to its rescue.

In important ways, mythology *is* at work even in these dramatic events. They tell us what we can conveniently call **the Ozymandias myth**,¹⁶³ that even the mighty, the wealthy and the worldly, even the Buddhists and their large opulent monasteries, that their submission to worldly wealth and assumption of worldly power only bring their own destructive deserts. The ways of the world keep them in the world, like desert sand blown about by desert winds in a desert of time.

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¹⁶¹ See SD 39.1 (7.3.2).

¹⁶² See SD 39.1 (7.3.3).

¹⁶³ "Ozymandias" (1818) was a poem by English poet, Percy Bysshe Shelley, about a desert traveler who comes across the ruins a great ancient empire (probably the great Persian empire before the time of Alexander the Great), but only some ruins remained of it. See Reflection R146.