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

http://dharmafarer.org
THE MINDING CENTRE, based in Singapore, is part of Piya Tan’s Dharma ministry. It was founded in 2006 to provide Dharma-based non-religious service to those in need of counsel and solace. It also serves as a haven and hub for those seeking Dharma by way of meditation and education, Sutta study and translation, and spiritual experience. The Centre also supports and promotes Piya Tan in his full-time Buddhist and related work.

Courses:  [http://themindingcentre.org](http://themindingcentre.org)

THE SUTTA DISCOVERY SERIES is part of the Living Word of the Buddha project which aspires to encourage and facilitate Buddhist Studies, both in a Dharma-inspired and academic manner for personal development as well as outreach work on a local and global scale. The Minding Centre and the Living Word of the Buddha project are motivated and guided by the vision of mere Buddhism.

Suttas:  [http://dharmafarer.org](http://dharmafarer.org)

THE MERE BUDDHIST VISION. We aspire to learn, teach and practise mere Dharma, or “non-religious Buddhism,” that is, Buddhism as simple as possible, as the Buddha Dharma, so that it is open to all who seek true stillness and liberating wisdom. We aspire to compassionately and joyfully proclaim the possibility, necessity and urgency of gaining spiritual liberation in this life itself—at least as a streamwinner, with or without dhyana—in keeping with the Okkanti Saṁyutta (S 25).

*Mere Buddhism is easy: live it and be free*

Piya Tan (Tan Beng Sin), 1949-
Title: Saṅkhitta Devatā Dīpanī (A short guide to deity)

or “A guide to the gods”

YOU can help Buddhism grow

Your pledge & support bring Dharma to others:

- Print Dharma and related books, and Internet Dharma
- Pledges for full-time Dharma work and global ministry (yearly budget $48,000)

*WE GIVE

for the sake of a beautiful mind,

as a support for the mind (in inner peace).

(Aṭṭha Dāna Sutta, A 8.31/4:236)
KEEPING BUDDHISM CENTRED

Sutta translations: http://dharmafarer.org

As people today become more aware of Buddhism, many seek the simple original teachings of the Buddha. For over two decades now, Piya Tan has been inspired by this idea of “mere Buddhism.” In this connection, he has set up the Minding Centre and Pali House.

The Minding Centre

A still centre in life’s storms

Email: themindingcentre@gmail.com; hp +65 8211 0879.

Courses: http://themindingcentre.org

Courses: Beginners’ Meditation; Intermediate Meditation; Buddhist Psychology; Psychology of Meditation; Basic Practical Buddhist Counselling; Psychology of Meditation; Psychology of Death and Living, Pali Workshop, etc.

Personal sessions: Meditation coaching; Meditation therapy; Counselling (problems related to work, sleep, stress, anxiety, etc).

Address all mails to: “Pali House,” Blk 248, Jurong East St 24, #08-50, Singapore 600248

Pali House

On Vesak Day, 12th May, 2006, Pali House was born, fulfilling Piya’s long-time dream for living space that is spacious, quiet and conducive for his Dharma work.

- Pali House has one of the most complete set of early Buddhist scripture (texts and translations).
- The translating of the early Buddhist scripture in the Sutta Discovery series is done at Pali House.

Pali House is possible through the generosity of the Buddhist community and various individuals like yourself who have generously and regularly contributed to Piya Tan’s work. He is doing full-time lay Dharma work without any salary. As such, your continued support will greatly help our Dharma work.

How you can help

- Support for Piya Tan’s full time Buddhist work (especially the Sutta Translation & related projects).
- Help with the Dharmafarer website (http://dharmafarer.org) through your expertise and time.
- Introduce people to the the Minding Centre and advertise our activities to your friends, etc.
- Donate to cost of computer peripherals and printing, especially laser printer toner and A4 copy paper.
- Sponsor purchases of Buddhist scriptures, books and materials (for the Sutta Translation library).
- Contribute to the Sutta publication fund (for printing costs of study notes and SD books, etc).
- Encourage relatives and friends to offer dāna together for merit of happy togetherness.
- After making such offerings or acts of merit, make this Dharmafarer aspiration:

  May this merit bring my mind peace and wisdom.
  May I enter the path of streamwinning in this life itself.

To pledge or donate, please make your cheque payable to “The Minding Centre” & mail to:

“Pali House,” Blk 248, Jurong East St 24, #08-50, Singapore 600248.
The Living Word of the Buddha ● Living the Word of the Buddha

SUTTA DISCOVERY
Directly seeing the Buddha’s Teachings

Every 2nd Sunday & 4th Sunday @ 10.45 am-12.30 pm
Venue: Poh Ming Tse
438 Dunearn Road, Singapore 289614. Tel: 6466 0785. Website: http://www.pmt.org.sg
For class info: themindingcentre@gmail.com; hp: 8211 0879.

The most direct way to learn Buddhism is to read and live the Pali suttas which contain some of the oldest records we have of the Buddha’s teachings. As we search these scriptures, we will discover ourselves amidst their stories, teachings and practices, and even take a first step towards spiritual awakening.

This series will also help you learn and master the Pali Canon: to locate suttas, teachings and stories, and have an idea of how Suttas are transmitted and translated. Wherever feasible, comparative studies are made between the Pali, Sanskrit and Chinese (Āgamā) versions of the suttas. Although a very basic knowledge of Buddhism (the 5 Precepts, etc) is helpful, no knowledge of these languages is required for this course. This class is suitable for beginner and mid-range level.

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.
Dharma Drive

The Living Word of the Buddha
The Buddha’s Teachings in the Earliest Texts
The Sutta Discovery series by Piya Tan, beginning in 2002 and still going on.

Make this a gift to a monastic or someone who needs it

This series will also help you learn and master the Pali Canon: to locate suttas, teachings and stories, and have an idea of how Suttas are transmitted and translated. Wherever feasible, comparative studies are made between the Pali, Sanskrit and Chinese (Āgama) versions of the suttas. If you can read this message, you are ready to study the Sutta translations. No deep knowledge of Buddhism is needed. [For 20 reasons for the SD series, see http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/sutta-discovery/printing-the-suttas]

Sutta Discovery (quarterly; ring-bound A4 vols): S$15.00 each (unless otherwise stated) or donation.

For Dharma stewards (supporters): The Dharma Card (8GB Micro SD Card) contains +60 SD vols, sutta teachings (MP3 talks, videos), reflections & books by Piya Tan.

Please order from

The Minding Centre “Pali House,” Blk 248, Jurong East St 24, #08-50, Singapore 600248.
email: themindingcentre@gmail.com ; hp +65 8211 0879
Suttas: http://dharmafarer.org ; courses: http://themindingcentre.org
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 transsomatic 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, vihara (the divine abodes) (SD 38.5) and in Devatā’nu-sati (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

http://dharmafarer.org
Contents

3 The devas

3.1 Deva

3.2 The 26 heavens
  3.2.1 The 3 worlds
  3.2.2 The 5 destinies
  3.2.3 Etymologies of deva
  3.2.4 Meanings of deva
  3.2.5 Etymology of manussa

3.3 Living conduct of the devas
  3.3.1 Food
  3.3.2 Abode
  3.3.3 Sexuality and procreation
  3.3.4 Birth
  3.3.5 Death and rebirth

3.4 The 4 great kings
  3.4.1 (Introduction)
  3.4.2 The world and the 4 great kings
  3.4.3 (Protectors of Buddhism)
  3.4.4 Other beings inhabiting the 4 great kings’ realms

3.5 The heavens: Earth-bound and space-based. Diagram 3.5: The sense-worlds
  3.5.1 The earth-bound heavens
  3.5.2 The space-based heavens.
  3.5.2.2 Māra’s heaven
  3.5.3 Space and crowdedness
  3.5.4 The space-based heavens of the sense-world

3.6 The Yāma devas
  3.6.1 Meaning of yāma
  3.6.2 Those reborn in Yāma
  3.6.3 Yāma and Yama
  3.6.4 The Tusita devas
  3.6.5 The Nimmāna,rati devas
  3.6.6 The Para,nimmita,vasavatti devas

3.7 The 1st dhyana brahmas
  3.7.1 The stations of consciousness
  3.7.2 Nourishment
  3.7.3 Mahā Brahmā

3.8 The 2nd form dhyana brahmas
  3.8.1 Lifespans
  3.8.2 Stations of consciousness
  3.8.3 Bodies of light

3.9 The 3rd form dhyana brahmas
  3.9.1 Lifespans
  3.9.2 Radiance
  3.9.3 Destruction of the universe

3.10 The 4th form dhyana brahmas
  3.10.1 (The pure abodes and anomalous states)
  3.10.2 (The 2 anomalous states)

3.11 The 4 formless dhyana brahmas
  3.11.1 Attainments
  3.11.2 The bliss of the attainments

3.12 The 9 abodes of beings: the 7 stations for consciousness and 2 bases
  3.12.1 Classification of beings by consciousness
  3.12.2 Table: The 9 abodes of beings

4 Tāvatiṁsa and the gods—evaluations

4.1 The 3 worlds
  4.1.1 (Tāvatiṁsa)
  4.1.2 (The form world, the formless world)

4.2 A living mythology
  4.2.1 (Mythologies)
  4.2.2 (Greek mythology)
  4.2.3 (Theistic mythology)

4.3 A psychosocial evaluation
  4.3.1 (Misuse of mythology)
  4.3.2 (Recollection of deity)
  4.3.3 Mythology in perspective

http://dharmafarer.org
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 mythology 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 brahmās. 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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No</th>
<th>Predominantly</th>
<th>Predominantly</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1-26</td>
<td>devas, <em>deva</em> blissful</td>
<td>good (happy) destinies (<em>sugati</em>)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28</td>
<td>humans, <em>manussa</em> mixed</td>
<td>bad (suffering) destinies (<em>duggati</em>)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29</td>
<td>animal birth, <em>tiracchāna, yoni</em> predictable</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>preta-realm, <em>petti, visaya</em> addictive</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31</td>
<td>hell-beings, <em>nerayika</em> crowded, violent</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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 deva blissful 
(2) 27 humans manussa mixed } good (happy) destinies (sugati) 
(3) 28 titans asura mixed 
(4) 29 animals tiracchāna predictable } bad (suffering) destinies (duggati) 
(5) 30 pretas peta addictive 
(6) 31 hell-beings nerayika 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 kāmāvacara), 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 dhyanas 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 siriyā jotantīti). KhpA 123,9-10

We see here the root Vīv or Vīv, “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, gunehi kilanti (KhpA 123,10).
⁷ The root Vīv is related to the Latin deus, divus, from which we get words like “divine,” “divinity,” etc.

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

3.2.5 Etyomology 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 manussā) (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:

(1) material food; kabaliṅkār’āhāra
(2) contact; phass’āhāra
(3) mental volition; and saṅkhār’āhāra
(4) consciousness. viññāṇ’āhāra (SD 20.6 (2))

The suttas say, “All beings are sustained by food” (sabbe sattā āhāra-ṭṭhitikā). 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 heavens 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 Paññhā S 1 (A 10.27/5:52), SD 85.15, Mahā Paññhā 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 Tāvatiṣa 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). 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 Tāvatiṣa 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.

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-dhyāna Ābhassara heaven. He thinks he has created this empty brahma-mansion by his own divine fiat.

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).

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]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Vasavatt</th>
<th>Wife</th>
<th>Children</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sunimitta</td>
<td>Visākhā</td>
<td>[unattested];</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suyāma</td>
<td>Sirimā</td>
<td>[unattested];</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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 1,2-2-6/1:17-19 (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.
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).
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 Tāvatiṣa [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 Tuṣita heaven (the 4th heaven) become intimate by merely holding hands. The devas of the Nimmana,raṭṭi 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! In other words, the more sensitive they are to pleasure, the more quickly and fully they feel satisfied and at peace with themselves.\(^\text{27}\)

\(^{19}\) D 1:218; A 8.36/4:243; § 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, the appear to 5-10 years old. The Pali tradition, however, says that they arise almost fully mature, that is, about 16 years old.

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

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 brahasmas of the form-world heaven, as we have noted, are born fully clothed.

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, āyu-k,khaya
2. the exhaustion of merit, puñña-k,khaya
3. the exhaustion of food, or āhāra-k,khaya
4. through anger, kopena

(1) the exhaustion of lifespan, āyu-k,khaya
(2) the exhaustion of merit, puñña-k,khaya
(3) the exhaustion of food, or āhāra-k,khaya
(4) through anger, kopena

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 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, dies [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.

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
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 are share the same space as earth and Tāvatiṁsa, 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 celestial realms—hence, he is called Sakra, lord of the devas, sakka devānam ina. For this reason, in Asia, Sakra is the most worshipped of all the celestial deities.

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:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quarter</th>
<th>The Great King</th>
<th>Sanskrit Name</th>
<th>Their Army</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The East</td>
<td>Dhatarattha</td>
<td>Dhṛtarāṣṭra</td>
<td>Gandhabba</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Elf-like Warriors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The South</td>
<td>Virūhaka</td>
<td>Virūdhaka</td>
<td>Kumbhanda</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Orc-like Dwarves</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The West</td>
<td>Virūpakkha</td>
<td>Virūpākṣa</td>
<td>Nāga</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Serpent-beings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The North</td>
<td>Vessavaṇa</td>
<td>Vaiśravaṇa</td>
<td>Yakkha</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(Kuvera)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Yaksha, Troll-like Beings</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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, 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 footsolders and warriors, reminiscent of the Trolls, Orcs, Uruk-Hai, Dragons, Dwarves and Balrogs of Middle-Earth. 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, 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,
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 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. **khīḍḍā, padosikā** — “defiled by play”
2. **mano, padosikā** — “defiled by mind”
3. **sita, valāhakā** — “the cool-cloud riders”
4. **unha, valahakā** — “the warm-cloud riders”
5. **candimā deva, putta** — the moon deity
6. **suriya deva, putta** — the sun deity

Like the Tāvatiṣa 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”)

(“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 pleasures of the Nandana grove \(^{[2.2.1.2]}\) and the Phārusaka grove\(^{48}\) in Tāvatiṣa, and the Cittalatā grove\(^{49}\) in Tusita. The Khiddā, padosikā are so called because they are corrupted and destroyed by play (*khīḍḍāya 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 are reborn in the hells.\footnote{D 1,45-46/1:19 f (SD 25,2).}

**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).\footnote{D 1,45-46/1:19 f (SD 25,2); AA 1:114,9-23; AA 3:147,17.} 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]

| 21 | Lords of others’ creations (para,nimmita,vasavatti) | 16,000 cy | **HAPPY DESTINIES (sugatī):** |
| 22 | Those who delight in creation (nimmāna, rafti) | 8,000 cy |
| 23 | The contented (tusita) | 4,000 cy |
| 24 | The Yāma devas (yāma) | 2,000 cy |
| 25 **The 33** (tāvatiṃsa) | 1,000 cy |
| 26 | The 4 great kings (cātum, mahā, rājika) | 500 cy |
| 27 | Human beings (manussa) | variable |

**Diagram 3.5.** The sense-worlds (the heavens are numbered)\footnote{The Sense-spheres (kāmāvacara).}

**“The descents”** (apāya):

| 28 | asuras or titans (asura,kāya) | unspecified |
| 29 | animals (tiracchāna,yoni) | unspecified |
| 30 | pretas (petti, visāya) | unspecified |
| 31 | hell beings (niraya) | unspecified |

**SUFFERING DESTINITIES (duggatī):**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>10 courses of wholesome karma motivated by non-attachment, loving-kindness and wisdom</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>10 courses of unwholesome karma motivated by greed, hate and delusion</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

[cy = celestial years]

**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 (bhūmāni bhūtāni) because they dwell on Mt Sumeru.\footnote{The lifespans here follow the Vibhanga scheme, which progressively doubles for each of the 6 heavens [2.2.1.1]. The Abhidhammattha,sangaha scheme progressively quadruples (catugguna) for each of them (Abhs:BRS 196). Ge- thin’s diagram has a list of different figures for the sense-world heavens, i.e, 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).} 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

\footnote{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 extrapatial (“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, rati 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, nimmitas, vasavatti, 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 Abhidhāma, 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 apāya, see A Comprehensive Compendium of Abhidhamma, Abhs:BRS 189.
colony, known as terms of venery ("venery" is an ancient word "hunting"),\textsuperscript{62} that is, they are hunted for food and for sport by humans and other animals.\textsuperscript{63}

\textbf{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 “shades\textsuperscript{64} 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.\textsuperscript{65}

\textbf{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 torments\textsuperscript{66} are implicit teachings (neyy’attha),\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{68}

The most crowded of these hells is \textit{Avīci}, “uninterrupted,” and is sometimes called the “great hell” (mahā,niraya).\textsuperscript{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 cramped and inner violence that constantly floods our being no matter where we are, even in the holiest or heavenliest place.\textsuperscript{70}

\textbf{3.5.4} The space-based heavens of the sense-world

\textbf{3.5.4.1} While the two lowest heavens of the sense-world—those of the 4 great kings [3.4] and of Tāvatiṃsa [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.

\textbf{3.5.4.2} The asuras (literally, “not-gods, anti-gods”) are a special class of the suffering-realm beings not usually listed among 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 Tāvatiṃsa led by Sakra and his 33 devas. In other words, they are “fallen gods”\textsuperscript{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 Tāvatiṃsa 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.\textsuperscript{72}

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

\textsuperscript{63} For other terms of venery, see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_English_terms_of_venery\_by\_animal.

\textsuperscript{64} See OED, sv manes (1).

\textsuperscript{65} On the evolution of the pretas, see SD 48.1 (6.4).

\textsuperscript{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.

\textsuperscript{67} See Neyy’attha Nīt’attha S (A 2.3.5+6), SD 2.6b.

\textsuperscript{68} See Pātāla S (S 36.4), SD 2.25; SD 2.23 (3); SD 89.10 (1); SD 53.16 (2).

\textsuperscript{69} DA 3:855; AA 2:256.

\textsuperscript{70} Further on suffering states, see Abhs:BR S 189 f.

\textsuperscript{71} On the origins of the asuras, see SD 15.5 (3.7.1).

\textsuperscript{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 Tāvatimśa gods and the asuras).

These gods and their exploits remind us of Norse mythology, where the gods of Asgard, 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 Tāvatimśa, 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 Tāvatimśa. 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” (dibbhaṁ sukhaṁ yātā pa-yātā sampattā’ṭi 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 Tāvatimśa 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 ðēs, “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 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.
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,duṭṭa Sutta (M 130) and the (Yama) Deva,duṭṭa Sutta (A 3.35). This may be due to their common origin as the Vedic deity Yama with whom the dead was united (Ṛg 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 unclear since the preta-s do not form a realm but exist “free-range” (visaya); hence, they are collectively called the “preta-range” (peṭṭi-visaya).

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 allegory for karma and rebirth. In the older (Yama) Deva,duṭṭa Sutta (A 3.35), he has 3 divine messengers (deva,duṭṭa), that is, an old man (decay), a sick man (disease) and a corpse (death). In a more developed discourse, the (Majjhima) Deva,duṭṭa 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.

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.

3.6.3.3 Although Yama is called a king (yama,rāja), he is not even the “lord of death,” a role given to Māra as maccu,māra. 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 free 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. 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! The Tusita devas are so called because they are full of joy (tuṭṭhā pahatthātī tusitā).
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. 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. 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.

Gotama arises in Tusita as Seta,ketu, and the coming future buddha, Metteyya, is now living there, too. Tusita is also the abode of every Bodhisattva's parents.

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. They are so called because they delight in their own creations. They can create any form in any colour. The lord of the Nimmāna,ratī heaven is called Sunimmita.

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 Kāmûppapatti 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’ūpapattiya) as being of the following 3 kinds:

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 Cūḷavamsa: 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 1:47f.
95 Mahv 32.73.
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.

http://dharmafarer.org
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). They are described as “beings who desire the creation of others so that they have them under their power” (parehi nimmite kāme vasam vattentiti paranimmitta,vasavattino) [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’upajivī no uṭṭhāna,phal’ūpajivī) (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.

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, cosmollogically, 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) (kāmōvacara), 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 dhyanic meditation.

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 dhyanic (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 loving-kindness, compassion, gladness and equanimity. 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.
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). 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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Lifespan</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>great Brahmā;</td>
<td>1 aeon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>Brahmā’s ministers;</td>
<td>½ aeon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>Brahma’s assembly or retinue.</td>
<td>¼ aeon</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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 feel joy, 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; ābhassara 8 aeons
16 Boundless radiance; appamāṇābha 4 aeons
17 Limited radiance. paritt’ābha 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). 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 Appamāṇābha, 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 the 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, feeding on zest [joy], 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.
118 They are said to be “mind-made” (mano, mano) because they are reborn by way of the dhyana-mind (jhāna, manena) (DA 1:110).
119 “Zest,” pītī, 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 (sankhāra-k, khandha), and it may be described as “joyful interest.”
luminous, moving about through space, glorious—and they stay like that for a very long time. 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 brahmās have mastered the 3rd dhyana in their previous life so that they are born into the 3rd-dhyana form-realm. They comprise these 3 levels (with their lifespans listed):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Time</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Radiant glory;</td>
<td>subha,kiṇha [Comy subha,kiṇṇa]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boundless glory;</td>
<td>appamāṇa,subha</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limited glory.</td>
<td>paritta,subha</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.9.1.2 Although the Nānā Karāṇa Sutta (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. 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 brahmās are called Subha,kiṇha, “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.

3.9.2.2 In terms of abode (āvāsa), the Subha brahmās share the same mental body and feel the same 3rd-dhyana bliss [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.
The joy of the Subha,kinha brahmas reflect their 3rd-dhyanic ambience, where zest (pīṭī) has settled, leaving a more placid joy that is serenely pervasive and absorbing,\textsuperscript{127} unlike the 1st-dhyanic Ābhassara brahmas who express their exuberant joy aloud (D 3:219).

\textbf{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-dhyanic 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,kinha heaven [3.9.1.1].\textsuperscript{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-dhyanic realms [3.10.2.2].\textsuperscript{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-dhyanic form-world. The rest of the 4th-dhyanic world (the pure abodes) and the whole of the formless world remain intact because of their non-physical nature.\textsuperscript{130}

\textbf{3.10 The 4th Form Dhyanic Brahmàs}

\textbf{3.10.1} The 4th-dhyanic brahmas have cultivated dhyana to an excellent or “subtle” (pāṇīta) degree (AA 3:125). This heaven is mostly taken up by the pure abodes (suddhāvāsa) [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:

\begin{align*}
5 & \text{ The peerless} & \text{ akaniṭṭhā} & 16,000 \text{ aeons} \\
6 & \text{ The clear-visioned} & \text{ sudassī} & 8,000 \text{ aeons} \\
7 & \text{ The clear-beauty} & \text{ sudasā} & 4,000 \text{ aeons} \\
8 & \text{ The serene} & \text{ ātappā} & 2,000 \text{ aeons} \\
9 & \text{ The durable} & \text{ avihā} & 1,000 \text{ aeons} \\
10 & \text{ The non-percipient beings} & \text{ asaṅña,sattā} & 500 \text{ aeons} \\
11 & \text{ Abundant-fruit} & \text{ vēha-p,phala} & 500 \text{ aeons} \\
\end{align*}

\textbf{3.10.2} The 4th dhyanic heaven contains the abode of the unique Asaṅña,sattā or non-percipient beings [3.10.2.1], and the highest realm of the form-world, Vēha-p,phala [3.10.2.2]. Both these realms are located just below the pure abodes.

\textbf{3.10.2.1 The non-percipient beings (asaṅña,sattā)} are those erstwhile meditators who have developed dispassion towards perception (saṅñā, virāgāṁ bhāvetvā).\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{132} Their lifespan is 500 aeons.

---

\textsuperscript{127} AA 2:193.
\textsuperscript{128} PmA 1:373 f.
\textsuperscript{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).
\textsuperscript{130} SA 2:204; Vism 13.59-62/420 f. See SD 1.7 (App).
\textsuperscript{131} Vbh 419; Abhsv 5.85/142 = Abhs:WG 200.
\textsuperscript{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. The lifespan is 500 aeons. Non-returners who are reborn there attain nirvana without going anywhere else (VbhA 376). When the universe is destroyed by wind, Veha-p,phala forms the limit of the destruction. (CA 11).

3.11 THE 4 FORMLESS DHYANA BRAHMAS

3.11.1 Attainments

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

1 The base of neither-perception-nor-non-perception n’eva,saññā,naśaññ’āyatana 84,000 aeons
2 The base of nothingness ākiñcaññ’āyatana 60,000 aeons
3 The base of infinite consciousness viññāṇañc’āyatana 40,000 aeons
4 The base of infinite space ākāsānanc’āyatana 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).

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” (viññāna-t,thiti). 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; ThA 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 (āruppa) is a dhyanic or transsomatic\(^\text{139}\) state that is free from both the “perception of sense-reactions” (patiṭha, saññā) and the “perception of diversity” (nana-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 brahmās of the 1\(^{st}\) formless-dhyāna 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 (ākāsānaca). These brahmās blissfully experience boundless space: they are, as it were, “all space.”

3.11.2.3 The brahmās of the 2\(^{nd}\) 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 (viññāṇaṇa). These brahmās blissfully experience only boundless consciousness: they are, as it were, “all pure mind.”

3.11.2.4 The brahmās of the 3\(^{rd}\) 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 (ākīñcaṇaṇa). These brahmās 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.\(^\text{140}\) 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 consciousness\(^\text{141}\)

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, viññānakā, 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 “transsomatic,” see SD 54.2e (2.3.5.1).

\(^{140}\) On how heavenly beings fall into the hells, see (Nānā,karana) 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-t, thitiyo dvē āyatanañi), 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.

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); | nānatta, kāyā nānatta, saññino |
| Station 2 | beings different in body, same in perception (that is, the 4 subhuman realms); | nānatta, kāyā ekatta, saññino |
| Station 3 | beings same in body, different in perception (such as the Ābhassara devas); | ekatta, kāyā nānatta, saññino |
| Station 4 | beings same in body, same in perception (such as the Vehapphala devas); | ekatta, kāyā ekatta, saññino |
| Station 5 | the base of infinite space; | ākiñcānāyatanaya |
| Station 6 | the base of infinite consciousness; and | viññānaḥc’āyatana |
| Station 7 | the base of nothingness. | ākiñcānāyatanaya |

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 | asañña, sattā |
| Base 2 | the base of neither-perception-nor-non-perception. [Table 3] | n’eva, saññā, nāsaññāyatana |

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) [3.12.3].

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

---

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). 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.”
144 D 33, 2.2(3)/3:288, 33.3.2(3)/3:263; A 9.24/4:401.
145 Sometimes, āyatana is translated as “sphere” when referring to a meditative base.
146 On āyatana, see Pañca-t, taya S (M102) @ SD 40a.12 (3.6).
147 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 bases\textsuperscript{149}

(1) Formless Realm (arûpavacara) or “formless base” (arûpâyatahana), esp in meditation attainment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Base only:</th>
<th>Base of neither-perception-nor-non-perception n’eva, saññā, nāsaññâyatana</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>7th station for consciousness</td>
<td>Base of nothingness akiñcaññâyatana</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6th station for consciousness</td>
<td>Base of infinite consciousness viññânaññâyatana</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5th station for consciousness</td>
<td>Base of infinite space âkâsânaññâyatana</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(2) Form Realm (rûpavacara) or “form base” (rûpâyatahana), esp in meditation attainment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Not stations:</th>
<th>The pure abodes suddhâvâsa\textsuperscript{151}</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Base only:</td>
<td>The base of non-perceptible beings asañña, sattâ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4th station for consciousness:</td>
<td>Gods of abundant fruit vehapphala</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>beings same in body,</td>
<td>Gods of radiant glory subha. kîṅha</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>same in perception</td>
<td>Gods of boundless glory appamâna, subha</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(ekatta, kâya ekatta, saññino)</td>
<td>Gods of limited glory paritta, subha</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd station for consciousness:</td>
<td>Gods of streaming radiance âbhassara</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>beings same in body,</td>
<td>Gods of boundless radiance appamâñ’âbha</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>different in perception</td>
<td>Gods of limited radiance paritta, subha</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(ekatta, kâya nânatta, saññino)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd station for consciousness:</td>
<td>Great Brahmâ mahâ brahmâ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>beings different in body,</td>
<td>Gods of Brahmâ’s ministers brahmâ, purohitâ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>same in perception</td>
<td>Gods of Brahmâ’s assembly brahmâ, parisajjâ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(nânatta, kâya ekatta, saññino)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(3) Sense Realm (kâmavacara)

| 1st station for consciousness: | Gods who lord over others’ creations para, nimmita, vasavatthin’va |
| beings different in body, | Gods who delight in creating nimmâna, ratî |
| different in perception | The contented gods tisita |
| (nânatta, kâya nânatta, saññino) | The Yâma gods yâma |
| | The gods of the 33 tâvatiśrasa |
| | The gods of the 4 Great Kings c’âtum, mahârâjika |
| | Human beings manussa, loka |

The Lower Realms (âpaya, bhûmi):

| 2nd station for consciousness: | The host of asuras [titans] asura, kâya |
| beings different in body, | The realm of the departed [ghosts] pitti, visaya |
| same in perception | The animal kingdom tirachchâna, yoni |
| (nânatta, kâya ekatta, saññino) | The hells niraya |

\textsuperscript{149} See D 15, 33–34 (SD 5.17 Table 10); D 33, 2.3(10)/3.253; Viññâna-ñ, thiti, SD 23.14; Group karma? SD 39.1 (1.4).

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

\textsuperscript{151} The pure abodes (suddhâvâsa), the 5 highest of the form worlds (rûpa, 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 Viññâna-ñ, thiti, SD 23.14.

\textsuperscript{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.

\textsuperscript{153} The first 6 are the sense-world deva-realms, the lowest of the celestial realms.
4 Tāvatiṁsa and the gods—evaluations

4.1 THE 3 WORLDS

4.1.1 Tāvatiṁsa (Skt trāyastriṁśa) [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, Tāvatiṁsa 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 PSYCHOSOCILOGICAL EVALUATION

4.3.1 A psychosociological evaluation of heavenly life, such as that of Tāvatiṁsa, 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. 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. 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.

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.

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.” 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 ourself 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.

---

156 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.

157 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.

158 See Devatānussati + SD 15.13.

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

4.3.3 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 Asia\(^1\) and in India\(^2\) was given the death-blow by Turkish marauders by the 13\(^{th}\) 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,\(^3\) 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.

\(181108 181117 181122\)

\(^{1}\) See SD 39.1 (7.3.2).
\(^{2}\) See SD 39.1 (7.3.3).
\(^{3}\) “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.