

Parallel universes¹

Amongst the world religions – indeed, of all the religions in history – Buddhism is perhaps the only one that speaks of parallel universes.² Our universe – with all its suns, moons, galaxies, worlds and beings, terrestrial and non-terrestrial – is not the only one there is. There are numerous other worlds and beings out there. We will here briefly examine the significance of this remarkable teaching of the Buddha.

In the early Buddhist texts, the Indian subcontinent³ was known as Jambu,dīpa (Sanskrit, Jambu,dvīpa), “the Jambul Continent.”⁴ Over 2,500 years ago, the ancient “Indians” (the dominant strata of society then) understandably regarded Jambu,dīpa as being located to the south of the Himalayas – called Mount Sineru or Sumeru – which they vaguely regarded as the cosmic mountain, the axis mundi (“world-hub”), the centre of the universe or galaxy (around which it spins).⁵

According to Buddhist mythology, to the north of Jambu,dīpa, beyond Mount Sineru, was Uttara,kuru, described in the suttas as a continent (*mahā,dīpa*), along with Aparā,goyāna (to the west), and Pubba,vidēha (to the east).⁶ These 4 continents, each surrounded by 500 smaller “islands” (*dīpa*), made up a world system (*cakka,vaḷa*, literally, “wheel-circle”).⁷ Interestingly, the early Buddhist texts (such as the quote above) seem to assume some kind of spinning world “spheres,” which was closer to our modern scientific conception of the universe.

The key passage on early Buddhist cosmology is found in **the (Ānanda) Abhibhū Sutta** (A 3.80, on the greatest extent of the universe to which the teaching is “heard”) and **the Kosala Sutta 1** (A 10.29, a reflection on impermanence), runs thus:

Bhikshus [Monks], as far as the sun and the moon revolve, illuminating the quarters with their light,⁸ there extends **the thousand-fold world-system**. In that thousand-fold world-system there are
a thousand moons,
a thousand suns,

¹ This special double reflection on parallel universes is based on **the Kosala Sutta 1** (A 10.29,2/5:59 f), [SD 16.15](#); **the (Ānanda) Abhibhū Sutta** (A 3.80), SD 54.1; [SD 2.19](#) (10); and Kvu 13.1/476. See also [SD 10.9](#) (8.2.3); [SD 2.19](#) (9.5); [SD 49.8b](#) (15.1.3).

² The brahminical cosmology also speaks of a multiverse, but their earliest references are in the encyclopaedic legendary account called Puranas, the earliest of which is 250 CE (over 6 centuries after the Buddha).

³ We must note that the subcontinent then had no political borders, and people lived mostly in regional tribes, each with its own governing system. However, in the Buddha’s time, we begin to see the rise of an Indian imperialism that reached its apex in Asoka’s empire.

⁴ The *jambul* here is not the familiar “rose-apple” (which is not native to India); it is the black plum: see [SD 16.15](#) (3.1) n.

⁵ The myth of a flat disc-shaped world, supported by 4 world-elephants on the back of a celestial turtle is found neither in the Puranas nor the Epics, and was probably a very late invention.

⁶ **(Ānanda) Abhibhū Sutta** (A 3.80/1:227), SD 54.1; **Kosala Sutta 1** (A 10.29/5.59), [SD 16.15](#).

⁷ Originally, *cakka,vāḷa* (Sanskrit, *caka,vāḍa*) refers to a “ring of mountains.” DA 2:678; SA 1:74; AA 2:34 f; KhA 176; SnA 2:443.

⁸ With reasonable imagination, we should understand this as covering astronomically vast distances, as far as their radiance (magnitude) can be seen—as we today are able to see the astronomically distant heavenly bodies and remote space phenomena.

a thousand Sinerus, the kings of mountains,
a thousand Jambu,dipas [Jambul Continents],
a thousand Western Goyāna continents [Apara,go,yāna],
a thousand Northern Kuru continents [Uttara,kuru],
a thousand Eastern Videha continents [Pubba,videha],
four thousand oceans,
four thousand maharajahs [emperors],
a thousand heavens of the Cātum,mahārājika [the 4 great guardian kings],
a thousand heavens of Yāma [the Yāma devas],
a thousand heavens of Tusita [contented devas],
a thousand heavens of Nimmāṇa,ratī [the devas who delight in creating],
a thousand heavens of Para,nimmita,vasavatti [the devas who lord over the creation of others], and a thousand Brahma worlds.

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

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

Being revulsed with that, he becomes dispassionate toward what is the foremost, not to speak of the inferior. (A 10.29,2/5:59 f), SD 16.15

In early Buddhism, a universe is (among others) often referred to as a “thousand-fold world-system” (*sahassa,loka,dhātu*). Those who have studied the suttas extensively, note that when references are made to astronomical terms, there is a tendency to make use of large numbers in a symbolic way.

The Saṅkhār’upapatti Sutta (M 120), in its teaching on “rebirth through aspiration,” describes the Brahma realm as comprising multiples of thousands of Brahmā-worlds, from a Brahmā of a 1,000-world system, progressively to one of a 2,000-world system, and so on, and finally to one of a 100,000-world system. All these worlds make up only the 1st-dhyana Brahmā world.⁹

In fact, **the (Ānanda) Abhibhū Sutta** (A 3.80), after describing our solar system and its immediate universe, goes on to describe the larger universe as comprising the following:

- (1) a system of 1,000-fold lesser universe (*sahassī cūlanikā loka,dhātu*), or a “small chiliocosm”;
- (2) a system of 1,000,000-fold middle universe (*dvi,sahassī majjhimikā loka,dhātu*), or a “middle chiliocosm,” embracing 1,000 “small chiliocosms”; and
- (3) a system of 1,000,000,000-fold (one-billion-fold) universes (*tisahassī mahā,sahassī loka,-dhātu*), or a “great chiliocosm,” embracing 1,000 “middle chiliocosms.”¹⁰

Hence, “thousand” (*sahassa*) here is not a finite number but simply refers to the immensity of such a universe containing astronomically numerous world-systems. Within such a universe, the Suttas say, there are a “thousand” (astronomically numerous) suns, moons, galaxies, inhabited realms (with humans and non-humans), and gods (or alien races).

⁹ M 120,12-18 (SD 3.4). This excerpt is one of many visions of the happy realms which we can aspire to be born in. However, the Sutta concludes that the best is to aspire to have no rebirths at all! (M 120,37), SD 3.4. On the early Buddhist conception of the universe, see SD 49.8b (15.1.3).

¹⁰ A 3.80/1:227 (SD 54.1). **The Abhidharma,kośa**, a 4th-century-CE Abhidharma thesis by Vasubandhu (Abhk 3:138-141), describes the *tri,sāhasra,mahā,sāhasra,loka,dhātu* in virtually identical terms.

The early Buddhist texts seem to be aware of what we today call “black holes.” **The Andha,kāra Sutta** (S 56.46), for example, opens with the words,

“Bhikshus, there are world-interspaces (*lok’antarika*, “intermundia”), unsupported (*agha*), fathomless (*asamvuta*), regions of blinding darkness and gloom, where the light of the sun and the moon, so powerful and mighty, reach not ... *But darker than this is the ignorance of the 4 noble truths!*” (S 56.46/5:454), SD 53.2

The Commentaries consistently give the following futuristic explanation of “**world-interspaces**” that is reminiscent of what scientists today call the “intergalactic void”:

Between every three spiral world-spheres (*cakka,vāḷa*) there is one world-interspace, like the space between three cart-wheels (or almsbowls, MA) set down so that they touch. This is an “interworld hell,” measuring 8,000 fathoms (*yojana*) [around 900,000 km?]. It is unsupported, that is always open (*nicca,vivaṭa*), and fathomless, that is without an underlying support, and so dark that even eye-consciousness cannot arise. (DA 2:433; MA 4:177; AA 3:126; BA 29)

The Param’attha Mañjusā (Visuddhi,magga Commentary), too, speaks of “world-spheres” or galaxies that “lie adjacent to each other in contact like bowls, leaving a triangular unlighted space between every three” (VismMṬ 199), which is called a “world-interspace” (*lok’antara*).¹¹ Their numbers extend in all directions to infinity on the supporting water’s surface. (The world-sphere is said to rest on “water,” which rests on “wind,” which rests on “space.”)¹²

The Majjhima Commentary adds:

Beings are reborn there because of their having committed some heavy, heinous offence against their parents or righteous recluses and brahmins, or because of some habitual bad deed like killing animals, etc. (MA 4:178)

The three canonical passages on the dark fathomless world-interspaces are all in connection with the conception of the Bodhisattva:

“When the Bodhisattva passed away from Tusita heaven and descended into his mother’s womb, a great immeasurable light surpassing the splendour of the gods appeared ... And even in those unsupported, fathomless world-interspaces, regions of blinding darkness and gloom, where the light of the sun and moon, so powerful and mighty, reach not – there, too, a great immeasurable light surpassing the splendour of the gods appeared.”

(D 14,1.17/2:12; M 123,7/3:120; A 4.127/2:130)

For an ancient religious literature, these Buddhist texts show a remarkable awareness of the universe that was almost modern, and with which we are clearly familiar. However, we should still remember that, in terms of cosmology, these descriptions belong to the sutta narrative, not to be taken literally (*nī’t’attha*). Their import is to be teased out (*neyy’attha*) to help us understand the Dharma better. Take **the Kosala Sutta 1**, quoted above, for example: it is not about the vastness of the universe or the systems that it encompasses. It is a reflection on impermanence.

¹¹ MA 4:178; cf Vism 16.43.

¹² See Vism:Ñ 218 n14.

Furthermore, we must also note what is *not* said. None of these texts, and other related texts, ever mention that there are Buddhas in any of these parallel universes, or beyond. Nor do these texts speak of any “paradise” in any direction, lorded over by a Cosmic Buddha. There is only one historical Buddha and one immense universe, which is conceived as a multiverse. This is as far as Buddhist narrative and mythology go, and their purpose is to illustrate the Dharma of impermanence to an ancient audience with an ancient cosmology.

The early Buddhist cosmological imagination was far advanced of its times – just as our scientific imagination of the universe today is advanced in our own times. However, with the help of modern science and technology, we can stretch that imagination far beyond the early Buddhist imagination. But we should never stretch it beyond what we can really know today. Let the future do that in their turn. We can only say that as we advance, we only know more and more of less and less. Only when we awaken to true reality, we know the all that is nothing.

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