

10

Early Buddhist cosmology

Man and mind, earth and heaven, samsara and nirvana¹
An introduction by Piya Tan ©2011, 2020

SD 57.10 Contents

§§		§§	
1	The roots of early Buddhist cosmology	3.2.1	Evolution and realms
1.1	THE MIDDLE WAY TO AWAKENING	3.2.2	The suffering states
1.2	THE BUDDHA'S AWAKENING		Fig 3.2.2 The wheel of life
1.2.1	The 3 superknowledges	3.2.3	The hell-beings
1.2.2	The significance of the Buddha's awakening	3.2.4	Animals
1.2.3	Avoiding speculativeness	3.2.5	The pretas
1.3	THE RISE OF EARLY BUDDHIST COSMOLOGY	3.2.6	The asuras
1.3.1	Reasons and conditions	3.3	HUMANITY AND GODLINESS
1.3.2	Avoiding ideological extremes	3.3.1	The recollection of deity
1.3.3	The land-sighting bird	3.3.2	The 4 divine abodes
1.3.4	Early Buddhist cosmodycy		
1.3.5	Essence of early Buddhist cosmology	4	A psychology of early Buddhist cosmology
1.4	INDO-ARYAN MYTHOLOGY	4.1	A THREE-TIERED WORLD
1.4.1	Common roots	4.1.1	Competing worlds?
1.4.2	The devas and asuras; the brahmas	4.1.2	Cosmic ecology
1.5	THE WORLD AND ITS CYCLES	4.2	MENTAL WORLDS
	Fig 1.5.1.1 Bird's eye-view of our world	4.2.1	Cosmology and learning
1.5.1	World sphere, world system	4.2.2	The 4 kinds of learners
	Fig 1.5.1.2 The 4 continents	4.2.3	The inner cosmology
1.5.2	The devas and the brahmas	4.3	BUDDHAS AND NIRVANA
1.5.3	Cyclic space-time	4.3.1	With neither beginning nor ending
	Fig 1.5.3.4 The cycle of cosmic destruction	4.3.2	The buddhas and the cosmos
1.5.4	The evolving universe. Fig 1.5.4.		
1.5.5	Evaluation	5	Other universes and worlds
		5.1	WHEN THIS WORLD ENDS
2	The physical universe (chiliocosm)	5.2	MANY BUDDHAS?
2.1	THE SMALL UNIVERSE	5.2.1	One universe, one buddha
2.1.1	The earth and the world system	5.2.2	Many universes, many buddhas?
2.1.2	The physical world (<i>okāsa, loka</i>)	5.3	DANGERS OF A MATERIALIST COSMOLOGY
2.1.3	The existential world (<i>satta, loka</i>)	5.3.1	The 3 wheels
2.2	COSMIC SYSTEMS (MEGAVERSES)	5.3.2	Pretas and paradises
2.2.1	Megaverses	5.4	BENEFITS OF A MYTHICAL COSMOLOGY
	Fig 2.2.1 Ancient Buddhist cosmos & our galaxy	5.4.1	A universe of experience
2.2.2	<i>Loka, dhātu</i>	5.4.2	The brain
2.2.3	The 4 kinds of <i>loka, dhātu</i>		
		6	Cosmology as karma and rebirth
3	A sociology of the 3 worlds	6.1	THE 3 WORLDS AND 31 PLANES
3.1	THE SAMBARIC FAMILY	6.1.1	Worlds and destinies
3.1.1	All life one family	6.1.2	The form world
3.1.2	Man the minder	6.1.3	The formless world
3.1.3	Man the renouncer	6.2	THE 3 WORLDS AS ONTOLOGY
3.2	THE SENSE WORLD	6.3	CONCLUSION

¹ Formerly SD 36.8, 36.15. For an encyclopaedic reference: Punnadhammo, *The Buddha Cosmos*, 2018 (728 pp).

1 The roots of early Buddhist cosmology

1.1 THE MIDDLE WAY TO AWAKENING

1.1.1 The Buddha famously reached awakening by keeping to the “middle way” (*majjhima paṭipadā*).² All his youth, he lived a life surrounded by worldly pleasures and plenty in his 3 mansions (or palaces) in Kapila, vatthu.³ After renouncing the world, having learnt all that the 2 foremost meditation teachers⁴ of the time had to teach, and not finding liberation, he spent 6 painful years of self-mortification.⁵

After the years of austerities, he became so emaciated and weak that he almost died. He was then certain that depriving or destroying the physical body—of “exhausting it” (*kilamatha*)—was not the way to liberation.⁶ Neither was a life that kept feeding the body with pleasure, which only weakens and clouds the mind, the tool for liberation.⁷

1.1.2 Having barely avoided death through self-mortification, the ascetic Gotama⁸ recalled the **1st dhyana** that he experienced as a 7-year-old child in Kapila, vatthu. Then, he realized that he should “fear not the pleasure that has nothing to do with sensual desires and unwholesome states.”⁹ With this crucial knowledge, he turned to dhyana (*jhāna*) meditation,¹⁰ freeing his body and its hindrances, to attain various **superknowledges** through brought his full awakening as the Buddha.¹¹

1.2 THE BUDDHA’S AWAKENING

1.2.1 The 3 superknowledges

The earliest texts tell us that the Buddha’s awakening comprises **these 3 superknowledges** (*abhiññā*), that is:

- (1) the knowledge of the recollection of his own past lives (*pubbe, nivāsanānussati, ñāṇa*)—affirming **re-birth**, that this is not our only life; [1.2.2.1]
- (2) the “divine eye” (*dibba, cakkhu*) [clairvoyance],¹² that is, the knowledge of death and rebirth (of beings) (*cutūpapāta*), or the knowledge of rebirth according to one’s karma” (*yathā, kammūpaga, ñāṇa*)

² **Dhamma, cakka Pavattana S** (S 56.11) + SD 1.1 (3); **Araṇa Vibhaṅga S** (M 139,4), SD 7.8; **Rasiya Gāmaṇi S** (S 42.-12,4), SD 91.3; **Dhamma, dāyāda S** (M 3,8), SD 2.18; SD 1.1 (3).

³ See SD 52.1 (6.1). On Siddhattha’s life of comfort: SD 52.1 (5.1.1).

⁴ These were Ālāra Kālāma and Uddaka Rāma, putta. See esp **Ariya Pariyesanā S** (M 26,15-17), SD 1.11 & SD 52.1 (12).

⁵ On his self-mortification (*atta, kilamathānuyoga*), see **Dhamma, cakka Pavattana S** (S 56.11,3) SD 1.1; **Mahā Saccaka S** (M 36,19-33), SD 1.12 (excerpt) + SD 49.4.

⁶ On sensual pleasure as a mental hindrance (*ñīvaraṇa*), see **Kāma-c, chanda**, SD 32.2. On *kāma* as sexual pleasure, see SD 32.2 (3)

⁷ “Devotion to sensual pleasures” (*kāma, sukh’alīkānuyoga*), fully, “pursuit of the joy of sense-pleasures”: **Dhamma, cakka Pavattana S** (S 56.11,3) SD 1.1.

⁸ The Buddha’s personal name is Siddhattha (Skt *siddhārtha*); his clan (*gotra*) name is Gotama (Skt *gautama*). On the names connected with the Buddha—Siddhattha, Gotama, Kapilavatthu, Sakya—and his ancestry, see Nakamura, *Gotama Buddha* vol 1, 2000:29-54.

⁹ **Mahā Saccaka S** (M 36,31 f), SD 49.4. On the significance of the Bodhisattva’s 1st dhyana: SD 52.1 (5.2.2).

¹⁰ See **Dhyana**, SD 8.4.

¹¹ On the Buddha’s great awakening, see SD 52.1 (17).

¹² The elder **Anuruddha** is foremost amongst the monks with the divine eye (A 1.192/1:23,21). He walks with other monks who have the same power (S 14.15/2:156,3-6), SD 34.6. His clairvoyance can survey over the whole of the thousandfold world system (SA 2:140,13-19) [2.2.3].

—affirming **karma**, that is, we are responsible for our own actions which have consequences from now on. [1.2.2.2]

- (3) the knowledge of the destruction of the influxes (*āsava-k, khaya, ñāṇa*), that is, he has destroyed the “influxes” (*āsava*) of sensual lust (*kāmāsava*), of existence (*bhāv’āsava*), of ignorance (*avijjāsava*),¹³ which makes his an **arhat**,¹⁴ just like others who keep to the 3 trainings of moral virtue, concentration and wisdom.¹⁵ Historically, the Buddha is said to have awakened by reflecting on the nature of de-
pendent arising (*paṭicca, samuppāda*).¹⁶ [1.2.2.3]

1.2.2 The significance of the Buddha’s awakening

1.2.2.1 The Buddha’s 1st superknowledge, that of the recollection of his own past lives [1.2.1 (1)] allows him to recall as many of his past lives as he wishes. Indeed, he has been through practically every realm there is.¹⁷ With this knowledge, he knows how he was reborn in various human forms, various non-human forms (including animal forms) and various divine forms, in other words, in our world and in other worlds, too.¹⁸ With this knowledge, the Buddha knows intimately the existence of **other non-human extra-terrestrial worlds**.¹⁹

1.2.2.2 The Buddha’s 2nd superknowledge is the divine eye or clairvoyance [1.2.1 (2)], with which he is able to know how other beings fare according to **their karma**.²⁰ He sees those who have done moral good arising in the happy celestial worlds, and those who have habitually done bad falling into suffering in subhuman states, that is, amongst the animals, pretas (addictive ghosts), hell-beings and to servile states, such as amongst the gandharvas (*gandhabba*), the kumbhandas (*kumbhaṇḍa*), the nagas (*nāga*), yakshas (*yakkha*) and the suparnas (*supaṇṇa*).²¹

Besides the Buddha, his accomplished arhat monk disciples, such as Moggallāna and Anuruddha, too, are able to recall such past lives and even visit extraterrestrial worlds. The elder **Moggallāna**, for example, visits Mount Meru and Pubba, Videha (the eastern continent) (Tha 1202); Sakra’s Tāvatiṃsa (**M 37, 7-**

¹³ These form the ancient set of the 3 influxes (*āsava*) [SD 30.3 (1.3.2)]; in later suttas, the influx of views (*diṭṭh-āsava*) is added as the 3rd influx’, making them the 4 influxes [SD 30.3 (1.4.2)]: on both sets: SD 56.4 (3.8).

¹⁴ On the Buddha’s awakening as the same as that of the other arhats, see **Sambuddha S** (S 22.58), SD 49.10.

¹⁵ On the 3 trainings (*sikkha-t, taya*), see **(Ti) Sikkhā S** (A 3.88), SD 24.10c; **Sīla samādhi paññā**, SD 21.6; SD 1.11 (5).

¹⁶ On the Buddha’s awakening to the 3 knowledges, see **Sampasādaniya S** (D 27,15-17), SD 10.12; also SD 52.1 (17.1.2).

¹⁷ Technically, the Buddha, before his awakening, was never reborn in the pure abodes (*suddh’āvāsa*), ie, where only non-returners arise to spend their last days before awakening. [6.1.2.2]

¹⁸ The 2 **Mahā Kapi J**’s relate the Bodhisattva’s great compassion even as a monkey who saves his own band of monkeys (J 407/3:369-375) and the life of an ungrateful man (J 516/5:67-74). **Cariyā, piṭaka**, a late canonical work [C:H iii-xii], relates gives accounts of the Bodhisattva as a human, deva, animal, snake, bird and fish. For a list of such births: Rhys Davids. *Buddhist Birth Stories*, 1880:ci.

¹⁹ On the Buddha’s recollection of his own past lives, see SD 57.1 (3.2); on his recollection of others’ past lives, see SD 57.1 (3.3).

²⁰ On the moral context of karma, see SD 57.1 (4).

²¹ These are attendants and soldiers of the 4 great kings (*cātum, mahā, rājika*). The gandharvas or celestial minstrels serve Dhatarattha, the guardian of the east; the kumbhandas (orc-like dwarves) serve Virūdhaka in the south; the nagas or serpent beings serve Virūpakkha in the west; and the yakshas (*yakkha*) serve Vessavaṇa in the north. See SD 54.3a (3.4.2). The suparnas or garudas (*garuḷa*), mortal enemies of the nagas, are bird-like harpies inhabiting the skies between the realm of the 4 great kings and Tāvatiṃsa (Sakra’s heaven of the 33): SD 54.22 (8.2.6.4). Then, there are the asuras (*asura*) or titans [DhA 2.7,55-60, SD 54.22].

21, SD 54.9); and the brahma worlds.²² His other celestial visits are recounted in **the Vimāna, vatthu**. Moggallāna’s encounters with pretas are recorded in **the Peta, vatthu**.

The elder **Anuruddha**, the monk most renowned for the divine eye [1.2.1 (2)], is familiar with the gods and has even lived amongst them (**M 127**, SD 54.10). The elders Moggallāna, Mahā Kassapa, Mahā Kappina and Anuruddha, are recounted in **the (Aparā Diṭṭhi) Aññatarā Brahmā Sutta** (S 6.5), as going to a brahma realm with the Buddha (SD 54.18).

This shows that the Buddha and his great disciples are not only familiar with the nature of other humans, but also of celestial beings, the beings servile to the devas, and those inhabiting the suffering states. Whether we take these non-human beings as historical or mythical, they are often shown to hold wrong views, and, on account of their being unawakened, to have less psychic powers than the Buddha or his disciples have. Indeed, we may see such beings as actors still caught in the vicissitudes of the cosmic stage that is samsara.

Such beings are referred to in stories, partly to entertain the worldly congregation and the unawakened, partly to educate them in the true reality of impermanence and suffering. This is the conventional language of the world: the licence that draws us to stories of mythology and fiction. As psychological myths, such stories only reflect human nature and true reality on the greater cosmic stage as lessons to us in our Dharma understanding and practice. [5.4.1]

1.2.2.3 The Buddha’s 3rd superknowledge is that of the destruction of the influxes of *sensual lust, existence and ignorance* [1.2.1 (3)] and, following that, he understood true reality by way of **conditional-ity**. He has overcome all **lust** through his mastery of the dhyanas with right view. He has understood the true nature of our body as composed of the 4 elements—earth, water, fire and wind²³—and pervaded by consciousness. The Buddha’s conscious body (*sa, viññāṇaka kāya*) is his past karma—the remnants of his 5 aggregates (form, feeling, perception, formations and consciousness) without any clinging.

If we understand the destruction of the influxes as the knowledge (*ñāṇa*), then, his understanding of conditionality is the vision (*dassana*), how he sees it and put into a language for our benefit. Both **the Udāna** (U 1.1-3) and **the Vinaya** (Mv 1.1.1-7) opens with giving an almost identical account of this vision. **The Udāna** recounts them as 3 different occasions, thus:

			<u>time of reflection</u>	<u>dependent arising</u>
• Bodhi Sutta 1	U 1.1/1	SD 83.13	end of week 1 (first watch) ²⁴	forward cycle (<i>anuloma</i>)
• Bodhi Sutta 2	U 1.2/2	SD 83.14	end of week 2 (middle watch)	reverse cycle (<i>paṭiloma</i>)
• Bodhi Sutta 3	U 1.3/2 f	SD 83.15	end of week 3 (last watch)	forward + reverse cycles

The Vinaya account²⁵ is given in an apparent single sequence, suggesting that these 3 events occur one after the other on the same day, that is, the end of week 1, each time after emerging dhyana meditation.

The forward cycle of dependent arising goes thus: “Conditioned by **ignorance**, there are formations; conditioned by formations, there is consciousness; conditioned by consciousness, there is name-and-form; conditioned by name-and-form, there are the 6 sense-bases; conditioned by the 6 sense-bases

²² **S 6.5**, SD 54.3; **A 6.34/3:32-34**, **7.56/4:74-78**; **Tha** 1194-1200.

²³ Fully, these are the 4 great elements (*mahā, bhūta, rūpa*), the 4 primary stuff of existence, what we today understand respectively as solidity or extension (*paṭhavī, dhātu*), fluidity or cohesiveness (*āpo, dhātu*), heat and decay (*tejo, dhātu*), and motion and pressure (*vāyo, dhātu*). See **Mahā Rāhu’ovāda S** (M 11,8-11, with §12 on “space”), SD 3.11; **Mahā Hatthi, pādōpama S** (M 28,6), SD 6.16.

²⁴ The 3 watches of the night are: 1st watch (6-10 pm) (*paṭhama, yāma* or *purima, yāma*), the 2nd or “middle” watch (10 pm-2 am) (*majjhima, yāma*), 3rd or “last” watch (2-6 am) (*pacchima, yāma*); see SD 56.1 (7.2.1).

²⁵ Mv 1.1.1-7 (V 1:1-4). See SD 26.1 (5) The 7 weeks after the great awakening. For a useful comparative study of both sources, see Nakamura, *Gotama Buddha* (vol 1) 2000:197-202.

there is contact; conditioned by contact, there are feelings; conditioned by feelings there is craving; conditioned by craving there is clinging; conditioned by clinging, there is existence; conditioned by existence, there is birth; conditioned by birth, there arise decay and death, sorrow and lamentation, physical and mental suffering, and despair. Such is the **arising** of this whole mass of suffering.” (U 1.1 = Mv 1.1.2)

The reverse cycle is as follows: “With the ending of **ignorance**, formations end; with the ending of formations, consciousness ends; with the ending of consciousness, name-and-form ends; with the ending of name-and-form, the 6 sense-bases end; with the ending of the 6 sense-bases, contact ends; with the ending of contact, feelings end; with the ending of feelings, craving ends; with the ending of craving, clinging ends; with the ending of clinging, existence ends; with the ending of existence, birth ends; with the end of birth, there end decay and death, sorrow and lamentation, physical and mental suffering, and despair. Such is the **ending** of this whole mass of suffering.” (U 1.2 = Mv 1.1.4)

The “forward and reverse” cycle combines both these cycles.

1.2.2.4 The Buddha, on account of his awakening, has no desire for any kind of **existence**, especially the suffering-ridden sense-base life. He has also truly understood the impermanent, unsatisfactory and nonself nature of the form world of the devas, and the formless world of the brahmas, he has no desire for them, nor will he be reborn in either of these worlds, too. Finally, rid of all ignorance, the awakened one, the Buddha, is the true “**knower of worlds**” (*loka, vidū*).²⁶ “Worlds” here is best understood and described by the term “the all” (*sabba*), famously expounded in the Sabba Sutta (S 35.23).

According to **the Sabba Sutta** (S 35.23), the “**all**” (*sabba*) that there *is*, are the 6 internal sense-faculties—the *eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind*—and their respective 6 external sense-objects—*form, sound, smell, taste, touch and thoughts*. There is nothing knowable, meaningful nor existing beyond this.²⁷ This short but significant Sutta gives us a broad hint on the nature of the early Buddhist universe.

There are **the 3 worlds**: the sense-world (*kāma, loka* or *kāma, dhātu*), the form world (*rūpa, loka* or *rūpa, dhātu*) and the formless world (*arūpa, loka* or *arūpa, dhātu*). Beings of the sense-world—including the devas (*deva*) of the 6 sense-world heavens [1.4.2]—depend on the 5 physical senses. The brahmas (*brahmā*) of the form world have and need only the senses of seeing and hearing. The brahmas of the formless world do not have or need any of these physical senses since they are purely mind-made of the subtlest quality.

We will have a very good idea of the spirit of early Buddhist cosmology by reflecting on this sutta teaching on the all. It is the epitome of the Buddha’s “omniscience” as the knower of worlds. This also helps us truly appreciate the metaphors and drama of early Buddhist cosmology, especially as a “psychology of mythology.”²⁸

1.2.3 Avoiding speculativeness

1.2.3.1 In the **Ariya Pariyesanā Sutta** (M 26), the Buddha famously exhorts monastics, when assembled, to either “**speak the Dharma or keep the noble silence**,” that is, either talk Dharma or meditate.²⁹ The Buddha himself is well known, especially in the early years of the ministry, as **Sakya, muni**, the silent sage of the Sakyas.³⁰ Indeed, silence is the highest wisdom (*moneyya*), all the 3 superknowledges [1.2.1] rolled into one.

²⁶ On *loka, vidū*, see SD 15.7 (3.5).

²⁷ **Sabba S** (S 35.23), SD 7.1.

²⁸ On the helpful concept of “psychology of mythology” in early Buddhism, see SD 52.1 (1).

²⁹ M 26,4/1:161 (SD 1.11); see also **Dhyana**, SD 8.4 (4). See also **Silence and the Buddha**, SD 44.1.

³⁰ On the Buddha as the silent sage, see SD 57.1 (5.2.2).

Even when the Buddha teaches, he keeps his silence on matters that neither concern the spiritual life nor conduce to its progress. On speculative questions, such as the nature of the universe in time and space, the notion of an eternal self or immortal soul, and the posthumous fate of an awakened saint (or anyone for that matter)—the notorious “**10 questions**”³¹—the Buddha keeps his silence, firmly reminding the seeker (and us) to keep to the right track of beneficial inquiry, one that is connected with Dharma-spirited understanding and practice.

The **silence** that the Buddha points to us is that of silencing unwholesome conduct, silencing a mind riddled with views, and silencing wisdom burdened with defilements. **The true silence** is that of moral virtue (of body and speech), as a support for good meditation, leading to liberating wisdom. The highest silence is the peace and freedom that is nirvana. Hence, the Buddha’s silence, far from being the lack of wisdom, is the peace that knows *all*, sees *all*. [1.2.2.4]

Hence, the Buddha is *silent* on matters of cosmology (the nature of the universe), epistemology (the nature of the soul), or metaphysics (what happens after death). And yet—despite the Buddha’s proverbial silence on such speculative matters—we still have a very well-developed **cosmology** [3.1], a universe of 31 planes [5.4.2], inhabited by a diverse population of beings. How or why did this development come about?

1.2.3.2 There are a number of explanations for the rise and growth of early Buddhist cosmology. **The 1st** and most basic reason is **societal**. There was already a developed and popular Indian cosmology, especially, that of the brahminical system, such as its cosmogony and hierarchy of gods. This early Indian mythology was part of a great Indo-Aryan family of mythologies, of which the most developed was that of the ancient Greeks. [1.4]

However, the Buddha’s concern, as we have noted, is characteristically **non-theistic**: the gods are themselves a part of this shifting flow of samsara, subject to karma and rebirth. Clearly, the Buddha has not, in one fell swoop, adopted the popular Indian mythology as a skilful means. His approach is, as a rule, that of the gradual way; hence, the rise of early Buddhist cosmology was incidental and contextual. We will next examine a few such incidents and contexts that clearly contributed to it, or at least hinted at it.

1.3 THE RISE OF EARLY BUDDHIST COSMOLOGY

1.3.1 Reasons and conditions

There are at least 3 other important reasons to explain why early Buddhist cosmology arose: why the Buddha, to some extent, accepted the popular Indian cosmology [1.4], and naturally adapted³² it for his teaching strategy or skilful means.³³ Clearly, it is strategic to present a new or unfamiliar teaching using popular lore as a vehicle. [1.2.3.2]

(2)³⁴ **The moral and psychological reason** for the rise of early Buddhist cosmology concerns the understanding of the nature of our body and mind. The various planes of existence—suffering and happy—are simply manifestations of our minds. How we see and use our body and other bodies shape our mind,

³¹ On the 10 undetermined questions, see SD 57.1 (5.2.1-5.4).

³² On the Buddha’s “natural adaptation” of quotes, teachings and ideas, from outside, see SD 12.1 (6-7); SD 39.3 (3.3.4).

³³ On the Buddha’s skilful means (*upāya*), see **Upāya**, SD 30.8.

³⁴ “(1)” is in (1.2.3.2).

which in turn feed such habits. When death comes, that human body ceases, but the mind continues whether in greed, hate, delusion or fear,³⁵ [1.3.2.1]

(3) **The spiritual reason** behind early Buddhist cosmology is that the various existential realms are simply manifestations of our own habitual tendencies and extensions of our own minds. When we have views, we create a mental loop that keep us in a rut of repetitive actions, by which we hope we would find the answers for all our problems. No matter where we go in the sublime heavens and the subhuman realms, we are still caught with our unresolved problems. We can only answer it in our own mind when it awakens to true reality, even as a human being, when the mind is capable of freeing itself. [1.3.2.2]

(4) **The sociological reason** explains the role of early Buddhist cosmology in explaining or correcting the seeming imbalance we see in the social manifestations of karma, where we often see the good suffering, and the bad often prospering. In Buddhist cosmology, the karmic stage is extended in time and space beyond the *now* into the infinite future. The karmic show continues to unfold with the bad overwhelmed by their due deserts, and the good enjoying their sweet karmic fruits. Even when this may seem only as teaching or tale, they effectively work as a warning that the bad that we do are interred in our bones, and silently spreads over our being as karmic cancer, striking us down when we least expect it. We may rightly say that the good suffer openly, the bad only pretend to prosper. [1.3.2.3]

1.3.2 Avoiding ideological extremes

1.3.2.1 The 2nd reason³⁶—**the moral and psychological reason** [1.3.1 (2)]—for the rise of early Buddhist cosmology is that it serves as a supporting teaching to those of **karma and rebirth**. The basic idea behind karma is that our actions, conscious (*sampajāna*) or unconscious (*asampajāna*), done knowingly or unknowingly,³⁷ so long as we have the intention (good or bad), we are accountable for them. The karmic fruits will arise with commensurate but exponential effects upon oneself and others connected with us whenever there are sufficient conditions.

However, the common observation is that we often see *the good suffer* despite their habitually doing good, while *the bad*, despite their habitual bad, even *because* of it, seem to *prosper*. The reason is because karma is only **one of 5 natural laws or orders (*pañca,niyāma*)** that govern us: in modern terms, the laws (1) of physics, (2) of biology, (3) of karma, of (4) psychology and of (5) nature.³⁸ In practical terms, a powerful, wealthy but bad person, for example, is born into conditions of (1) physical power and wealth; (2) his family is well-connected and influential, and he has great charisma; (3) hence, he is able to prevent the fruiting of some bad karma, and hide, play down, disguise, or simply ignore any bad karmic fruits that arise to them; (4) they are mentally determined and ruthless; and (5) have the power to prevent or exploit nature, natural events or conditions, even religion, to their advantage.

1.3.2.2 Against the virtue-based Buddhist life and training, ancient Indian society at some levels, was haunted by an ideological tension between the materialists and the theists. On the one extreme, the **materialist (*lokāyata*)**³⁹ and the materialistically inclined not only deny a supreme creator (such as *Ívara*), but also reject both the ideas of karma and rebirth—they deny the efficacy and accountability of karma (*akiriya,vādī*).

³⁵ These are the 4 biases (*agati*) behind our actions that shape our mind, see **Sigal'ovāda S** (D 31,4+5), SD 4.1; **Āgati S 1** (A 4.17), SD 89.7; **Saṅgaha Bala S** (A 9.5,6.4) n, SD 2.21; SD 31.12 (6.4.1.3); SD 53.5 (2.2.1.1).

³⁶ For the 1st reason, see (1.2.3.2).

³⁷ We usu understand karma as being “consciously” deliberate; on “unconscious” (*asampajāna*) karma, see **The unconscious**, SD 51.20 (2.2.2).

³⁸ On the *pañca,niyāma*, see SD 5.6 (2); SD 57.1 (4.2.1.2).

³⁹ D:RD 1:166; Sikṣa,samuccaya 4.1.

Their amoralist stand is that this is our only life, beyond which there is nothing. Hence, whatever we need or want to do, for whatever the reason, should be done, so long as it benefitted us without incurring any negative effect upon our self. After all, this is our only life: live it, live it as well as we can.

Some of these materialists are fatalists or determinists (*niyati, vādī*)⁴⁰: whatever happens, happens for a reason, and is meant to happen. This is the innate independent “nature” of things (*sabhāva*; Skt *svabhāva*). Hence, there is neither right or wrong, good or bad, this world or the next world. Whatever is within our power or opportunity to be, to do or to have, is thus *naturally* ours. Some of us are meant to prosper, some of us to suffer.

1.3.2.3 The other ideological extreme are **the theists, the brahmins**, the religious elite, or that is how they view themselves. They have their own pantheon of gods, such as Agni (P *aggi*), immanent in fire. In every brahmin home, there is the sacred fire, tended by the leading male (it is a patriarchal ideology). While *dhamma* to the Buddha means reality, truth, teaching (amongst others), to the brahmins **Dharma** is “duty,” or better, social ideology enforced through religion, similar to the traditional Confucianist notion of propriety (simplified 礼; traditional 禮; 𠄎), basically to respect family, seniority and the hierarchy of power or of class (*vaṇṇa*, “colour,” or *jāti*, “birth”).

While in imperial China, this ideology worked very well to legitimize the emperor and his supporting nobility, with the majority of the populace as menial peasants, the situation in India was different. While the brahmins served the kings (*rāja*), especially as purohitas (*purohita*, royal chaplains) and ministers, they only formed one class (*vaṇṇa*, “colour,” or *jāti*, “birth”)—the brahmins (*brāhmaṇa*)—and the kings and his warriors belonged to the kshatriya class (*khattiya*). It was a time when **the kshatriyas** as a class were in the ascendent and were fast displacing the brahmins as society’s elite in a time characterized by intellectual turmoil and religious quests, experimentation and freedom.⁴¹

1.3.2.4 The Buddha is himself a kshatriya of the Sakya nobility and heir to his father’s position of a “rajah” (a common term of ruling status, probably the head of a chiefdom). However, being spiritually precocious, he chooses not to be swept by this class struggle [1.3.2.3]. As an awakened teacher, he teaches a classless dharma for the awakening and liberation for all who takes the path, and he opens up his sangha or monastic order as a classless community of those working on that path of awakening.

One of the most effective ways of countering the materialist’s notion of the this-is-our-only-life hedonism and self-centred opportunism or helpless fatalism, the Buddha teaches the reality of **rebirth** according to our self-accountable merits or demerits (*kusalākusala*). Even if we regard them as “mythical” or as “conventional truths,” the *joys* of the heavens and a moral life are as real as the *pains* of the subhuman realms and suffering states: they are all pervaded by the universal reality of impermanence.

1.3.2.5 The brahmins, in their religious ideology, uphold **karma** (P *kamma*) as *right ritual action*, similar to the Confucian notion of righteousness and moral disposition of *yi* (simplified 义; 義 traditional), the kind of social conduct that dissolves individualism and freedom (personal and social) for the benefit of the greater social (hierarchical) good (or rather, the upper classes, especially those in power). The brahmins have long since invented and used religious ideology to ensconce themselves on the apex of the ancient Indian social hierarchy and legitimize themselves with the power, privileges and plenty that society must offer them.

The brahmins (*brāhmaṇa*), according to the brahmins, are the “mouth-born” of Primal Man or Supreme Deity; hence, as God’s spokesman, their bodies, acts and words are sacred (more so than of the non-brahmins). The kshatriyas (*khattiya*), according to the brahmins’ theology, originated from the Dei-

⁴⁰ See eg **Titth’āyatana S** (A 3.61,4), SD 6.8. For a philosophical survey, see Jayatilleke, *Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge*, 1963: determinism, determinist, deterministic, niyati.

⁴¹ See eg **Aggañña S** (D 27,21), SD 2.19.

ty's arms; hence, his sacred task is to defend and empower the brahmins above him. The vaishyas (*vessa*) are born from the thighs: his task is to provide material benefits and wealth for those above them. The sudras (*sudda*) are the feet-born: they must do all the menial tasks so that those above them can live up to their class ideals and do so comfortably.

The 5th (pañcama) category is *unclassed*, comprising mostly the dark-skinned autochthonous tribal natives, the *mleccha*: they are the outcastes.⁴² They are not part of society, should keep their distance, and not even cross a brahmin's shadow nor recite the Vedic words or molten lead will be poured down their ears!

1.3.2.6 The Buddha unequivocally rejects this Machiavellian caste system and unjust class ideology of the brahmins for **an open society**, where individuals are respected and emulated for their own good, or blamed and shunned for their bad. Our struggle between good and bad only shows our capacity for choosing what is good and right for us, for others and the world. The reality of suffering is a clear sign that something is wrong, not with the world, but with how we see it and act in it.⁴³

We are not born high or low in society, as good or bad persons: **our intentions and actions** make us so. Where there is *mental* action, there are likely to be *bodily* deeds and *verbal* deeds: we act and communicate through **karma**.⁴⁴ This is how we create our living space and interact with others. We are actors on this cosmic stage, and we play many roles. They are *not* fixed, immobile, as the brahmins want us to believe, with fixed social stratus and roles. Our place and play in society are a mobile one, our roles change, devolve or evolve, depending on our good or bad of mind and heart.

We each create our own virtual world; it is more real than the external world is to us. When this body ends and we die, this world of our mind continues as one of the 31 planes of existence [6.1]. **Karma** shapes and moves us around in society and the world; **rebirth** moves us around and shapes us in and out of countless realms of being. Ultimately, all these states, human or nonhuman, subhuman or celestial, the hells or the heavens, are all **mind-made**, meaning that our inner realities, our experiences, are more real than these metaphors of the cosmic drama.

1.3.3 The land-sighting bird

1.3.3.1 Thirdly, there is **a spiritual reason** [1.3.1 (3)] for which the Buddha, and the sutta redactors who compiled the suttas in his name, are remarkable story-tellers, especially when the teachings are meant for anyone to "**come and see**" (*ehi,passika*).⁴⁵ Often, such suttas, as a rule, begin with a statement, a topic or a story that is familiar to practically everyone in the audience, especially the non-Buddhists. For, the aim of such suttas is to attract them, or at least impress them, with a better alternative to their life, that is, the true spiritual life. Often, too, such suttas are tempered with subtle **humour**.

Once the audience has warmed up with something familiar, the teaching then proceeds to relate a new turn, the Dharma-centred approach. This may be in the form of a climax showing the benefits of following the teaching, or it may be an anticlimax with a happy or humorous surprise of keeping the faith, the Buddha Dharma. These are, in fact, the characteristics of the longer suttas, especially those of **the Dīgha Nikāya**, the basket of long teachings.⁴⁶

⁴² On the caste system of ancient India, see **Tevijja S** (D 13,19) n, SD 1.8; SD 10.8 (6).

⁴³ See esp **Nibbedhika Pariyāya S** (A 6.63), SD 6.11.

⁴⁴ Cf "The diversity of the world arises from karma" (*Karma, jam loka, vaicitryam*), Abhk 4.1.

⁴⁵ This is one of the 6 virtues of the Buddha Dharma:

⁴⁶ See Manné, "Categories of Sutta in the Pāli Nikāyas and their implications for our appreciation of the Buddhist teaching and literature," 1990. On the missionizing role of Dīgha Nikāya, see SD 21.3 (2.1).

1.3.3.2 A case in point—a teaching connected with the Buddha’s stand on cosmology—is the delightful **Kevalāḍḍha Sutta** (D 11), SD 1.7. The Buddha relates an instructive and humorous story about how a monk, seeking the answer to the question—Where do the 4 elements totally disappear?—visits all the sense-world heavens up to the 1st-dhyana brahma-realm, asking Great Brahma himself the question. None of them could answer his question, and Brahma humbly refers the monk to the Buddha.

The Buddha first relates to the questioning monk **the parable of the land-sighting bird**. Ancient sea-going sailors in mid-ocean, seeking landfall, releases a bird into the sky. When the bird, finding no land, returns to the ship, she sails on. However, when the bird flies away without returning, the ship goes in that direction to find land.

The meaning of this story and parable is that none of the heavens or their gods know the true reality that frees us from samsara. Hence, they can never answer the “final question,” regarding nirvana. We may traverse all the heavens, but the best place to get our spiritual questions answered is in the human world when our mind **awakens** to true reality. Even if the heavens, and other worlds and universes, and aliens, do exist, our path to awakening is still best sought while we are humans, even in our imperfect world. This is the very 1st noble truth.

1.3.4 Early Buddhist cosmodycy

1.3.4.1 The 4th reason for the rise of early Buddhist cosmology is **sociological** [1.3.1 (4)]. More exactly, it is the sociology of religion that helps to explain the situation, that is, in terms of “the theodicy of suffering.” The great German sociologist, Max Weber, in his *The Sociology of Religion* (1922), thought of the teachings of karma and rebirth as “theodicies.”⁴⁷ However, **theodicy** is literally about “justifying God”⁴⁸: a God that needs justification is clearly an unjust agent—an idea foreign to early Buddhism.⁴⁹

Cosmodicy,⁵⁰ on the other hand, attempts to justify the fundamental goodness of the universe in the face of bad or evil. A related term—**anthropodicy**—refers to attempts to justify the fundamental goodness of human nature in the face of the bads or evils produced by humans.⁵¹ The former applies to our current needs (in fact, either concept will work in our case): the use of early Buddhist cosmology as a moral check and balance that is **karma**, natural justice, and the *personifications* of karma as beings gaining **rebirth** in various realms and states.

1.3.4.2 Cosmodicy tries to show us that *the world is basically good* despite the fact that bad seems to prevail in our world. How does early Buddhist cosmology function as cosmodicy (or anthropodicy)? First of all, we are all basically creatures of habits (*nati*). These habits gain strength over each life, and, upon dying, they continue in the new life in a familiar realm. The habits we live with inside us, are externalized as our ambience in the following and future lives.

Our habits come from our mind, which, then, is our world. We project what we see, hear, smell, taste and touch creating a virtual reality onto the external world. In this sense, no matter where we are, we are effectively living in our own world, our mind-made world. Every realm of the Buddhist cosmology, then, is mind-made, created in our own image and we inhabit it.

⁴⁷ M Weber [1922] 1963:113, 145 f. M S M Scott, “Theorizing theodicy in the study of religion,” 2009:4.

⁴⁸ Patrick Sherry, “Theodicy,” <https://www.britannica.com/topic/theodicy-theology>; see also Britannica, 15th ed Micropedia, 1983 sv.

⁴⁹ See **Bhūri,datta J** (J 543/6:208-211): “He who has eyes can see the sickening sight; | Why does not Brahma set his creatures right? ... etc,” tr Cowell & Rouse, *The Jātaka*, 1895 6:110.

⁵⁰ The word cosmodicy (“Kosmodicee”) was coined by Friedrich Nietzsche in a letter to Erwin Rohde in Feb 1872 (*Sämtliche Briefe. Kritische Studienausgabe in 8 Bänden* 3. Berlin/NY: dtv/de Gruyter, 1986:294). The word anthropodicy arose in 20th-century European philosophy.

⁵¹ Meiner & Veel (ed), *The Cultural Life of Catastrophes and Crises*, 2012:243.

Should we, in this life, think that we can get away with our bad habits, unwholesome lives, pretending we are doing the right thing, feigning goodness, the karmic curtain will sooner or later fall on our show. Death comes. We leave our human body behind, and our mind is dragged away into that self-projected prison we have earlier walled up for ourself.

1.3.5 Essence of early Buddhist cosmology

1.3.5.1 There is no systematic cosmology in the suttas (4th-3rd century BCE). However, the basic and key ideas and details given in these suttas are found in the developed cosmology of the later traditions, such as the Abhidharma of the various schools.⁵² Some of these ancient ideas have themselves been naturally adapted [1.3.1] from the common pool of early Indian cosmology found, for example, in the texts of the Vedic traditions (1500-500 BCE).

1.3.5.2 Scholars of early Buddhism often present early Buddhism as merely engaged in moral training and meditation, and the cultivation of wisdom. For reasons we have noted in this section, **Buddhist mythology** is so embedded and woven into the ethical, conceptual and philosophical dimensions of early Buddhism that any attempt to separate them would be like watching Star Wars without any aliens in them.

The reason for this is simple enough. **Mythology**, far from being “false stories,” are actually psychological images and stories that hypostasize (embody or personify) our own habitual and essential qualities. These hypostases are told and retold to us as cautionary tales with the colours of entertainment, especially humour, for our edification and inspiration for a better life, even hinting at the benefits of self-awakening.⁵³

1.3.5.3 Having come thus far with early Buddhist cosmology, it is time that we review our understanding of it. Essentially, **early Buddhist cosmology**, along with many of the details in the later developed cosmology, both share these 4 common principles:

- (1) Early Buddhist cosmology is **non-theistic** in the sense that the universe has *neither Creator nor* supreme essence. The sufficient cause for its existence and process is in the interaction of conditions called dependent arising (*paṭicca samuppāda*)
- (2) The universe is without any limits, either spatially or temporally. Both space and time are “**cyclic**,” in the sense the universe repeatedly goes through a kind of “pulsating” cycle [1.5.3.3]. The beginning of the universe is indiscernible [1.5.4.1], its end cannot be reached by “going.” [1.5.3.1]
- (3) The universe comprises 31 planes of existence [App] constituting a hierarchy in terms of mental developments and level of meditation.
- (4) The beings inhabiting this universe are continually reborn into various realms according to their karmic fruit. The only escape from this endless cycle of rebirths and redeaths called samsara (*samsāra*) is by way of attaining nirvana, which the Buddha’s teaching is essentially about.⁵⁴

⁵² There are 3 major Abhidharma traditions known to us: those of the Theravāda or southern tradition (Sri Lanka and SE Asia); Sarvāstivāda or northern tradition, which through the Yogācāra school fed the Mahāyāna cosmology, found in East Asia and Tibet. These cosmologies share the same roots and basics, differing only in the details. In fact, they remain relevant to this day to the worldview of ordinary traditional Buddhists everywhere.

⁵³ On the nature and value of Buddhist mythology, see SD 2.19 (1); SD 51.11 (3.1.1). On the practical reality of how traditional (mostly ethnic) Buddhists relate to the mythical beings, see Gethin, *The Foundations of Buddhism*, 1998:128-132.

⁵⁴ The 4 points are based on those in Gethin, *Macmillan Encyclopedia of Buddhism*, 2004:183.

1.4 INDO-ARYAN MYTHOLOGY

1.4.1 Common roots

1.4.1.1 Ancient Indian mythology (including early Buddhist mythology) is closely related to Greek mythology. In fact, they share the same ancient Proto-Indo-European religious roots.⁵⁵ This is at best a hypothesis, as we are dealing with complex and widespread cultural milieux. Yet, the two mythologies have such close and dynamic overlaps and parallels that they invite interesting and useful discussions for a better understanding of how we function as individuals and as a society in a common universe.

For a helpful discussion, we will only limit our brief survey to a comparison of some key and interesting parallels between Greek mythology and ancient Indian mythology. The mythologies of both cultures are polytheistic: they believe in many gods, and worship their idols and forms in remarkably similar ways. Both these ancient cultures also built temples for their gods and worshipped fire.

1.4.1.2 The ancient supreme Indian god of the Vedic pantheon was *Dyáuṣ, pitṛ* or *Dyaus Pitā*, “the sky father.”⁵⁶ In the Indo-European pantheon, he is known as Dyḗus ph2tér (same meaning), which in Greek becomes *Zeus Pater*, in Latin *Jupiter* or *Dispater*. Zeus’ weapon is the thunderbolt, which is also a well known divine weapon, especially of Vajira, pāṇī, the Buddhist version of Hercules, who is a demigod son of Zeus.⁵⁷

1.4.2 The devas and asuras; the brahmas

1.4.2.1 Just as the ancient Greek gods and other mythical beings live on “Mt Olympus,” the first 2 heavens of the sense-spheres (*kām’āvacara*)⁵⁸—the 4 great kings (*cātum, mahā, rāja*) and the gods of the 33 (*tāvātimsa*)—dwell on Mount Sumeru, the axis mundi (the cosmic hub).⁵⁹ In the imagination of the ancient Indians, this cosmic “mountain” comprised the sacred mountains of the Himalayas, just as the ancient Greeks imagined Olympus as the abode of their gods. Like the Olympian heavens, these 2 heavens—the lowest of the 6 sense-world heavens—are “earth-bound beings” (*bhummāni bhūtāni*), since they dwell on Mount Sumeru, and that they walk on the ground.⁶⁰ In other words, these 2 heavens are closely connected with our world and are very human-like in the celestial and mythical senses.

1.4.2.2 Mount Sumeru (also called Meru, Sineru or Neru), to the ancient Indians, was both the unscalable Himalayan mountains as well as some “distant” unscalable centre of the universe, a kind of portal to the heavens beginning with the 2 lowest of the 6 sense-world heavens⁶¹ [1.5.2.3]. Such a celestial universe was easier for the ancient Indians to imagine and accept, especially when they did not see the possibility of scaling the sacred heights, or traversing the skies in a rocket to reach the moon or Mars.

⁵⁵ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Proto-Indo-European_religion.

⁵⁶ Ṛgveda 1.89, 90, 164, 191, 4.1. In Malay, *petir* means “thunder,” Zeus’ weapon.

⁵⁷ On Hercules in Buddhism, see SD 21.3 (Fig 4.2b). On Vajira, pāṇī, see SD 21.3 (4.2).

⁵⁸ So called because the beings there are dependent on their physical senses and they arouse sensual pleasures from them: *kāma* has both these senses.

⁵⁹ For details on Sumeru, see Punnadhammo, *The Buddhist Cosmos*, 2018:50-55 (1:4).

⁶⁰ See SD 54.3a (3.5.1).

⁶¹ The other 5 sense-based heavens are “space-bound,” ie, more distant from earth. On the earth-bound heavens and the “space-bound,” see SD 54.3a (3,5).

1.4.2.3 According to **the Abhidharma,kośa** (3.63 f),⁶² Sumeru has 4 terraces⁶³ of 16,000 yojanas [leagues],⁶⁴ 8,000 yojanas, 4,000 yojanas and 2,000 yojanas wide, each being 10,000 yojanas apart (vertically) [1.5.1.1]. The 4th terrace or highest level is inhabited by **the 4 great kings' hosts** (*cātum,mahā,rājika deva*). The 3 lower terraces are each inhabited by a different tribe or kind of yakshas (nature spirits).⁶⁵ [Fig 1.5.1.1]

According to the suttas,⁶⁶ higher up are **the 4 great kings** (*cātum,mahā,rāja*) themselves, each ruling and guarding one of the 4 quarters: Dhata,raṭṭha (Skt *dhrta,rāṣtra*) in the east, with the gandharvas; Virūlhaka (Skt *virūḍhaka*) in the south, with the kumbhandas; Virūpakkha (Skt *virūpākṣa*) in the west, with the nagas; and Vessa,vaṇa (Skt *vaiśrāvaṇa*) in the north, with the yakshas [1.2.2.2]. Although the beings attending these 4 great kings are not devas, they are generically, as a group, regarded so. These devas live in celestial mansions (*vimāna*), and are the most numerous of the devas.

1.4.2.4 On Sumeru's summit are the devas with **the 33** (*tāvātīmsa*) at their head, led by Sakra (*sakka*), "lord of the devas" (*devānam-inda*) of the 2 heavens; hence, he is also called Indra (*inda*) [1.4.2.2]. The Saṃyutta Commentary relates the story of how Sakra and his 33 companions overthrew the old gods of Tāvātīmsa (later known as **the asuras**)⁶⁷ [3.2.6], in a very close parallel to how, in Greek mythology, **Cronus and the Titans**, 6 brothers and 6 sisters, the offspring of Gaia (Earth) and Uranus (Heaven), the "old gods," were overthrown by the "new" gods led by Zeus and the Olympian gods.⁶⁸

1.4.2.5 Of all the high gods of ancient India, early Buddhism has the most significant links with **Brahmā**. Generically, "brahmā" (as opposed to "devas," the celestials of the sense-world, *kāma,loka*) are the radiant beings of the dhyanic form world (*rūpa loka*). Specifically, "Brahmā" usually refers to *mahā,-brahmā*, the brahma lording over his own realm. The seniormost of them is **Brahmā Sahampati**,⁶⁹ who is said to be a non-returner, inhabiting the pure abodes (*suddhāvāsa*).⁷⁰ Other great brahmas, like Brahmā Sanañkumāra⁷¹ and Brahmā Baka,⁷² are still unawakened worldlings despite being high gods.

1.5 THE WORLD AND ITS CYCLES

1.5.1 World sphere, world system

1.5.1.1 The broader cosmological picture is, of course, more complex. We have already mentioned how the Himalayas, the highest mountain or what is seen to be the highest from most of the central Gangetic plains, is the axis mundi, **Mount Sumeru**, the Olympus of the ancient Indian universe. Now let us visualize this "world axis" and the universe around it.

⁶² Abhidharma.kośa,bhāṣya (the treasury of Abhidharma with autocommentary) is a Sanskrit work attr Vasuan-dhu (late 4th cent CE) representing the Sautrāntika, one of the pre-Mahāyāna 18 early school [Routledge Ency of Bsm, "Nikāya Buddhism," 2007:549-558; list: Princeton Dict of Bsm 2014:1091]. The work often quotes from Pali suttas. Ch 3 (*trṭīyam kośa,sthānam*) deals with cosmology (*loka,nirdeśa*).

⁶³ "Terraces," (Skt *parisaṇḍa*), ie, levels. See Abhk:Pr 2:536 nn427 f,

⁶⁴ On the yojana, see (1.5.3.2) n.

⁶⁵ On yakshas, see SD 21.3 (4.2.6); SD 51.11 (3.1.1.2); SD 54.2 (3.2.2; 3.2.3.4).

⁶⁶ Such as **Kevalddha S** (D 11,69/1:216), SD 1.7. For a list of the sense-world devas and other inhabitants, and their lifespans, see SD 54.3a (Diagram 3.5).

⁶⁷ J 1:202; DhA 1:272-280; cf SnA 484 f. For a summary, see SD 39.2 (1.1.2).

⁶⁸ See SD 54.21 (1.2.1.4). For details and refs of the Titans, see [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Titans_\(mythology\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Titans_(mythology)).

⁶⁹ See **Brahmā Sahampati S** (S 48.5), SD 86.10.

⁷⁰ For locations of these worlds, see SD 1.7, Table 1.7, or DEB Appendix.

⁷¹ On Brahmā Sanañkumāra, see **Sanañkumara S** (S 6.11), SD 63.12. See also **Aggañña S** (D 27,32) n, SD 2.19.

⁷² On Brahmā Baka, see **Brahmā Baka S** (S 6.4), SD 11.6.

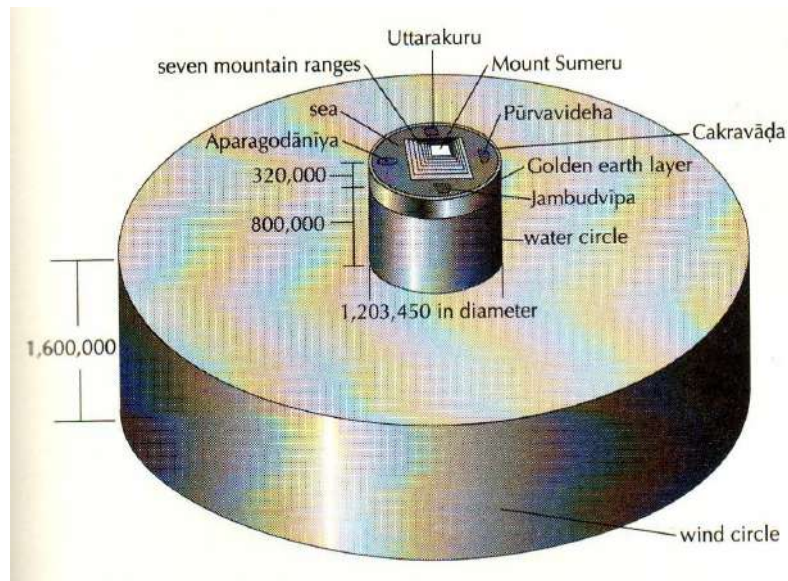


Fig 1.5.1.1 Bird's-eye view of our world as imagined in ancient India⁷³

On the lower levels of this universe are **the sense-world realms**, arranged in various distinct galaxy-like “world spheres” (*cakka, vāḷa*, “wheel-circles”; Skt *cakra, vāḷa*). Like many Pali words, *cakka, vāḷa* is polysemous. It is used in at least 2 ways, referring to a “ring of iron mountains” surrounding a world sphere, which may, depending on the context, also be called a “world system” (*loka, dhātu*) [2.1.1.2 f].

1.5.1.2 At the centre of the cakravala (anglicization of *cakka, vāḷa*) is the great cosmic mountain, **Sumeru**, the axis mundi. This is surrounded by 7 concentric rings of mountains and seas. Beyond these heights and depths, in each of the quarters is one of the 4 great continents surrounded by the great ocean. Fig 1.5.1.2 gives an old traditional Burmese representation of our earth as a “world sphere” (*cakka, vāḷa*). The 4 continents surround Mount Sumeru, with Jambudvīpa (India) is the island in the south with smaller islands around it. The concentric circles in the middle represents Mount Sumeru.

In the south is **Jambudvīpa** (*jambu, dīpa*), the jambul⁷⁴ continent, is located just below the towering mountain ranges, the Himalayas, inhabited by ordinary human beings. This is, of course, our known world, India, the land where buddhas arise.⁷⁵ On the west is **Apara, go, yāna**; on the north, **Uttara, kuru**; on the east, **Pubba, Videha**; and on its outer rim is a circle of 7 iron mountain ranges, and a sea between and within them.

1.5.1.3 The Dīgha Commentary says that when it is sunrise in Jambu, dīpa, it is the middle watch (10 pm-2 am) in Apara, go, yāna; when it is sunset in Apara, go, yāna, it is midnight in Jambu, dīpa. Thus, they are about 12 hours apart. When it is sunrise in Apara, go, yāna (the western continent), it is noon in Jambu, dīpa, sunset in Pubba, videha (eastern continent), and midnight in Uttara, kuru (the northern continent)

⁷³ Source: Akira Sadakata, *Buddhist Cosmology* (tr G Sekimori), 1997:27 (Fig 5). The measurements are in yojanas or leagues. 1 *yojana* = 11.25 km or 7 mi = 4 *gāvutas*. See **Magha V** (DhA 2.7,50), SD 54.22; **Pahārāda S** (A 8.19,9.1 n), SD 45.18; SD 47.8 (2.4.4.1).

⁷⁴ For details on Jambu, dīpa, esp *jambu*, esp not as rose-apple but as jambul, see SD 16.15 (3).

⁷⁵ For a recent study of ancient Buddhist cosmology, see Randy Kloetzli 1983:23-72 & Akira Sadakata 1997:25-40, esp 30-38.



Fig 1.5.1.2 Our world sphere (*cakka,vā-
/a*) and the 4 continents. Source: A Bud-
dhist cosmology MS. British Library.
[Or.14004, f.27](#). The original picture is ori-
ented with Jambudvipa (with the Buddha
figure) on the right, ie, the east.

(DA 3:868). Jambu,dīpa and Uttara,kuru apparently share the same time zone (the same longitudes). This is a **geo-graphical** (terrestrial) view of the Sumeru-centric world.⁷⁶ [2.2.1: cosmography]

1.5.2 The devas and the brahmas

1.5.2.1 On the slopes of **Mount Sumeru** itself and rising above its peak are the 6 heavens inhabited by the sense-world **devas**.⁷⁷ The lowest of these is that of the deva-hosts of **the 4 great kings** (*cātum,mahā,rājika*), who guard the 4 quarters. On the peak of Mount Sumeru is the heaven of **the 33 devas** (*tāva,tīm̐sa*),⁷⁸ ruled by Sakra, while in the shadow of Mount Sumeru dwell **the asuras** (*asura*), titans or fallen gods, who were expelled from the heaven of the 33 by Indra. [3.2.6]

Above the peak, just after Tāvatiṃsa, is the heaven of the **Yāma** devas; then, follows the heaven of **Tusita**, heaven of the contented devas, where buddhas-to-be, like the future Metteyya (Skt maitreya), are reborn and await the time to take birth, and above them, the **Nimmāna,ratī**, devas who delight in creation (with the power to create or project their own pleasures). The highest of the 6 heavens of the sense world is that of the **Para, nimitta,vassa.vattī**, devas who enjoy the creations of others.

1.5.2.2 Although the Para.nimitta,vassavattī devas are the highest and most powerful of the sense-world devas, they do not have full control of all their realm. For, in a remote part of this heaven is the abode of **Māra the bad**, who, in fact, lords over the whole of the sense-world, using his vast powers of promise, deception and terror to hold back its inhabitants from leaving his world; and, if he wishes, he may even ascend to the next realm, that of the 1st- dhyana brahma world, to deceive even the brahmas there, including the great brahma himself with wrong views.⁷⁹

1.5.2.3 The 6 sense-world heavens are inhabited by devas, male and female, who, like humans, reproduce through sexual union, but of a subtler celestial kind. Such a union takes the form of an embrace, the holding of hands, a smile, or a mere look.⁸⁰ Their offspring, young devas—called *deva,putta* (“celestial sons”) and *deva,dhītā* (“celestial daughters”)—are not born from the womb, but arise instantly and whole in the form of a beautiful 5-year-old child in the lap of the gods (Abhidharmakośa 3:69 f).

⁷⁶ This section is also at SD 16.15 (3.1.2) where (3.1) is about India as a drifting continent.

⁷⁷ Of these sense-world devas, KhpA defines thus: They sport, thus they are devas (*dibbantīti devā*), meaning that they play with the 5 cords of sensual pleasures [M 13], or they shine in their own splendour (KhpA 123,9 f). Comys say there are 3 kinds of deva: (1) conventional devas (*sammuti,deva*) kings, queens and their offspring; (2) devas by birth (*upapatti,deva*), beginning with the 4 great kings upwards; (3) devas by purification (*visuddhi,deva*), ie, the noble ones (streamwinners, etc) (KhpA 123,10-16; Nc 307; Vbh 422,1-4).

⁷⁸ On the 33 gods (*tāva,tīm̐sa*), see SD 54.22 (7).

⁷⁹ See **Māra Tajjanīya S** (M 50), SD 36.4.

⁸⁰ Further on the sexuality of the sense-world devas, see SD 54.31 (3.3.3.3).

1.5.2.4 Above these sense-world heavens is a very different world, the realms of **the brahmas** (*brahmā*), gods of very refined mind and gloriously radiant body. Brahmas are neither male nor female though their appearance resembles that of men. The Siamese Buddhist cosmology text, *Traiphum Phra Ruang*, “the 3 worlds according to king Ruang” [2.1.3.3] describes the smoothness of their faces and their great beauty, a thousand times brighter than the moon and sun, and with only one hand they can illuminate 10,000 world systems.⁸¹ [4.3.2.2]

A great brahma of even a lower brahma heaven may rule over a 1,000 world system, while a higher brahma may lord over a 100,000 world system [1.5.3.1]. However, there is not a single Great Brahma with absolute power over the rest: there is no Almighty Creator God or his like. It does happen, however, that a certain great brahma may wrongly consider himself to be the Creator, and his host of brahmas actually believes and worships him so; but this is only delusion on the part of both parties.⁸²

In fact, their world rises upwards with one class or realm of great brahma and his host being surpassed by a further, more powerful great brahma and his host. Thus, they constitute “this world, with its gods, with its Māra, with its Brahmā, this generation with its recluses and brahmins, its rulers and people.”⁸³ This is the “world of beings” (*satta,loka*)⁸⁴ or “receptacle world” (*bhajana,loka*).⁸⁵ [2.1.3]

1.5.3 Cyclic space-time

1.5.3.1 The spatial-temporal nature and cycle of the universe are complex. The universe, as a whole, in terms of space and time, has neither beginning nor end. **The Rohitassa Sutta 1** (A 4.45) dramatically describes the boundless space-time that is the universe. A devaputra (young male deva), Rohitassa, asks the Buddha whether it is possible “by going, to know or to see or to reach the world’s end, where one is not born, does not age, does not die ... is not reborn.” The Buddha’s replies that “it cannot be known, seen or reached by going.” [5.4.2]

A devaputra (young male deva), **Rohitassa**, joyfully confirms the Buddha’s answer. He relates how he (Rohitassa), as a seer in a past life, endowed with super-speed, living 100 years, and taking 100 years,⁸⁶ flying at super-speed—just as a light arrow shot by a master archer would fly past the shadow of a palmyra tree—stopping only to snack, answer nature’s calls, rest—“died along the way without reaching the world’s end.”⁸⁷ [4.2.3.2]

In a similar parable, **the Attha,sālinī**, the Dhammasaṅgāṇī Commentary, states there is no limits to the universe in terms of distance. If 4 great brahmas from the Akanitthā (the 5th and highest of the pure abodes), endowed with super-speed, able to traverse 100,000 world systems (in 4 different directions) [1.5.2.4] in the time it takes a light arrow shot by a strong archer would take to cross the shadow of a palmyra tree, were, with such speed, to race in order to see the limits of the universe, they would pass away (into nirvana) without ever accomplishing their purpose! Thus infinite is the universe. (DhsA 160 f).

1.5.3.2 The length of a **great aeon** [1.5.4.1] is not specified in human years but only explained *metaphorically* and *hyperbolically* in **the Pabbata Sutta** (S 15.5), thus:

⁸¹ Reynolds & Reynolds, *Three Worlds According to King Ruang*, Bangkok, 1982:251.

⁸² **Brahma,jāla S** (D 1,39-44) describes how this happens (SD 25.2). On the ignorance of a great brahma, see **Ke-vaḍḍha S** (D 11), SD 1.7.

⁸³ **Sāmañña,phala S** (D 2,40), SD 8.10 = **Cūḷa Hatthi,padôpama S** (M 27,11), SD 40a.5 = **Veḷu,dvāreyya S** (S 66.7), SD 1.5 = **Venāga,pura S** (A 3.63), SD 21.1 = **Sela S** (Sn 3.7), SD 45.71.

⁸⁴ This is one of the 3 meanings of “world” (*loka*): of space (*okāsa,loka*), of beings (*satta,loka*) and of formations (*saṅkhāra,loka*), SD 15.7 (3.5.1 (2)).

⁸⁵ Abhk 3.45.

⁸⁶ One must imagine Rohitassa lives for more than 100 years, and starts off his cosmic quest as a very young seer.

⁸⁷ A 4.45/2:47-49 (SD 52.8a).

Suppose, bhikshu, there were a **great mountain of rock** a league (*yojana*)⁸⁸ long, a league wide, a league high, with neither holes nor crevices, one solid mass of rock. At the end of every hundred years, a man were to stroke it just once with a piece of Kāsī cloth. That great mountain of rock might, by this effort, be worn away and eliminated, but **the aeon**, bhikshu, would still not have ended. Bhikshu, so long is an aeon.

And through such long aeons, we have wandered through so many of them, so many hundreds of aeons, so many thousands of aeons, so many hundreds of thousands of aeons.

What is the reason for this? Because, bhikshu, this cycle of lives (*samsāra*) is without discernible beginning ... It is enough to be free from them. (S 15.5)⁸⁹

In the Sutta's last paragraph, the Buddha declares that the beginning of samsara—our beginning—is “indiscernible,” inconceivable. In another parable in **the Khīra Sutta** (S 15.4), the Buddha illustrates samsara's inconceivable length thus: our mothers' milk drunk by each of us in the course of our long journey through samsara is greater than the waters in the world's oceans. (S 15.4/2:180 f)

This only shows how long we have existed, and will continue to do so. During all that time, says **the Assu Sutta** (S 15.3), we have been suffering losses of mother, father, brother, sister, son, daughter over and over again. The tears we have shed amounts to much more than all the oceans' waters! This should be sufficient to want to free oneself from such suffering.⁹⁰ This is what such cosmological information is for: to reflect in the true reality of samsara and turn to the path of awakening by aspiring for streamwinning in this life itself.⁹¹

1.5.3.3 Despite the boundlessness of a world system or universe, it is neither always stable nor ever static. Even imaginary universes and paradises are neither stable nor static: our views of them constantly change! It goes through **cosmic cycles of expansion and contraction** across vast aeons, world-periods (*kappa*), in an endless time-cycle, where matter (the 4 elements) is neither created nor destroyed: they recycle themselves. In other words, it is a pulsating universe.⁹² [1.5.4.1]

When a single world system **contracts**,⁹³ “everything” is destroyed, or rather, matter slowly collapses into a kind of cosmic crunch. The world system, as we know it, then ceases to exist—for a time, a very long time. Technically, either stage (collapsing universe and the big crunch) takes a quarter of a world-period called an “incalculable aeon” (*asaṅkheyya, kappa*).⁹⁴

1.5.3.4 Fire, water and wind are 3 of the 4 primary elements,⁹⁵ the 1st of which is “earth,” (*paṭhavī*), solid matter. It may be said that these elements act on each other so that they are transformed or devolve into “space” (*ākāsa*). Although we speak of “elements” (*dhātu*), none of them are either stable or

⁸⁸ A “league” (*yojana*) is the distance travelled by a yoke of oxen, ie about 7 miles (11.3 km), and is divided into 3 *gāvutā* (DhA 2:13; cf DhA 1:108). See SD 47.8 (2.4.4.1); also Dh 60, J 5:37.

⁸⁹ S 15.5/2:181 f (SD 2.19(9.2.1)); also SD 49.8b (15.2).

⁹⁰ S 15.3/2:179 f (SD 16.13(3)); SD 2.19 (9.3.2).

⁹¹ For the significance of the lengthiness of the aeon (*kappa*), see SD 2.19 (9.2.2).

⁹² See SD 54.3c (3.4.3).

⁹³ “Contracts,” *sarṇvaṭṭati*, lit, “rolls back,” collapses, dissolves. See D 27,10.1 n on “contracts” (SD 2.19).

⁹⁴ In Pali usage, an incalculable (*asaṅkheyya*) is a generic term for each of the 4 phases of a great aeon (*mahā, kappa*). The Skt *asaṅkhyeya kalpa* is 10¹⁶ (10 with 16 zeroes) or a quadrillion (a thousand trillions) great aeons (*mahā, kalpa*). See Abhk:Pr 480; SD 2.19 (9.1, 9.3).

⁹⁵ On the 4 elements (*mahā, bhūta*), see **Mahā Rāhu'ovāda S** (M 11,8-11, with §12 on “space”), SD 3.11; **Mahā Hatthi, pādōpama S** (M 28,6), SD 6.16.

static; they are simply temporary “states” or “phases” of matter (*rūpa*), always in a flux, at least on a molecular (*kālapa*)⁹⁶ level.

By “**fire**” is meant some kind of cosmic conflagration or the manifestation of heat on account of the appearance of the “7 suns.”⁹⁷ “**Water**” is here some kind of meltdown or dissolution of matter constituting the universe; and “**wind**” is great cosmic implosion, like a build-up of all the cosmic gases that vaporizes the physical universe.

This **fire** starts in the lower realms of the sense-sphere and, having burnt up these, it invades the form realms. Having consumed the realms of the 1st dhyana, it stops, that is, having engulfed even Mahā Brahmā’s realm (the highest of the 1st-dhyana world). The realms of the 2nd, the 3rd and the 4th dhyanas, and the 4 formless realms, are thus spared destruction by *fire*.

However, when the cosmic destruction is wreaked by **water**, the 3 realms corresponding to the 2nd dhyana are collectively destroyed: the universe up to the Ābhassara heaven is destroyed [5.1.1]. The destruction by **wind** invades and destroys even the realms of the 3rd dhyana, that is, up to the Subha,kiṇha heaven. Only the subtle realms of the 4th dhyana and the 4 formless worlds are never subject to this universal destruction.⁹⁸

Most often, this contraction is brought about by the destructive force of “**fire**” (*tejo, jāla*), that is, for 7 successive aeons. At the end of the 8th aeon, the universe is destroyed “**water**” (*āpo, udaka*). Then again 7 cycles ending in destruction by *fire*, and the 8th by *water* again. When it has been 7 times destroyed by *water* at each, it is again destroyed 7 cycles by *fire*. In this manner, 63 aeons pass. And then, “**wind**” (*vāyo, vāta*) destroys the universe. This whole cycle of periodic cosmic destructions takes 64 great aeons⁹⁹ [2.1.2.1]: this is summarized in the following table: [Fig 1.5.3.4]

Key:

F = Fire

W = Water

Wd = Wind

Sequences: A1-A8, B1-B8 ... H1-H8.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	
A	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	W	8
B	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	W	8
C	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	W	8
F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	W	8
F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	W	8
F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	W	8
G	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	W	8
H	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	Wd	8

Total great aeons: 64¹⁰¹

Fig 1.5.3.4 The cycles of cosmic Destruction by fire, water and wind¹⁰⁰

1.5.3.5 Buddhaghosa, in his *Visuddhimagga*, and **Vasubandhu**, in his *Abhidharmakośa*, each gives a different explanation for the causes of the destruction of the universe. **The Visuddhimagga** says that the

⁹⁶ *Kālapa* (“group”) is a late Abhidhamma term referring to “groups” of the finest state of matter, termed *rūpa-kālapa*. See *Abhidhamm’attha,saṅgaha* 6.16-22; *Abhs:BRS* 1999:252-255 (index: matter).

⁹⁷ See **Satta Suriya S** (A 7.63), SD 47.8.

⁹⁸ For a diagrammatic representation of the ranges of these cosmic destructions, see Appendix: The 31 planes according to the Pali sources.

⁹⁹ On fire, water and wind destroying the universe, see *Vism* 7.40-44; Sadakata, *Buddhist Cosmology*, 1997:105 + Fig 14. The sutta terms are *tejo, apo vāyo*; the alternate names—*jāla, udaka, vāta*—are those mentioned in *Vism*.

¹⁰⁰ Based on “The three worlds” poster created by Bh Suvanṇo of Penang, Malaysia, undated (2001?). For a diagram representing this cycle of destruction in a linear manner, see Sadakata op cit, 1997:105 f + Fig 24.

¹⁰¹ 64 great aeons is also the lifespan of a Subha,kiṇha brahma (*Vism* 13.65/421 f).

universe is destroyed on account of the predominance (*ussannatā*) of one of the 3 unwholesome roots, that is, those of lust (*rāga*), ill will (*dosa*) and delusion (*mohā*).¹⁰² In a world-cycle which is destroyed by “fire,” the predominant (*ussanna*) defilement is lust among beings; the cosmic destruction by “water” arises through ill will; and the destruction by “wind” arises rooted in delusion.¹⁰³

The **Abhidharmakośa**, on the other hand, gives a different explanation for cosmic destruction, relating the cycles of destruction to the dhyana-factors (*jhān’āṅga*) connected with the highest world that is destroyed. Cosmic destruction reaches the highest world, that is, the 1st-dhyana brahma realm, when the “fault” (*apaḥṣāla*)¹⁰⁴ of “thinking and pondering” (*vitakka, vicāra*)¹⁰⁵ predominates there, “which burns the mind and is similar to fire.”

The destruction by **water** reaches up to the 2nd dhyana level of the Ābhassara beings as the highest world, when it is predominated by “joy” (*pīti*) “which, being associated with physical well-being, renders the body soft and flabby; it is similar to water.”

The destruction by **wind** reaches up to the 3rd dhyana world of the Subha, kiṇha brahmas, when it is predominated by in-and-out-breathing, which is of the nature of wind. (The physical breath is said to cease only in the 4th dhyana).¹⁰⁶

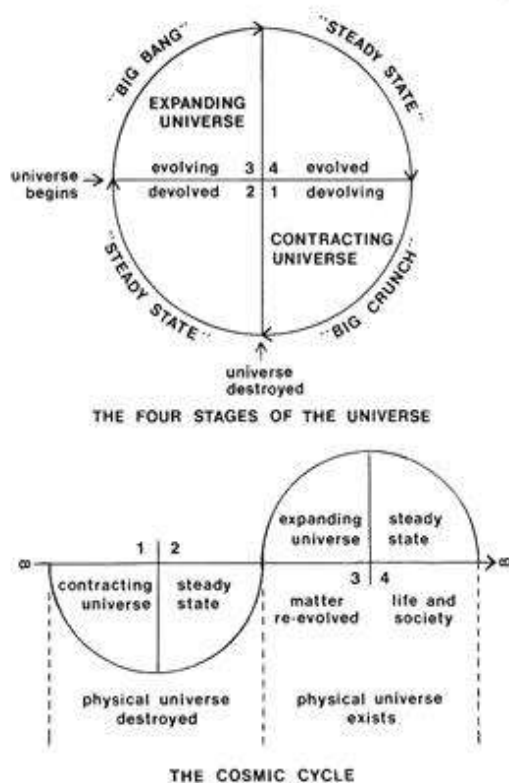


Fig 1.5.4: The cosmic cycle ©Piya Tan, 1991, 2020

1.5.3.6 This explanation shows a close parallel between the *mental* microcosm of the meditator progressing through the dhyanas and the *external* macrocosm of worlds evolving and devolving towards periodic destruction.¹⁰⁷ Of the 2 explanations of the causes for cosmic destruction, Vasubandhu’s explanation seems more feasible.

However, in either case, it is difficult to imagine how one’s mental states affect the cosmos. It is possible to interpret this explanation not in a *causal* sense, but rather in a “correlative” way: the “faulty” mental state and the cosmic destruction occur at the same time. The mental faults of the celestial beings arise as a symptom of their reaching the end of their lifespan, which coincides with the destruction cycle of the cosmos.¹⁰⁸

1.5.3.7 Buddhist cosmology is not a scientific attempt to explain the nature of the universe. Rather, it is based on the Buddha’s **knowledge of recollection past lives** (*pubbe-nivāsānussati ñāṇa*), which is (briefly) described thus, in the **Sāmañña,phala Sutta** (D 2):

¹⁰² On the 3 unwholesome roots (*akusala, mūla*), see **Mūla S** (A 3.69), SD 18.2; SD 4.14 (1.5); SD 50.20 (3.1.3).

¹⁰³ Buddhaghosa adds that “some” (*keci*) hold the alternative view that causes are as follows: destruction by fire was due to predominance of hate; by water, due to lust; by wind, due to delusion. (*Vism* 13.64/422).

¹⁰⁴ *Apakṣāla* is an obscure Skt word: vll *apsakṣala, apakṣana, apācara* (*Abhk:PR* 550 n569). **Kaṇṭaka S** (A 10.72/-5:133-135) uses the word “**thorn**” (*kaṇṭaka*): noise (*sadda*) is the thorn (*sadda*) to 1st dhyana; *vitakka, vicāra* to the 2nd dhyana; *pīti* to the 3rd dhyana; in-and-out-breath to the 4th dhyana, etc (SD 80.17).

¹⁰⁵ The usu tr for *vitakka, vicāra* is “initial application and sustained application,” but here the phrase refers to a general situation where this dhyana-factor apparently degrades into actual thinking.

¹⁰⁶ *Abhk* 3.100c-101d (*Abhk:Pr* 494). On the dhyana-factors (*jhān’āṅga*), see SD 8.4 (6).

¹⁰⁷ Gethin, “Cosmology and meditation,” 1997; also Punnadhammo, *The Buddhist Cosmos*, 2018:139-141 (§2:9).

¹⁰⁸ Cf the 5 death signs (*pubba, nimitta*) of a deva: **Pañca Pubba, ninita S** (It 83), SD 23.8a(1.2).

“With his mind thus *concentrated*, he directs and inclines it to the knowledge of the recollection of past lives.¹⁰⁹ He recollects his manifold past existence, that is to say, 1 birth, 2 births, 3 births, 4 births, 5 births, 10 births, 20 births, 30 births, 40 births, 50 births, 100 births, 1,000 births, 100,000 births, many aeons of cosmic contraction, many aeons of cosmic expansion, many aeons of cosmic contraction and expansion” (D 2,95-97/1:81 f), SD 8.10

Even so, this is *not* about miracles or psychic powers, but the Buddha teaching us, from his personal experience (that is, by self-verification) of the instability and change that we go through as sentient beings. It is a **reflection on impermanence** we are reminded to constantly do self-cultivation for mental development so that we reach the path of awakening leading away from samsaric suffering.

Hence, the suttas often remind us of the unimaginably long duration—countless world-cycles—that we have been caught in samsara that we should have learnt its true nature so that we want to be free of this cyclic suffering [1.5.3.2]. For a greater appreciation of this truth, it helps to understand how long a world-cycle, world period or “**great aeon**” (*mahā,kappa*) is—which is what we will look into next.

1.5.4 The evolving universe

1.5.4.1 The length of time the universe takes to complete *one full world cycle*—known as a “**world period**”—is called a “great aeon” (*mahā kappa* or simply *kappa*) [1.5.3.2]. It is made up of 4 intermediate aeons (*antara,kappa*),¹¹⁰ each of which is thus also called a “small aeon.” It consists of a period of contraction; then, the world remains stably contracted, fully devolved (the big crunch); then, a period of expansion; and finally, a period of expanded stability, a fully evolved world.¹¹¹ These are the 4 stages in a single cycle of a world-period or great aeon (*mahā,kappa*)—as we have noted, it is a **pulsating universe**.¹¹² [1.5.3.3]

The universe, the physical world, has neither beginning nor ending: it moves relentlessly in a cycle, rising and falling, evolving and devolving. We have already surveyed how the world ends or collapses into a big crunch [1.5.3.3]. We will now examine how, after the big crunch, the world re-evolves into habitable space for beings and the Buddha.¹¹³

1.5.4.2 The Brahma,jāla Sutta (D 1) gives this instructive explanation. After a long time (following the “big crunch”), the physical universe re-evolves. As the universe is expanding, an empty brahma-mansion (the celestial abode of Mahā Brahmā) appears. A certain celestial being, having passed away from his heaven arises in the empty brahma-mansion (on account of his good karma), and dwells there alone for a long time.

Mahā Brahmā, feeling direly lonely, wishes for company. At the very same time, other beings are reborn there in his company, and they dwell together. Mahā Brahmā, thinking he must be the first to arise there, grandly declares himself to be the Almighty, “By me have these creatures been created.” By way of

¹⁰⁹ *Pubbe,nivāsanānussati,ñāṇa*, lit “the knowledge of the recollection of past abidings [existences].” The remainder of this section is expanded into 4 sections in **Brahma,jāla S** (D 1,1.31-34/1:13-16 @ SD 25.3(76.3)) and 3 sections in **Sampasādaniya S** (D 27.15-17/3:107-112 @ SD 10.12). In both cases, each is used to explain how the eternalist view arose.

¹¹⁰ In Pali usage, an intermediate aeon (*antara,kappa*) is an indeterminate period, whose length varies with context. The Skt usage defines it as a fixed subdivision that is 1/20 of a great aeon (*Imahā,kalpa*; P *mahā,kappa*). On the “incalculable” (*asaṅkheyya*), see (1.5.3.3).

¹¹¹ See (**Catukka**) **Kappa S** (A 4.156/2:142) + SD 2.19 (9).

¹¹² For a diagram of the stages of the cosmic cycle, see SD 2.19 (8).

¹¹³ While “beings” is plural, the “Buddha” is in the singular because only 1 appears in a universe at one time, even though our present world-cycle, a “fortunate” one (*bhadda,kappa*), is said to have 5 buddhas: **Bahu,dhātuka S** (M 115,14) SD 29.1a; Abhk 3.95-96 (Abhk:PR 484 (3)). On the 5 buddhas in our aeon: SD 52.1 (9.1.1.2).

divine synchrony, the lesser brahmas, who have arisen there later, think reciprocally that he *must* be the Almighty, that “by this Lord Brahmā have we been created.”

In due course, one of those brahmas, having passed away, is reborn on earth. In this world, he goes forth as an ascetic, and devoted to meditation. He gains samadhi and is able to recollect his immediate past life, but nothing before that. Hence, he declares Mahā Brahmā to be the Almighty, our Creator, that he is eternal and unchanging, while we are not.¹¹⁴

1.5.4.3 The Aggañña Sutta (D 27), the discourse on the foremost knowledge, is a religious classic on ancient cosmology and evolution of society.¹¹⁵ At Sāvattihī, the Buddha teaches the 2 probationary monks, the brahmin youths Vāsetṭha and Bhāradvāja,¹¹⁶ to free them from the troubling notion that the brahmin caste is highest caste with various wisdoms and privileges. By way of an elaborate cosmological and evolutionary narrative, tinged with wry **humour**,¹¹⁷ the Buddha relates how the caste system of their society is really the result of the rise—presented actually as a *devolution*—of sentient beings and society. Being ignorant of this, “**the brahmins have forgotten the past.**”¹¹⁸

At the beginning of the aeon (*kappa*), beings possess radiant ethereal bodies, able to freely travel through the air, and feed on joy; in other words, they are devas. The newly evolved earth is mostly “water,” on top of which is rich creamy substance. Out of desire, these beings taste it and began to like it. As time passes, there are creepers, and then rice. Out of sensual greed, they continue to consume these. The coarser the food they eat, the coarser their bodies become so that they end up as physical beings.

In due course, they develop sexual organs, begin to have intercourse, and go on to build dwellings to hide their act.¹¹⁹ As their bodies become physically human, their lifespan, in turn, decreases. Immorality, strife, crimes and violence follow until many of them realize they need a leader to save society from anarchy. They elect their **1st king**, the great elect (*mahā,sammata*), the 1st kṣatriya. From him comes the lineages of the other 3 classes: brahmin, vaishya and sudra.¹²⁰

1.5.4.4 This narrative is a clear challenge to the brahminical ideology that they are born superior to all other classes, claiming to have descended from the mouth of Primal Man or their Supreme God himself. Although the Sutta appears to be a Buddhist account of the origin and evolution of the universe and society, many of the themes reflect **brahminical cosmogony** (with which Vāsetṭha and Bhāradvāja are familiar). This is clearly a satire of brahminical pretensions in Indian society.

On another level, the Sutta disguises many **Vinaya rules** depicted as acts that the mythical actors commit, hinting at the transgression of those rules for monastics.¹²¹ For example, in the Sutta’s account of the early stage of the earth’s evolution, it is said that one of the greedy beings “tasted the sweet earth with his finger,” which contravenes **Sekhiya,dhamma** rules 52 and 53 (V 4:198).¹²²

On a contemporary note, we may read interesting suggestions of **good ecology**; for example, naturally growing rice becomes a cultivated crop. This serves as a gentle warning against human actions moved by lust and laziness so that we end up harming and destroying our environment, even the world.¹²³ [4.1.2]

¹¹⁴ D 1,40-44/1:17 f (SD 25.2).

¹¹⁵ D 27/3:80-97 (SD 2.19).

¹¹⁶ On Vāsetṭha and Bhāradvāja, see SD 2.19 (4).

¹¹⁷ On Buddhist humour regarding the Sutta, see SD 2.19 (5).

¹¹⁸ D 27,4/3:81 (SD 2.19). On how the brahmins forgetting their past, see SD 2.19 (6).

¹¹⁹ On the origin of sexuality, see D 27,16/3:88-

¹²⁰ D 26,4-6/3:82 f (SD 2.19).

¹²¹ On **Aggañña S** and **the Vinaya**, see SD 2.19 (7.2).

¹²² D 27,12/3:85 (SD 2.19).

¹²³ See *Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism*, 2014: Aggañña Sutta.

1.5.4.5 The Cakka,vatti Sīha,nāda Sutta (D 26), the discourse on the wheel-turner’s lion-roar, seems to carry on from where the Aggañña Sutta [1.5.4.3] left off, and relates how the neglect of duties by a ruler (or a government) is the root of social problems. The Buddha relates the story of a “wheel-turner” (*cakka,vatti*) or universal monarch, Daḷha,nemi, whose righteousness keeps order and brings prosperity to the country.

Daḷhanemi’s successors, however, gradually fail in their responsibilities, bringing about immorality, strife and the shortening of life-spans from 80,000 years to a mere 10 years.¹²⁴ While the predominant emotion amongst the early beings of the Aggañña Sutta is lust, in the Cakka,vatti Sīha,nāda Sutta it is hatred.

Social disorder reaches its lowest point with the widespread and disastrous “7-day war.” At the height of it, people finally recognize their wrongdoings and gradually return to moral living. This begins to improve their conditions, until the time of a wheel-turner named Saṅkha, who prepares for the coming of the future buddha Metteyya (Skt *maitreya*). This is the only sutta that mentions the future buddha, the last in our fortunate world-cycle.¹²⁵

1.5.4.6 The world of **time and space**, samsara, is ever shifting and unstable. Time means impermanence; space means unsatisfactoriness, that there are always painful limits to how we *are*, what we *have*. Yet beings vainly try to live their lives with ease and more. Compared to the devas and brahmas, human lifespan is relatively very short indeed. We are often reminded of this to spur us on to live wholesome lives and attain the path in this life itself.

The life-spans of beings in the various realms vary, such that their times are relative to that of earth. **The Vibhaṅga** gives the following times and lifespans in the realms of the sense-worlds:¹²⁶

- **Cātum,mahā,rājika**: 50 human years are a night and a day there; 30 such nights is a celestial month; 12 such months are a celestial year; their lifespan is 500 celestial years = 9,000,000 human years.
- **Tāva,timsa**: 100 human years is a night and a day there; 30 such nights is a celestial month; 12 such months are a celestial year; their lifespan is 1,000 celestial years = 36,000,000 human years.
- **Yāma devas**: 200 human years is a night and a day there; 30 such nights is a celestial month; 12 such months are a celestial year; their lifespan is 2,000 celestial years = 144,000,000 human years.
- **Tusita devas**: 400 human years is a night and a day there; 30 such nights is a celestial month; 12 such months are a celestial year; their lifespan is 4,000 celestial years = 576,000,000 human years.
- **Nimmāna,ratī devas**: 800 human years is a night and a day there; 30 such nights is a celestial month; 12 such months are a celestial year; their lifespan is 8,000 celestial years = 2,304,000,000 human years.
- **Para,nimitta,vasavattī devas**: 1,600 human years is a night and a day there; 30 such nights is a celestial month; 12 such months are a celestial year; their lifespan is 16,000 celestial years = 9,216,000,000 human years.

The Paṭi,pūjikā Vatthu (DhA 4.4) tells a moving story of how an unnamed devi (female deva), wife of Māla.bhārī, a Tāvātimsa deva, passes away as she is sitting in a tree plucking flowers for her husband’s garland. Reborn into a Sāvattihī family, she recalls her past deva-life and wishes to return to her husband. She performs her earthly duties and offers alms to the monks, dedicating the merits to her rebirth back in Tāva,timsa. Having lived a full human life, she dies and is reborn in the same spot in Tāva,timsa where she has died earlier. Māla,bhārī, seeing her, asks where she has been all morning. She relates her story. Mala,-

¹²⁴ When humans average 10 years, a maiden of 5 is said to be ready for marriage (D 26,20.2/3:72), SD 36.10.

¹²⁵ D 26/3:58-79 (SD 36.10).

¹²⁶ Vbh 422,20-423,33. For the lifespans of the brahmas [6.1.2 f], see App (the 31 planes).

bhāri then reflects: “If human lifespan is so short, it is highly improper for them to indulge in a life of heedlessness.” This story was told by the Buddha in reference to **Dh 48**.¹²⁷

1.5.4.7 In general, beings of **the lower realms** live shorter, more precarious, lives, while the devas live longer and better lives. In the highest realms, the brahmas enjoy vast expanses of time—up to 84,000 aeons.

On account of the realities of time and space, the bliss of beings, even the highest of them, cannot be true happiness: it is not permanent, merely a relatively longer or shorter respite from pain. Behind every ladder to happiness there is a snake that swallows all down its jaws of pain into the guts of suffering.

Beings in the hell realms experience virtually endless pain and suffering until their karmic fruits that put them there are exhausted. In contrast, beings in the higher brahma realms enjoy bliss that seems entirely free of all overt suffering. Even when their lives may last for inconceivable lengths in human terms, they are, even then, surely inching their way for a great fall once their karmic fruits cease to feed and keep them.

1.5.5 Evaluation

1.5.5.1 Early Buddhist cosmology is not a scientific description of the cosmic cycle, and not meant to be. Even scientific knowledge changes within a generation; old ideas are revised, even debunked, for new theories and techniques. Science is progressive, which means it is not always right and accepts it so.

Buddhist cosmology, especially that of the suttas, has been the same, at least in spirit, since the Buddha’s time. The reason for this ironic stability is that it is about **impermanence** that underlies the physical universe itself. We must imagine that the Buddha well knows this through his meditative powers of “past-life recollection” by which he is able to recall the past, even to see the rise and fall of worlds, and the end and dawn of life. [1.2.2]

In **the Aggañña Sutta** (D 27) [1.5.4.3], the Buddha uses this understanding to show how the brahmins deceive themselves and try to cast their shadow over the whole of society. **The Cakka,vatti Sīha,nāda Sutta** (D 26) [1.5.4.5] reminds those in power that it comes from society, whose goodness or badness is but a reflection of what that power does or does not. These are cosmic lessons on a social level: they are true at any time; it’s only whether we see it, act accordingly and rightly, or not. [2.1.2.2; 3]

1.5.5.2 The universe itself is never static: it is ever expanding or contracting; we are living in between the cosmic contractions. Yet from death itself follows life: the wheel of life just keeps spinning. When we think or wish that this is our only life and world, we may fool ourself into believing that our bad actions, unseen, uncaught, are well worth it: for, this is our only life, there is neither karma nor rebirth. Live it to the best for our self, no matter what the costs.

But **karma** is real and it works: it has already made us what we are, often hopelessly so. Only by understanding and accepting karma are we able to keep it right and good for true happiness. Whether we believe in karma or not depends, actually, on our wisdom. Rejecting it is as bad as blindly believing in it. Some helpful understanding of **rebirth** usually comes from observing how people act and react in familiar ways, and that we often do, too. In other words, karma and rebirth work hand-in-hand. Try to see what wisdom arises from this open observation of life.¹²⁸ [6]

One key lesson from early Buddhist cosmology is that death is not the end. Death levels hell-beings, heavenly beings and humans; the cosmic crunch displaces them to another universe [5.1]. Only when we are free of life, will we be free of death: they are like light and the shadows it casts. We are but living

¹²⁷ DhA 4.4/1:362-366 + SD 54.15 esp (2.2).

¹²⁸ On the advantages of understanding karma, see SD 57.1 (4.4); on rebirth, see SD 57.1 (1.3).

particles caught in this vast cosmic stage in endless cyclic time. We play many roles, many same roles, again and again. The curtains come down only for the act; then, they open again, and ever again. There is only an audience of 2: karma and rebirth. The shows only blissfully end with nirvana.

2 The physical universe (chiliocosm)

2.1 THE SMALL UNIVERSE

2.1.1 The earth and the world system

2.1.1.1 In order to better and usefully understand the cosmos as envisioned in the early Buddhist texts, we must begin with understanding the world we are living in now, this planet earth, our environment. In this sense, this planet, our inhabiting it, enjoying it, caring it, is *the heart of the universe*. Just as we are made up of *earth, water, fire and wind*, so is the cosmos. Just as the cosmos is impermanent, so are we. We are the cosmos. [1.3.5.3]

But let us come down to **earth** first before going further. In terms of physical composition, the earth is just like any other celestial body: it is composed of the 4 elements. **The Mahā,parinibbāna Sutta** (D 16) records the Buddha as explaining the cause of an earth-tremor or an earthquake¹²⁹ in terms of the 4 elements, thus:

“Here, Ānanda, the great **earth** rests on water; the water on wind; the wind on space. And when the mighty wind moves, it disturbs the water, and through the disturbance of the water, the earth trembles.”¹³⁰ (D 16,3.13/2:107), SD 9

The “**earth**” here, of course, refers the solid manifestation of this planet. However, the other 3 elements (*dhātu*) are the “primary states” (*mahā,bhūta*) of matter, not in their narrow but in the broad senses. For example, **water** is not just H₂O or liquids in general, but also the *cohesive* characteristic of matter; **wind** is more than just moving air, but is *motion* of any kind; and **space** is *emptiness* that is the absence of these elements; yet it surrounds and contains these elements.¹³¹

When, with this understanding, we envision the Buddha’s explanation above, we see a bigger picture of **the earth** resting on “magma” (“water”),¹³² which, in its deeper levels, is molten and moves (“wind”); and all this rests in space.¹³³ Such a visualization makes good sense when we further see Mount Sumeru as the axis mundi, the world’s centre. All this is collectively called a “world sphere” (*cakka,vāḷa*).

2.1.1.2 A cakravala (anglicized form of Skt *cakra,vāḷa*) is a *world sphere* formed around the great cosmic mountain (axis mundi), Mount Sumeru.¹³⁴ The term *cakkavāḷa* is rare, but not unknown, in the

¹²⁹ The Buddha lists 8 occasions for earth-tremors (*bhūmi,cāla*), 7 of which herald key events in his life. Only the 1st is actually the physical “cause” of an earth-tremor or an earthquake.

¹³⁰ This clearly refers to what we today call the tectonic movements of the earth, causing earthquake, but on the other 7 occasions, “earth-tremors” would be more appropriate (an earthquake often has devastating effects).

¹³¹ “Fire” is not mentioned here: it refers to any kind of combustion, incl decay. On the 4 elements, see (1.5.3.4).

¹³² “Magma” refers to the molten parts of inner earth. The physical earth comprises the outer solid crust, a middle layer of mineral-rich mantle, and the molten core almost entirely of iron-nickel (NiFe) alloy. The core itself has 2 layers: a *liquid* outer core and a *solid* inner core.

¹³³ We must remind ourselves this is not meant to be any scientific (technical) explanation of geology, but simply part of the Buddha’s skilful means in highlighting the universal reality of impermanence. [1.5.5.1]

¹³⁴ Early Buddhist cosmology does not regard the earth as the centre of the universe, but “Mount Sumeru” is. Jayatilleke, *Facets of Buddhist Thought*, explores this analogy in his essay “The Buddhist Conception of the Universe” (2009:65-76).

Pali canon;¹³⁵ the concept is only fully developed in commentarial literature, where the term is common. Clearly, it is a technical term, and a late one.

Instead of *cakra, vāḷa*, the canonical texts use **loka, dhātu** (literally, “world-element”) or simply **loka** (“world”) to refer to a **world system**. This term used to highlight samsara, *impermanence*, *suffering* and the urgency to free oneself from it all. Hence, I have rendered *cakka, vāḷa* as “world sphere” or the anglicised “cakravala,” and *loka, dhātu* as “world system.” They are partly synonymous, but *loka, dhātu* has a broader sense. [1.5.1.1]

2.1.1.3 A cakravala is a “world sphere,” part of a larger cosmic system, a “world system.” We would today understand a cakravala as a solar system, that is, a grouping of celestial bodies circling the sun and, in Buddhist terms, *in which various kinds of beings live*. But the solar system exists as *part of an even larger universe*, comprising **world systems** (*loka, dhātu*). In fact, ours is not the only world-system, or even universe; there are numerous others.

Unlike the religious cosmologies in the theistic religions, Buddhist cosmology speaks of *countless* other world systems scattered throughout space and beyond—just as there are star systems in modern scientific cosmology. Let us examine more closely what a world system is.

2.1.1.4 What constitutes a “world system” (*loka, dhātu*)? [1.5.1] Simply: in the imagination of the early Buddhists, it is what makes up our *basic world system*. Since we are not making a historical study of religion or cosmology per se, but to understand *Buddhist* cosmology in terms of *our practice*, we may broaden and update such an idea. In modern terms, such a world sphere is the solar system, consisting of our star, the sun, and everything bound to it by gravity: the planets Mercury, Venus, Earth, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus and Neptune, dwarf planets such as Pluto,¹³⁶ dozens of moons and millions of asteroids, comets and meteoroids.¹³⁷

Such a definition, according to Buddhism, is only that of a **space-time or physical universe** (*okāsa, -loka*). Significantly, this excludes the “world of beings” (*satta, loka*) [1.5.2.4], that is, not just human beings and non-humans, but also non-humans (celestial beings and “aliens”) and subhuman beings in the suffering states. In other words, following the suttas—such as **the (Tika) Abhibhū Sutta** (A 3.80) [2.2.2]—such a **world sphere** will include not only our solar system (the whole earth, the sun, the moon, the planets, etc), but also the sense-world heavens, and the brahma realm of the 1st-dhyana, the 2nd-dhyana and the 3rd-dhyana [App].

Excluded, it seems, are the 4th-dhyana form realm and the 4 formless realms. They are *not* part of the *physical* universe; in a sense, they are *outside* of it, since they are of either a very refined form or simply formless. Hence, they are not affected by the cosmic turmoil of the cosmic cycle [1.5.3.3]. They last for a very long time: from 500 aeons to 84,000,000 aeons. [App]

2.1.2 The physical world (*okāsa, loka*)

2.1.2.1 Our purpose in interpreting early Buddhist cosmology is to facilitate an understanding of the Buddha’s cosmological imageries so that we appreciate the truths that they illustrate. The Buddha is here touching the knowledge, beliefs and imagination of his ancient Indian audience. This is a teaching whose

¹³⁵ There is only one use of the word *cakkavāḷa* in the 4 Nikāyas, in a verse at the end of **Mahā, parinibbāna S** (D 16,) which Comy says was added by the Sinhalese elders. It is also found in **Buddha, varṃsa** (B 1.64) and **Apadāna** (Ap 380,19, 585,17, 593,5), both of which are clearly late additions. It occurs frequently in Comys: J 1:203,22; BA 52,22; MA 3:373,19, 4:114,13 f, 121,16 f, 177,13, 5:7,18; SA 2:159,25 f; Vism 205,20 (see Vism:Ñ 7.40 for long n on “world sphere”).

¹³⁶ In 2006, the International Astronomical Union (IAU) formally redefined the term “planet” during their 26th General Assembly. That definition excluded Pluto and reclassified it as a dwarf planet.

¹³⁷ For a summary, refs and illustrations, see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_System.

import or significance needs to be “drawn out” (*neyy’attha*) [4.2.1.1]. Our modern understanding of science should help us see the merits of this cosmological imagination, considering that we are reviewing an ancient pre-scientific cosmology used to illustrate the Buddha’s timeless teaching.

2.1.2.2 With this openness and curiosity, we will be able to discover explanations and meanings seemingly hidden or lost to us on account of our “modern” learning. We must wonder, for example, how **Mount Sumeru** is regarded as the “central mountain” of the physical world (*okāsa,loka*) [2.1.3.1]. Clearly, the ancient Indians saw it in 2 ways: as the physical but remote mountain-range called the Himalayas (and their sacred mountains) and as the cosmic centre of their universe.¹³⁸

In fact, Buddhaghosa, in his *Āṅguttara Commentary*, gives us just such a picture—of Mount Sumeru as the axis mundi, thus:

Just as in a great lake there were a blue lotus, and the lotus is in the middle with 4 leaves. The lotus bud is like Mount Sineru [Sumeru], the 4 leaves are like the 4 continents and the surrounding waters like the rest of the space. This is well known to great beings with psychic powers who travel through space, and see Mount Sineru and its 4 continents like the blue lotus in the middle with 4 leaves and the surrounding waters like the rest of the space.¹³⁹ (AA 2:36)

2.1.2.3 Kloetzli, in his *Buddhist Cosmology* (1983), proposes the hypothesis that the 7 mountain ranges of the cakravala or world sphere [1.5.1.2] correspond to the spheres of **the 7 planets** in Greek cosmology, that is, the sun (*suriya*), the moon (*canda*; Skt *candra*), Mercury (*budha*), Venus (Skt *śukra*), Mars (*kuja*), Jupiter (Skt *brhaspati*) and Saturn (Skr *śani*).¹⁴⁰ This remarkable parallelism is no coincidence since these two ancient cultures share the roots of their respective Indo-Aryan mythologies.¹⁴¹ [1.4]

It also suggests that the ancient Aryans (the cultural roots of such ideas) knew the heavens well enough to have their own astronomical concepts and beliefs. This means that they had some deep understanding or imagination of how their land was located in the larger reality of this planet, and in the broader cosmic reality—this understanding of cosmology was as relatively advanced in their time as is ours in our own time. Two thousand years from now, the future would probably think in the same way about us today!

Unless we are experts in astronomy or some related fields, it would not help to speculate further. The relevant point here is simply that of the richness of the ancient cosmological imagination that was part of the ancient roots of modern science.¹⁴² It is sufficiently expedient for our purpose of understanding ancient Indian mythology in the context of a changing cosmos and the universal reality of impermanence.

Once again, we must be reminded that the purpose of Buddhist cosmology is not any kind of scientific explanation, but part of a skilful means to reflect on the **impermanence** even on the cosmic level, a truth which still applies to this day. [1.5.5]

¹³⁸ See Punnadhammo op cit 69-73 (1:11).

¹³⁹ *Yathā hi mahā,taḷāke eko’va uppala,gaccho assa, tassa cattāri ca paṇṇāni, majjhe ca ekaṃ uppala,makulaṃ assa. Evam evaṃ cattāri paṇṇāni viya cattāro dīpā, majjhe uppala,makulaṃ viya sineru,pabbato, sesaṃ udakaṃ viya udaka,parikkhitto okāso. Tassa mahanta,bhāvo iddhi,mantānaṃ pākaṭo hoti. Tesañ,hi ākāseṇa gacchantānaṃ cattāro mahā,dīpā cattāri paṇṇāni viya upaṭṭhahanti, sineru,pabbato majjhe uppala,makulaṃ viya, sesaṃ udakaṃ viya udaka,parikkhitto okāso.* (AA 2:36,11-19)

¹⁴⁰ For refs, see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indian_astronomy#Indian_and_Greek_astronomy.

¹⁴¹ Kloetzli 1983:43, 45 f.

¹⁴² Cf Punnadhammo op cit 67 f {1:10} who, however, rejects this possibility.

2.1.3 The existential world (*satta,loka*)

2.1.3.1 We have so far mostly spoken of early Buddhist cosmology in terms of a physical world (*okāsa,loka*; Skt *bhajana,loka*) [1.5.2.4], the location of space-time reality. We will here examine briefly the cosmos in terms of the lives that exist in it: **the existential world** or, less technically, the world of beings (*satta,loka*). [6.2.1]

2.1.3.2 Probably as early as Asoka’s time (when the canon was closed), and certainly by the Abhidharma period (4th century CE), there was already a fully developed doctrine of **the 31 places of existence** [App]. This is essentially a systematization of the various beings, their realms and categories, including their descriptions and details (their nature, size, habitat, lifespan, etc), mostly recorded in the Abhidharma texts (such as **the Vibhaṅga**), the Commentaries and ancillary works (such as **the Abhidhamm’-attha,saṅgaha** and its commentary) and Sanskrit, especially Vasubandhu’s **Abhidharma,kośa** with its autocommentary (*bhāṣya*).¹⁴³

2.1.3.3 The oldest extant Pali work on cosmology is **the Loka,paññatti** (which actually translates literally as “cosmology”).¹⁴⁴ It is a Burmese work whose author is unknown, written probably in Thaton in the 11th or 12th century.¹⁴⁵ It is not as systematic as the Sanskrit **Loka,prajñapti**, on which most of it is based. The Sanskrit original is lost but a Chinese translation dating from 558 CE is extant.¹⁴⁶ Later classics on Buddhist cosmology include the Siamese work, **Traiphum Phra Ruang**¹⁴⁷ [1.5.2.4].¹⁴⁸

2.2 COSMIC SYSTEMS (MEGAVERSES)

2.2.1 Megaverses

Let us look at **Mount Sumeru** again—this time as *the axis mundi*, the cosmic centre; that is, in terms of **cosmography** (as against *geography*) [1.5.1.3]. Interestingly, if we include **Mount Sumeru** and take it as the axis mundi, the galactic centre, then, we extend our conception of “world system” (*loka,dhātu*) to cover *the whole of our galaxy, the Milky Way*.¹⁴⁹ Of course, we can go further and include the whole of the visible or knowable universe, that is, even beyond our Milky Way. This may well be so, since, as we can see by now, early Buddhist cosmology is quite an open cosmology, a teaching tool.

For example, it would be interesting when we transpose the ideas of early Buddhist cosmology onto a modern image of **our galaxy**. For an idea that was more than 2500 years old, they the systems seem to fit quite remarkably close. [Fig 2.2.1]

¹⁴³ Vasubandhu’s *Abhidharma,kośa,bhāṣya* (late 4th cent CE).

¹⁴⁴ Ed & tr (French) E Denis, *La Lokapaññatti et les idées cosmologiques du Bouddhisme ancien*, 2 vols, Lille, 1977.

¹⁴⁵ Denis op cit 1:vii. It is however attr Saddhammaghosa (1443).

¹⁴⁶ Denis op cit 1:ii.

¹⁴⁷ Or Traibhūmikathā (1345): Norman, *Pali Literature*, 1983:174. Eng tr Reynolds & Reynolds, *Three Worlds According to King Ruang*, Berkeley, 1982. Phra Ruang (พระร่วง) is a legendary Siamese hero-king, usu described as the founder of the 1st Siamese kingdom by freeing itself from the ancient Khmer kingdom. The 1345 work is from the Sukhothai period, and “Phra Ruang” may refer to one of more of its kings, prob Lithai.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Phra_Ruang.

¹⁴⁸ For details, see Norman op cit 174 f. See also SD 2.23 (1.3).

¹⁴⁹ For an intro and refs, see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Milky_Way.

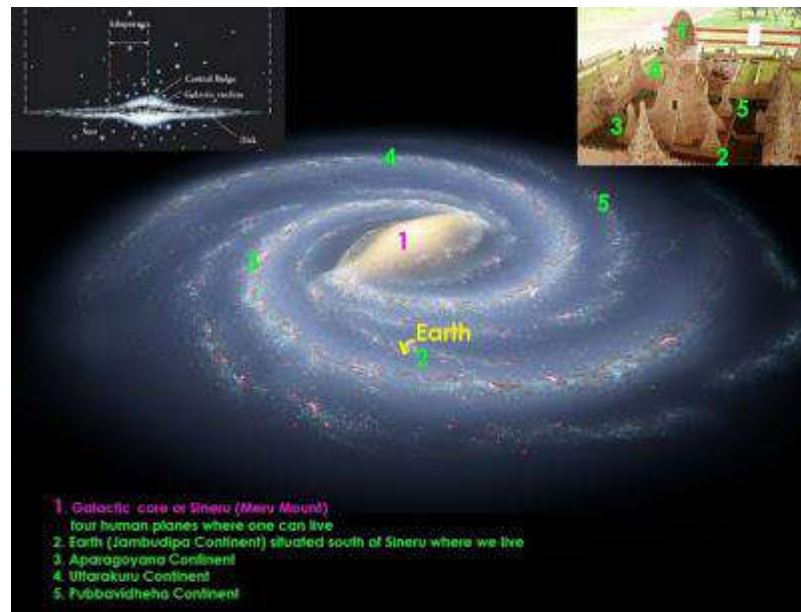


Fig 2.2.1 Ancient Buddhist cosmos and our galaxy

Source: <http://wisdomquarterly.blogspot.com/2012/11/where-is-center-of-world-mt-sumeru.html>.

2.2.2 *Loka, dhātu*

The (Tika) **Abhibhū Sutta** (A 3.80)¹⁵⁰ preserves a remarkable statement by the Buddha on this definition of *loka, dhātu* (world system), thus: [2.2.3]

“Ānanda, a thousand times the world in which the sun and the moon turn and light up the quarters with their radiance¹⁵¹—this, Ānanda, is called a **1,000 small world system** (*sahassī cūḷanikā loka, dhātu*).¹⁵²

In that 1,000 small world system,¹⁵³ there are:¹⁵⁴

a thousand moons,	
a thousand suns,	
a thousand Sinerus, kings of the mountains,	(the world-hubs)
a thousand Jambu, dīpas, ¹⁵⁵	(the Indian subcontinent)
a thousand Aparagoyānas,	(the Western Ox-wains)
a thousand Uttarakurus,	(the Northern Kurus)
a thousand Pubba, videhas,	(the Western Videhas)
a thousand 4 great oceans,	
a thousand Cātu, māha.rajīka heavens,	(the 4 great kings)

¹⁵⁰ A 3.80/1:226-228 (SD 54.1).

¹⁵¹ *Yāvatā ānanda candima, suriyā* (Ce Ee Ke Se; Be *candima, suriyā* throughout) *pariharanti disā bhanti virocana, tāva sahasadhā loko*.

¹⁵² See SD 54.1 (2.1.2.4). Comy: This is the range of a disciple (*ayaṃ sāvakassa visayo*, AA 2:341,1).

¹⁵³ The “1,000” here, then, is simply an adjective referring to a collection of neighbouring world systems; hence, the phrase is translated in the singular. See SD 54.1 (2.1.2.2+2.1.2.4).

¹⁵⁴ All this, up to the Para, nimmitta Vasa, vatti heaven, constitutes our “physical” universe, or, the “sense world” (*kāma, loka*). The brahma realms mentioned here constitute only the 1st of the 4 form worlds (*rūpa, loka*), which are all dhyanic in nature. For their locations in the early Buddhist cosmology, see SD 1.7 (App).

¹⁵⁵ *Jambu, dīpa* is the textual name for the ancient Indian subcontinent, the southernmost of the 4 great continents, surrounded by the 4 oceans. See SD 16.15 (3). For descriptions, see KhpA 123; SnA 2:443; DhsA 298.

a thousand Tavatimsā heavens,	(the 33 devas)
a thousand Yāma heavens,	
a thousand Tusita heavens,	(the contented devas)
a thousand Nimmāna, ratī heavens,	(devas who delight in creation)
a thousand Para, nimmita Vasa, vattī heavens,	(those who lord over others' creations)
and a thousand brahma worlds.	(A 3.80, 11/1:227 f), SD 54.1 ¹⁵⁶

Clearly, this is a description of a **multiverse**, which, comprises everything that exists: the entirety of space, time, matter, energy, information, and the physical laws and constants that describe them. The different universes within a multiverse are called “parallel universes,”¹⁵⁷ “other universes,” “alternate universes” or “many-worlds.” In other words, there are other universes similar to ours, just as there are other countries besides the one we are in now. Each of these other multiverses, called **loka, dhātu** (world system) is basically identical in structure as ours [2.1.1.3].¹⁵⁸

2.2.3 The 4 kinds of *loka, dhātu*

2.2.3.1 In all, the **(Tika) Abhibhū Sutta** (A 3.80) records the Buddha as speaking of these **4 kinds of world systems** (*loka, dhātu*), thus:

(1) <u>our immediate world system: “the universe”</u>	(<i>cakka, vāḷa</i>)
(2) <u>the “1,000-fold small” (or minor) world system</u>	(<i>sahassī cūḷanikā loka, dhātu</i>)
(3) <u>the “2,000-fold” or 1,000,000,000 “medium” world system</u>	(<i>dvi, sahassī majjhimika loka, dhātu</i>)
(4) <u>the “3,000-fold” or 1,000,000,000,000 “great” world system</u>	(<i>ti, sahassī mahā, loka, dhātu</i>)

The astronomical numbers above are explained as follows:¹⁵⁹

- (1) is our current universe;
 (2) is 1,000 = 10³ cakravālas, that is, 1,000 x (1) (in size);
 (3) is 1,000 x 1,000 = 1,000,000 = 10⁶ cakravālas, that is, 1,000 x (2),¹⁶⁰
 (4) is (1,000 x 1,000) x (1,000 x 1,000) = 1,000,000,000,000 = 10¹² cakravālas, that is, 1,000 x (3).¹⁶¹

2.2.3.2 World system (1) is our solar system and its quadrant as imagined by the early Buddhists, known simply as “the universe” (*loka, dhātu*, “world system,” or *cakka, vāḷa*, “world sphere”),¹⁶² that is, our “immediate” universe. (2) is technically as “small chiliocosm”; (3) is a “dichiliocosm”; (4) a “trichiliocosm.”¹⁶³ [1.5.2.4]

World system (2) is also simply called a thousandfold world system (*sahassī cūḷanikā loka, dhātu*), which is 1,000x larger than our immediate universe (1); a **small chiliocosm**, defined in the **(Tika) Abhibhū Sutta** (A 3.80) [2.2.2].

¹⁵⁶ Nc 235.2b; Dā T1.114b20c7. See SD 54.1 (2.1.2) for nn. Cf Punnadhammo, *The Buddhist Cosmos*, 2018:41 f.

¹⁵⁷ They are “parallel” in the sense of having almost identical structure but not in term of events (as in “different versions” of our own world. For intro and refs, see <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Multiverse>.

¹⁵⁸ On multiverses, see also SD 47.8 (2.3.6).

¹⁵⁹ For further notes on these 4 types of world systems, see SD 54.1 (2.1.2.0).

¹⁶⁰ In the North Indian Buddhist sources, this is said to consist of 1,000 x (1,000 x 1,000) = 10⁹ or a billion (US) cakravālas. See VbhA:Ñ (rev) 1996 2:216 n52.

¹⁶¹ This corresponds to the Buddha’s “field of authority” [4.3.2.2 (2)].

¹⁶² On these 2 terms, see SD 57.10 (2.1.1.2).

¹⁶³ The term “chiliocosm” first appeared in Abel Rémusat, Julius von Klaproth & C Landresse, *The Pilgrimage of Fa Hian*, Calcutta, 1848:131 (tr from French): <https://archive.org/details/pilgrimagefahia00rmgoog>.

World system (3) is a kind of “**mega**” universe, larger than (2) by 10^6 or 1,000,000 (a million); a **dichiliocosm**.

World system (4) is a kind of “**tera**” universe, larger than (3) by 10^{12} or 1,000,000,000,000 (a trillion); a **trichiliocosm**. As for the size of this tera-universe, the north Indian tradition—as found in Vasubandhu’s *Abhidharma,kośa* [2.1.3.1]—sees it as comprising *a billion* (1,000,000,000) world systems,¹⁶⁴ while the southern tradition—in Buddhaghosa’s commentaries¹⁶⁵—it is *a trillion* (1,000,000,000,000).

2.2.3.3 We have **another triad** of astronomical numbers in connection with the “**buddha-fields**” (*buddha,khetta*), that is, his fields of birth, of authority, and of range [4.3.2.2]. These extend, respectively, over:

- the “10,000 world system” (*dasa,sahassa cakka,vāḷa*),
- the “1,000,000,000,000 [trillion] world system” (*koṭi,sahassa cakkavāḷa*) = a “tera-universe” [above];
- an infinite number of world systems.

These are clearly normal “linear” numbers—that is, not exponential numbers, as in the 4 types of world systems [2.2.3.1]. Hence, **the “10,000 world system”** simply means just that many world systems around our *inhabited* world system. This is also called a “small world system.” Such “**a 1,000 small world system**” 1,000 suns, 1,000 moons, a 1,000 deva worlds, and 1,000 brahma worlds [2.2.2].

For the ancient Indian audience, clearly then, just as for most of us today, these are merely numbers that boggle our minds, if we are even able to conceive them. They are not meant to be taken in the technical scientific or astronomical sense. The reality is that there is no spatial limit to the size of the world systems, that is, the space-time realities (*okāsa,loka*) [1.5.2.4 n].

3 A sociology of the 3 worlds

3.1 THE SAMŚARIC FAMILY

3.1.1 All life one family

3.1.1.1 We are familiar with early Buddhism as comprising the 3 trainings in moral virtue, mental concentration and wisdom [1.2.1 (3) n]. From the perspective of social psychology, we can see this triad as that of the training regarding society, self and non-self. “**Society**,” specifically, a good society (one conducive to personal development, mental cultivation and spiritual progress), is rooted and founded on **moral virtue** (*sīla*), which is basically the restraint of our body and speech in relation of others.

We can usefully see this as a kind of sacrifice or “contract” we have with others by giving up some of our freedom that can be seen as *licence* should we take it as our self-centred liberty, that is, a common respect for *life, happiness, freedom, truth and wisdom*.¹⁶⁶ When these 5 **values** of humanity and life are respected, the good society is possible.

3.1.1.2 The respect for moral virtue [3.1.1.1], best expressed in its cultivation, conduces to **mental concentration** (*samādhi*), a term that covers all the practical aspects of meditation and its fruit, mental concentration. Hence, the suttas often speak of moral virtue that is “unbroken, untorn, unmixed, spot-

¹⁶⁴ Abhk 3.73 f. On the “power of 10,” see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Power_of_10.

¹⁶⁵ A 1:227 f; AA 2:340 f.

¹⁶⁶ These are the “5 values” underlying, respectively, each of the 5 precepts: against killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying and intoxication: SD 1.5 (2.7+2.8); SD 51.11 (2.2.3.4); SD 54.2e (2.3.2.5).

less, liberating, praised by the wise, untarnished, conducive to concentration.¹⁶⁷ Well cultivated moral virtue is the basis for a joyful focused mind: a healthy body builds a healthy mind.

Moral virtue, well cultivated, is the basis for a good society. It creates the good karma that propels us to a divine life and supports that divinity in the sense-world. In other words, the divinity is not “out there,” but within our own body and speech that is well cultivated.

Mental concentration, when well developed, frees us from the limits of the body and its senses. We free ourselves from the gravity of physical senses to enter the orbit of a calm and clear mind, that is the basis for insight wisdom and liberation. In short, we tap the full potential of the well-developed mind. [3.1.2]

When concentration is applied “externally” to our body and speech, in wholesome relation to others, it is called **mindfulness**. This is a direct awareness of our own speech, actions and thoughts that they do not harm us, nor others, nor the environment. Mindfulness, then, is not just an inward-looking monitoring, but acting right and well in every way in terms of self, others and the world we live in. It is **social ecology** in practice.

3.1.1.3 Moral virtue goes hand in hand with **mindfulness**, as we have just noted. We must be aware of ourselves and our actions in a wholesome way, and we work to be aware of others in the same way. This self-other mindfulness builds and shines moral virtue in us promoting a healthy community in our present reality. But this moral bond and healthy community does not stop here in this time-space: it pervades all our relationships. Or better: it promotes and highlights our common connection with every other being in the past, the present and the future, so long as we live.

In a set of 6 simple suttas in **the Samyutta**, the Buddha declares that, considering the unimaginable length of beginningless samsara, we have all surely been *mother, father, brother, sister, son and daughter* to others.¹⁶⁸ In other words, in the whole cosmos of beings, both in time and space, every time everywhere, we are members of the same family: the human family. Considering the mobility of rebirth, we are also family with other beings, non-human or divine, low or high. Hence, lovingkindness to all beings, accepting them unconditionally in a wholesome way, is in order.

3.1.2 Man the minder

3.1.2.1 To start off this section, we will reflect on this sobering reminder in **the Dhammapada**:

<i>Kiccho manussa,paṭilābho</i>	Difficult it is to obtain a human state.
<i>kicchaṃ maccāna jīvitam</i>	Difficult is the life of mortals.
<i>kicchaṃ saddhamma,savanam</i>	Difficult is the hearing of the true teaching.
<i>kiccho buddhānam uppādo</i>	Difficult is the arising of the buddhas [awakened ones].

(Dh 182)¹⁶⁹

It is difficult to gain the human state due to the fact that it is obtained with great effort through abundant moral wholesomeness. However, our pragmatist mind may wonder how is it that the human population is actually increasing? This teaching is not about *statistics*, but a state, on being human, **humanity**. Once fallen into a subhuman state, we stay there for an indescribably long period on account of

¹⁶⁷ Eg (**Tad-ah'**)**Uposatha S** (A 3.70,7.1), SD 4.18. On conditions conducive to concentration, see **Pacalā S** (A 7.58,-10/4:87 f), SD 4.11. See also UA 268. Cf “states conducive to concentration” (*samādhi,pakkha,dhammā*) (DA 2:245, 426; MA 3:182, 4:167; SA 3:209). On the recollection of moral virtue, see **Sīlānussati**, SD 15.11.

¹⁶⁸ Respectively, **Mātā S** (S 15.14/2:189), SD 57.2; **Pitā S** (S 15.15/2:189), SD 57.3; **Bhātā S** (S 15.16/2:189), SD 57.4; **Bhaginī S** (S 15.17/2:189), SD 57.5; **Putta S** (S 15.18/2:190), SD 57.6; **Dhītā S** (S 15.19 (SD 57.19/2:190), SD 57.7.

¹⁶⁹ The version in **Patna Dh** (Dh.Pn 357 (19.16)) and **Gāndhārī Dh** (Dh.Gn 263 (16.5)) respectively differ in 2 different lines: see Bh Anandajoti, *A Comparative Edition of the Dhammapada*, 2007:101.

the difficulty of practising moral virtue there. Such subhuman states can exist anywhere in the physical universe, the sense world, such as in the “dark hells” of the interworld void [3.2.3.4].

3.1.2.2 Why is it difficult to be human? [3.1.2.1] It is *not* difficult to be born or reborn a human, but it *is* difficult to *be human*. We are born only with a **human body**, but our parents’ love, care and coaching make us *human*. Then, relatives, friends, teachers and others socialize us. However, very often a large part of us remains unhumanized, still in the darkness of our subhuman nature and capabilities. Only self-awareness and moral discipline prevent this darkness from blinding us and others. Only insight wisdom removes this darkness and liberates us into the light of freedom.¹⁷⁰

3.1.2.3 Why is the life of mortals difficult? [3.1.2.1] Those who are born will die, and be reborn, again and again. We are **mortal**, and our life is difficult because it lasts only a short time, even though we must contrive to support ourselves with some livelihood, engaged in constant activity (such as agriculture or a profession). Even when we live a leisurely life off some income or wealth, we must find ways of entertaining or distracting ourselves, often in self-demeaning, even dehumanizing, ways. We have never really enjoyed the human state or humanity. When our human body dies, we simply continue to be what our subhuman mind is.

When we are willing and able to cultivate moral virtue and perform deeds of merit, we may be reborn in the heavens. However, even if we attain the highest heavens (living there for many world periods), that life, as any life, too, must end. Then, we fall into the subhuman states according to our dark nature that still lurks in us.¹⁷¹

3.1.2.4 Difficult it is to hear the true teaching [3.1.2.1] because one who proclaims it is hard to come by, often for many aeons. What we do often hear are merely ramblings of unawakened minds peddling views rooted in greed, hate, delusion or fear, often all of these. We are, as a rule, drawn to such teachers because we share some common or similar views, or on account of some past connections. Hence, we are drawn to the *person*—by looks, voice, external holiness and ideas¹⁷²—that is, we place the *teacher* above and before the teaching: we have built up a **cult** and become **an idol-worshippers**.

3.1.2.5 Difficult is the arising of buddhas [3.1.2]. It is hard for the Buddha to arise in our time because few are those who truly resolve to become buddhas, not taking it merely as a ritual or vow, a mere religious statement or some status. This buddha resolve is only fulfilled through enormous efforts, sacrifices and sufferings. Hence, the birth of such a one, with successful resolve, too, is rare even for many aeons.

Hence, once we have the good karma to live and listen to the Buddha or his teachings in this universe, we should seize the rare opportunity for self-awakening. Even if we do not meet such a Buddha but we are diligent to study and practise his teachings recorded in the early suttas, and grasping the spirit of the Buddha Dharma, by minding impermanence, we will see true reality and reach the path as **stream-winners** in this life itself.

3.1.3 Man the renouncer

3.1.3.1 An interesting and Dharma-based way of understanding the various realms of beings, the 31 planes of existence [App] is in terms of **renunciation** (*nekkhamma*), especially the renouncing of wrong views. Views, both wrong and right, are included the 3rd of the 3 unwholesome roots of greed, hate and

¹⁷⁰ See SD 36.1 (4.3.3).

¹⁷¹ On celestial beings being reborn in the subhuman states, see (**Catukka**) **Puggala S 1** (A 4.123), SD 23.8a.

¹⁷² See **Rūpa S** (A 4.65/2:71), SD 19.2a (6.5).

delusion. While a wrong view is like a virus that infects our thoughts, speech and action, even following us into the next life or subsequent lives, even a right view upheld but not properly understood and not effected with right practice and realization will have similar effects as a *wrong view*.

Right view, on the other hand, is the first of the 8 limbs of the noble path, and pervades every other limb of it. But it is still only the path, which means that we must keep moving, progressing, on the path itself. Views are, after all, our way of seeing things, even true reality. When we fully understand **true reality**, then, we know “**the all**” (*sabba*) [1.2.2.3], not just a part of it. We no more see only one side of the mountain, but we know the *whole* mountain. With full awakening, we are free from all views and have no need of them.

3.1.3.2 Those who are burdened most heavily and deleteriously by **wrong views** are the denizens of the subhuman planes: *the hell-beings, the pretas, the animals and the asuras* [3.1.2.3]. Most of the devas of the sense world still have wrong views of some kind. However, they have done such wholesome karma of **moral virtue** that have brought them rebirth in a commensurate happy realm.

Those beings in the form world and the formless world have not only habitually created wholesome karma by way of moral virtue, but they have also trained their minds in **calm, joy and peace** that they continue to enjoy happiness profoundly in their heavens. While the devas of the sense world have restrained their bodily acts and speech (and so continue to enjoy the divine pleasures of their physical existence), **the brahmas of the form world**, having transcended their bodies, cultivate their minds so that they are by nature radiant: they are radiant beings.

The formless brahmas have not only transcended their physical bodies, but have also refined their mental faculties to such a quality that they transcend even its radiance (which is subtle matter), and live the profound bliss of their formless world as energy beings.

3.1.3.3 What differentiates all these various realms of beings is **their minds**, whether they have *abused* the mind or *cultivated* it. Clearly, by “mind” here, is meant “thought” in a special operational sense of *motivating* and *defining* our mind, body and speech (the 3 karmic doors). In short, this is our own **intention** or volition (*cetanā*). It is with this understanding that we should read the first 2 verses of **the Dhammapada**:

*Mano,pubb’añgamā dhamma
mano,señhā mano,mayā
manasā ce paduñhena bhasati vā karoti vā
tato naṃ dukkham anveti cakkaraṃ va vahato
padaṃ*

The mind precedes all mental states;
the mind is supreme; mind-made are they:
when, with a defiled mind, one speaks or acts,
suffering follows one like a wheel that dogs a draught
ox’s foot. (Dh 1)

*Mano,pubb’añgamā dhammā
mano,señhā mano,mayā
manasā ce pasannena bhasati vā karoti vā
tato naṃ sukham anveti chāyā va anāpayinī*

The mind precedes all mental states;
the mind is supreme; mind-made are they:
when, with a pure mind, one speaks or acts,
happiness follows one like a shadow that leaves not.
(Dh 2)

3.2 THE SENSE WORLD

3.2.1 Evolution and realms

3.2.1.1 Early Buddhist cosmology is essentially evolutionary and interpretive. It is **evolutionary** in 3 senses:

- (1) **beings** evolve or devolve, according to their karma, in a “Snakes and Ladders”¹⁷³ samsara [6.1.3.3];
- (2) many, if not all, of the specific aspects of Buddhist cosmology (especially the suffering states and heavenly realms) have **evolved** since the earliest Buddhist times; [3.2.2] and
- (3) the whole idea of early Buddhist cosmology is to inspire us to avoid both the kind of **karma** that brings us to the suffering states [3.2.2], to remain in the human state, or even enjoy the heavenly states [3.3], but to *get out of it all* and attain nirvana.

Early Buddhist cosmology is **interpretive** in the sense that they are *not* dogmas to strike karmic fear in us or to keep us in line as docile inhabitants of imperious religion or imperial hierarchy (as in premodern India or China). Rather, they serve as vivid reminders that we are what we think and how we act. We become our karma.

3.2.1.2 We have stated that **beings** *progress or decline*, according to their karma, in a “snakes and ladders” samsara [3.2.1.1 (1)]. This is especially true of the 4 subhuman states: the hells [3.2.3], the animals [3.2.4], the pretas [3.2.5] and the asuras [3.2.6].

In terms of **karma**, we see these states (and those of the celestial beings) as being psychologically **archetypal** states: we habitually act out these behaviours that effectively define us. These are rooted in our thought-patterns rooted in *greed, hate or delusion*) that characterize the habitual violence of hell-beings, the predictable instincts of animals, the insatiable addictiveness of pretas, and the measured exploitativeness of asuras.

In **rebirth** terms, our we *become* our karma. When the shelf-life of our human frame has ended, our consciousness continues in its habitual violence as hell-beings, its predictable instincts as animals, its insatiable addictiveness as pretas, and its measured exploitativeness as asuras. Our karma becomes us: *our karma is us*.

3.2.2 The suffering states

3.2.2.1 We have stated that many, if not all, of the specific aspects of Buddhist cosmology (especially the suffering states and heavenly realms) have **evolved** since the earliest Buddhist times [3.2.1.1 (2)]. The earliest Buddhist sources—the Pali suttas (such as **the Pañcagati Sutta** (A 9.68)—speak only of **the 5 realms**: *the hells, the animal realm, the preta domain, the human world and the heavens of the gods* [6.1.1.2].

Of these, only humans and animals are normally *visible*; the rest (including the asuras) are *invisible* to our normal sight. On the fringes of the lower realms lurk the pretas, of whom some have claimed to have seen (out of a psychic bent or cultural conditioning).

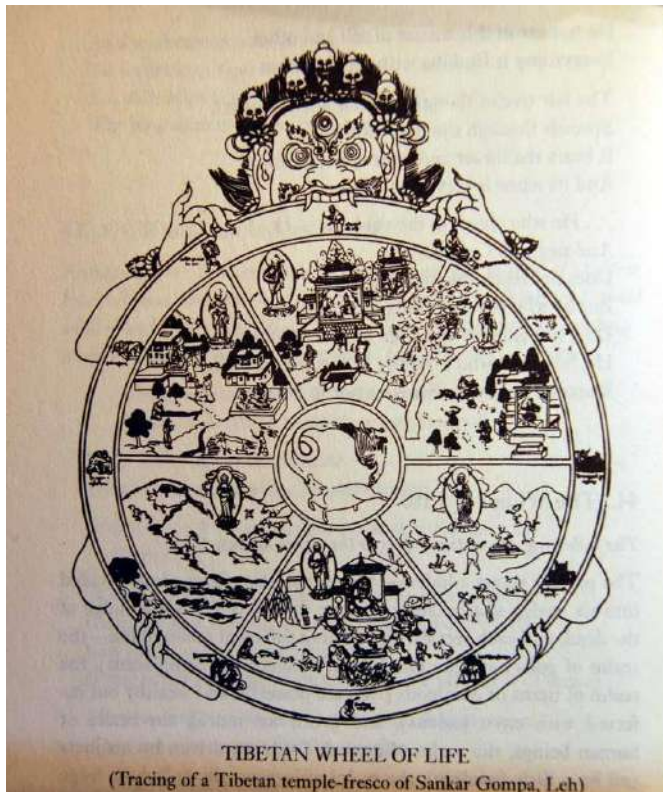


Fig 3.2.2 The wheel of life. Source: <https://www.lib.uidaho.edu/digital/turning/images/Wheel-of-LifeL.jpg>.

¹⁷³ On the ancient Indian game of Snakes and Ladders as being based on the karma-and-rebirth ideas of the cosmos, see SD 48.1 (6.3.1.5).

Another reason for their invisibility is that they play the role of **mythical figures**. They may actually be real beings, if we take the suttas and commentaries literally, but it is their mythical roles that are highlighted in the sutta lessons. They are not objects of beliefs, much less of worship, but of skilful means for our spiritual instruction.

The later texts often speak of **the 6 realms** [6.1.1.3], with the addition of the asuras [1.5.2.1] to the 5 realms. These 6 realms are famously portrayed in **the wheel of life** (*bhava, cakra*; P *bhava, cakka*) [Fig 3.2.2], thus:

3.2.2.2 The wheel of life (in the Tibetan tradition) prominently depict the relative positions of each of the 6 realms in 6 segments of the wheel. The 3 realms below the equator (the middle horizontal line) are the suffering states (left to right): the animals, the hell-beings and the pretas. Above the equator are the “happy” realms of humans, the gods (devas and brahmas) and the asura.¹⁷⁴ [3.2.6]

At the very centre of the wheel, its hub, are **3 animals**—a cock, a pig and a snake—representing the “3 poisons,” greed, hate and delusion (the 3 unwholesome roots), the root conditions for these states and our movement in and out of them. They are biting each other’s tail, in uroboros fashion.¹⁷⁵

The whole wheel of life is in the tight grasp of a demon-like Yama, the lord of death.¹⁷⁶ In the suttas, **Yama** is actually a kind of concerned counsellor who keep asking the hell-beings who come before him why they had not heeded the warning signs of bad karma. In terms of early Buddhism, then, this demon either depicts time or impermanence,¹⁷⁷ or mythically, Māra or Death personified.¹⁷⁸

3.2.3 The hell-beings

3.2.3.1 Scholar **Ineke Van Put** has done a study tracing the development from just one hell (*niraya*; *Skt naraka*) or great hell (*mahā, niraya*) to the elaborate hell-systems of **the Deva, dūta Sutta** (M 130) and **the Bāla, paṇḍita Sutta** (M 129).¹⁷⁹ This hell is described as an immense iron cube-like chamber with 4 gates in the cardinal points. It is burning red-hot all over, and beings suffer from the heat but do not die (like Prometheus in Greek mythology). This idea clearly reflects the ancient Indian knowledge and use of **iron** (it was, after all, the Iron Age).¹⁸⁰ It was also a period that saw the rise of kingdoms merging through conquests into empire.

Many of the terrible tortures described as occurring in *niraya*—the axe, the knife, iron pellets, molten copper, the fivefold pinion, the 100 nails, the chariot, fire, the blazing mountain, and the cauldron—probably reflected the tortures that kings used on their enemies and criminals. When Buddhism reached China, their hell system comprised of the 10 courts of hell, reflecting the imperial judicial system with 10 versions of Yama, who then took the role of judge and dispenser of punishments. [3.2.2.2]

3.2.3.2 In fact, **the Pātāla Sutta** (S 36.4) gives us an insight into the ancient belief in a flat-disc world, beyond whose rim (the world’s end) lies the “bottomless abyss” (*pātāla*) hells below. In fact, the Saṃyut-

¹⁷⁴ For the story behind the wish-fulfilling tree in the asura realm (2 o’clock), see **Magha V** (DhA 2.7, esp §100), SD 54.22.

¹⁷⁵ On the uroboros, see SD 23.3 (1); SD 49.2 (4.3.2.3).

¹⁷⁶ For details on this wheel of life, see SD 5.16 (14). For an explanation of the outer rim depicting the 12 links of dependent arising, see SD 5.16 (8).

¹⁷⁷ On Yama’s role as lord of the hells, see SD 2.23 (4),

¹⁷⁸ See **Māra**, SD 61.8; **Mahā Parinibbāna S** (D 16,3.4), SD 9; **Māra Tajjanīya S** (M 50), SD 36.4 (2.3).

¹⁷⁹ M 129/3:163-178 (SD 2.22); M 130/3:178-187 (SD 2.23). Ineke Van Put, “The names of Buddhist hells in East Asian Buddhism,” *Pacific World* 2007:205-229.

¹⁸⁰ See SD 52.1 (2.2.1.11).

ta Commentary speaks of *vaḷabhā,mukha* as a term for the opening or precipice in the great ocean that we fell into below which was located the Great Hell (*mahā,naraka*) (SA 3:75).¹⁸¹

The Buddha rejects such a view, and instructs us that the “bottomless abyss” beyond the oceans—that what we imagine to be “hells”—is really just a “designation” (*adhivacana*) for painful bodily feelings.¹⁸² Hell then is not really a place but a very real and painful state of mind of karmic suffering.

3.2.3.3 There is also no mention of any “8 hot hells” or “8 cold hells” in the suttas. Ideas about them—which probably developed from that of *niraya*—may have originated from **the Kokālika Sutta** (S 6.10), which names the following 10 hells (*dasa niraya*): Abbuda, Nirabbuda, Ababa, Aṭaṭa, Ahaha, Kumuda, Sogandhika, Uppala, Puṇḍarika and Paduma. The duration of suffering in Abbuda is *unimaginably* long. The Buddha compares it to the time it takes to empty a Kosala cartload of 20 measures (*khārika*)¹⁸³ of sesame seed (*tila*) by a man taking away just 1 seed from there every 100 years—even when the cart has been emptied, 1 *abbuda* has not passed! And each of the subsequent hells is 20x longer than the preceding one!¹⁸⁴

Curiously, none of these names are incorporated into the hell-system of early Buddhism. The Commentary explains that these are not separate hells, but merely designations for the different parts in **Avīci** (the lowest of the hells) (SA 1:218 f).

The Sanskrit form of these names (only 8 of them)—*arbuda, nirarbuda, aṭaṭa, hahava, huhuva, utpala, padma* and *mahā,padma*—are found in later literature, such as in the *Abhidharma,kośa*, where they are said to be the *forms* the hell-beings assume (such as a lotus) or the utterances they make (such as laughing) in these biting *cold* hells.¹⁸⁵

3.2.3.4 Another interesting development in the suttas is the mention of **dark hells**, like some black hole or phantom zone, located in **the interworld void** where 3 world-spheres (galaxies?)¹⁸⁶ meet. It’s fascinating how the early Buddhists knew about such phenomena. All this suggest that in the earliest teachings, the hells are not regarded as locations, but simply the mental experiences of excruciating suffering on account of our own karmic fruits.

The later graphic descriptions of hellish tortures—such as those described *briefly* in **the Bāla Paṇḍita Sutta** (M 129) and *more elaborately* in **the Deva,dūta Sutta** (M 130)—were clearly meant for the intractable masses who were untouched or unmoved by teachings on moral virtue and mindfulness. **M 130**¹⁸⁷ is interesting in describing how the king tortures criminals—seeing how they are now tortured and how such future fears can arise in us just thinking of them. The Sutta then states how even more painful are the sufferings of hell.

The point, however, remains that even if we do not believe the hells to be actual places, our sufferings are all the more real than what are described in the suttas since they arise from our own minds. Such sufferings will last so long as our bad karma (such that of as habitual violence) remains unexhausted.¹⁸⁸

¹⁸¹ According to SED, *vaḷabhā,mukha* (Skt) is the name of the entrance to hell. See Tha:N 274 n1104. Cf **Pātāla S** (S 36.4/4:206 f), SD 2.25.

¹⁸² Pātāla S (S 36.4) + SD 2.25 (esp 1.1.1). On a possible location of *pātāla* in the Indus delta, see SD 20.9: II 1104 (2).

¹⁸³ 1 *khāri(ka)* or *khāra* = 16 (or 18) *doṇa* (a food-bucket) [S 3.13,2, SD 37.13(1)] = 3 bushels (SED: *khāra*). 1 bushel = (UK) 8 gallons (36.4 litres); (US) 64 pints (35.2 litres).

¹⁸⁴ S 6.10/1:52.

¹⁸⁵ Abhk 3.59cd. On Vasubandhu’s view, see SD 2.23 (1.4).

¹⁸⁶ On the interworld void, see **Andha,kāra S** (S 56.46/5:454), SD 53.2; SD 2.19 (10). See also D 14,1.17/2:12; M 123,7/3:120; A 4.127/2:130.

¹⁸⁷ M 129,2-8/3:163-166 (SD 2.22).

¹⁸⁸ See the refrains for each of the punishments described in **(Majjhima) Deva,dūta S** (M 130,9-27/3:182-186); the hells are listed therein: M 130,16-27 (SD 2.23); also in **Bāla Paṇḍita S** (M 129,9-17/3:166 f), SD 2.22. On the reality of hellish sufferings, see SD 2.23 (3).

3.2.3.5 The Deva,dūta Sutta (M 130), aside from the graphic descriptions of hellish punishments, casts very positive light on the darkest aspects of religious cosmology, the hells. Firstly, the Sutta’s commentary quotes an untraced sutta verse:

*Na vessabhū no pi ca petti,rājā
somo yamo vessavaṇo ca rājā
sakāni kammāni hananti tattha
ito paṇunnaṃ para,loka,pattan’ti*

Neither Vessabhū nor the preta king,
nor Soma nor king Yama nor king Vessavaṇa:
therein one’s own deeds [karma] punish one,
who, ending it here, attains to other worlds.

This remarkable verse implies—as **the Pātāla Sutta** (S 36.4)¹⁸⁹ instructs us [3.2.3.2]—that what we imagine to be “hell,” is really just a “designation” (*adhivacana*) for painful bodily feelings. Our bad karma appears as hell-wardens (*niraya,pāla*) to us and we internally (in our minds) suffer those excruciatingly hellish pains, which are virtually real.¹⁹⁰ Buddhaghosa, in his Commentaries, thinks that perhaps these “hell-wardens” are “merely some kind of mechanical forms karmically generated”.¹⁹¹ what we today know as “intelligent” robots or emotionless automatons!

3.2.4 Animals

3.2.4.1 It is remarkable in itself that early Buddhism gives such prominence to **animals** by recognizing them as a class or realm of their own. As a whole, animals often face painful physical suffering through being hunted by other animals, and being hunted, exploited and mistreated by humans. Their further disadvantage is that they are neither able to reason nor to understand the cause of their predicament.

Despite being driven mostly by instinct even from birth, they lack the advantage of control that gives strength to trade off humans who are able to, at least temporarily set aside their instinct. Animals also lack language for understanding the subtleties of the Buddha’s teaching, much less realizing the true reality of things.

Early Buddhism is well above every other mainstream religion in highlighting animals’ capacity for altruistic conduct and not treating them as ritual objects. They can thus quickly free themselves from their disadvantaged state. Furthermore, Buddhism routinely teaches unconditional acceptance and **compassion for animals**, especially when there is mobility of rebirth amongst all the realms [1.5.3.2].

3.2.4.2 The (Saddha) Jāṇussonī Sutta (A 10.177) warns us that doing good (like social work) alone without cultivating moral virtue will only bless us with rebirth as well-loved and well-treated animals (including becoming pets to humans). Moral virtue, as a rule, frees us from our lowly existence to attain divine birth; higher rebirth in the form world or formless world requires appropriate mental development, that is, meditation.

The Jatakas (*jātaka*), stories of the Buddha’s past lives, are full of stories when he was reborn as a kind, even wise, animal. **Tha Cariyā Pitakā** contains accounts of how the Bodhisattva cultivated or showed various virtues not only as a human or a deva, but also as an animal, such as a snake, a bird and a fish [1.2.2.1 n]. When we aspire to **buddhahood**, our rebirths tend to be wholesome, even when, on account of our karma, we are reborn as animals.¹⁹²

¹⁸⁹ Pātāla S (S 36.4) + SD 2.25 (esp 1.1.1).

¹⁹⁰ **Kathā,vatthu** quotes some of the early schools as holding this view, but Kvu itself maintains that they are real beings. (Kvu 20.3/598,7)

¹⁹¹ *Yanta,rūpaṃ viya kammam eva kārāṇaṃ kāreti* (MA 4:231; AA 2:227; NmA 2:424).

¹⁹² Interestingly, when we aspire to streamwinning, and live our life accordingly (cultivating moral virtue and cultivating mindfulness of impermanence), we will not attain any subhuman rebirth: SD 16.7 (1.7.3.3).

3.2.4.3 Animals closely associated with the Buddha are reported to be reborn as devas in Tāvatiṃsa (heaven of the 33).¹⁹³ This was the case with **Kaṇṭhaka**, the Bodhisattva's horse, who died of a broken heart when his master renounced the world.¹⁹⁴ So it was, too, with a dog loyal to a pratyeka-buddha and that died on seeing him depart.¹⁹⁵ One of the most remarkable story, from **the Vimāna, vatthu**, is that of a frog who attains deva-birth merely by listening to the Buddha's soothing voice, and suddenly dying with a joyful mind!¹⁹⁶

On the other hand, humans can also be reborn as animals. **The Cūla Kamma, vibhaṅga Sutta** (M 135) relates how the miserly brahmin Todeyya was reborn as a dog in his own home. His son, Subha, became fond of it. In due course, when the Buddha visited Subha's home, the dog barked at him. When the Buddha told Subha that the dog had previously been his father, Subha was offended, claiming that he had been reborn in the brahma world. The Buddha then got the dog to reveal where the late father had buried his treasure. The dog later died and was reborn in hell.¹⁹⁷

In a wryly humorous **Vinaya** story, a monk attached to his robes is reborn as a louse in them! The Buddha instructs the monks to put the robes aside for a week (after which time, it dies).¹⁹⁸ Ghosaka, in a past life as Kotūhalaka, cast away his young son in time of famine, and was reborn as a dog.¹⁹⁹ A woman's husband was reborn as a dog who remained loyal to her.²⁰⁰

Such stories only exhort us **to treat animals well**, since this clearly helps to free them from their sub-human state and its disadvantages, and also on account of our karmic familial connection with all beings. [1.5.3.2]

3.2.5 The pretas

3.2.5.0 Besides our close karmic connections with animals, we also have a similarly close karmic connection with **the pretas** (*peta*). In fact, the pretas have one of the most interesting and colourful evolution of all the beings in Buddhist cosmology. They debuted into Buddhist cosmology simply as “departed ones,” in **the (Dasaka) Jāṇussoṇi Sutta** [3.2.5.1]; then, appeared as nameless suffering beings flying through the air [3.2.5.2]. In **the Āṭāṇāṭiya Sutta**, they are associated with the “southern” quarter [3.2.5.4]. Preta stories were then formalized and collected into **the Peta, vatthu** [3.2.5.3]; Their most Buddhist appearance is described in **the Tiro, kuḍḍa Sutta** [3.2.5.5]; and the most developed stage in preta belief arose outside of early Buddhism, in Mahāyāna, as “hungry ghosts.” [3.2.5.4 (5)].

3.2.5.1 The oldest idea of pretas is probably found in **the (Dasaka) Jāṇussoṇi Sutta** (A 10.177), where they are simply “departed ones,” those have passed away (*kāla, kata*), and thus also called “former fathers” (*pubba, peta*),²⁰¹ but are caught in some kind of limbo that prevents them from being reborn in

¹⁹³ On the elephant who looks after the Buddha in Parileyya forest (S 22,81; DhA 1:59), SD 6.1 (3); the monkey who offers him food (SD 6.1 (3.2)). See also R68a + R152: <http://www.themindingcentre.org/dharmafarer/weekly-reflections>. On animals in Tāvatiṃsa, see SD 54.22 (7.2.1.3).

¹⁹⁴ See SD 52.1 (120.4).

¹⁹⁵ **Sāmā, vatī V** (DhA 2.1,2/1:171-173).

¹⁹⁶ **Chatta Māṇavaka Vv** (Vv 4.3, vv 881-906), SD 101.3.

¹⁹⁷ M 135/3:202-206 @ SD 4.15 (1.3).

¹⁹⁸ **Tissa-t, therā V** (DhA 18.3/3:341-344 on Dh 240); summarized at SD 26.9 (1.6.3.3); see also SD 48.1 (8.2.1.2); SD 38.3 (5.5).

¹⁹⁹ DhA 2.1,2/1:171.

²⁰⁰ DhA 9.11e/3:41 f.

²⁰¹ Buddhaghosa: *pubba, petānan'ti para, loka, gatānam ṅātīnam*, “relatives who have passed on to the hereafter (other worlds),” AA 3:100,1, 4:127,20. Cf Dhammapāla: *pubbe keci pitaro*, “certain past fathers” (PvA 17). Also Miln 294.

the human world [3.2.5.2], or higher (as devas or brahmas), in which case they feed on divine food and loathe any kind human alms-offering which is gross to them!²⁰²

Upon dying, explains the Buddha, beings fare on in accordance with their karma—whether they have been morally unvirtuous (habitually committing any of the 10 unwholesome deed)²⁰³ or morally virtuous (habitually cultivating the 10 wholesome deeds).²⁰⁴ On account of the fruits of their **bad** karma, they will be reborn in **hell** (*niraya*) [3.2.3.1], where they cannot benefit from any of our offerings; or as **an animal**, where they cannot benefit from any of our offerings, but if they have done some acts of merit (like giving), they will be reborn as well treated *animals*.

On account of the fruits of their **good** karma, they are reborn as **devas** or as happy **humans**. In either case, they would not need our alms-offerings. Only when they are reborn in “the realm of the departed” (*petti,visaya*)²⁰⁵ as **pretas**, they can benefit from our alms-offerings. And there will always be pretas there who are somehow related to us [3.1.1.3]. How this is done will be detailed in another sutta [3.2.5.5].

3.2.5.2 The 2nd stage of the evolution of pretas in early Buddhism can be seen in **the Lakkhaṇa Saṃyutta**, connected teaching related to the arhat Lakkhaṇa, being chapter 19 of the Saṃyutta Nikāya, comprising 21 suttas.²⁰⁶ The suttas are all laid out on the same template as the 1st sutta (**S 19.1**) with stereotype accounts describing a series of unclassed but utterly miserable beings. It describes a skeleton flying through the air, with vultures, crows and hawks pecking, stabbing and tearing away at it, while it cries out in pain. Then, follows a flying piece of meat; a lump of meat; a flayed man; a man with body-hairs of spears; with body-hairs of arrows; with body-hairs of needles, which is repeated; with pot testicles, and so on. (forming the 1st sub-chapter).

Each sutta begins with a description of a different set of miserable beings undergoing some kind of torture. They are seen by the arhat Moggallāna (the foremost of monks with psychic powers) on the slopes of Mount Vulture Peak (*gijjha,kūṭa*), who then smiles. When his companion monk, the arhat Lakkhaṇa, questions him, he relates his visions.

Both of them then report, after each sighting, before the Buddha, who then confirms the sight, and explains the past bad karma of the respective beings. Each of these beings were a hell-being before, and is now experiencing their residual bad karma. In the past, each had been a butcher of some kind, a hunter, a torturer, a horse trainer, a slanderer, a corrupt magistrate, adulterers, fortune-teller, executioner, a bad monk, a bad nun, a bad probationer, a bad male novice, a bad female novice.

The same series of stories is found in **the Vinaya**. However, on each occasion, Moggallāna is accused by other monks of speaking falsely regarding what is beyond human powers. The Buddha vindicates Moggallāna each time and declares him to be free from any offence.²⁰⁷

3.2.5.3 A very significant point here is that despite the descriptions of these beings resembling very much like those in **the Peta,vatthu** and later literature on pretas, the term **petā** is never used in these

²⁰² A 10.177/5:269-273 (SD 2.6a).

²⁰³ These are the 10 unwholesome courses of karma (*akusala kamma,patha*): (1-3, bodily deeds of) killing, stealing, sexual misconduct; (4-7, verbal deeds of) lying, slandering, harsh speech, frivolous talk; (8-10, mental deeds of) covetousness, ill will and false views (A 10.177,2 etc), SD 2.6a.

²⁰⁴ These are the 10 wholesome courses of karma (*kusala kamma,patha*): (1-3, bodily deeds of) *abstaining* from killing, from stealing, from sexual misconduct; (4-7, verbal deeds of) *abstaining* from lying, from slandering, from harsh speech, from frivolous talk; (8-10, mental deeds of) *abstaining* from covetousness, from ill will and from false views (A 10.177,27 etc), SD 2.6a.

²⁰⁵ *Petti,visaya* or *pitti,visaya*, also *peta,visaya*, *peta,loka* (rarely, from affinity with Vedic beliefs: *yama,loka*, S 1:34,15; *yama,visaya*, Pv 2.8.2; *yamassa ṭhāniyo*, Pv 1.2.9; *yama,lokikā*, Pv 1.6.2); cf *yamassa,ṭhāne petti,visaye*, PvA 34: C Witanachchi, “Pettivisaya,” Ency Bsm 7 2005:404-419.

²⁰⁶ In 2 subchapters: S 19.1-21/2:254-262.

²⁰⁷ Pār 4.9.1-3 (V 3:104-108).

texts to refer to those suffering beings. In both the Saṃyutta suttas and the Vinaya accounts, Moggallāna is reported as exclaiming: “How amazing, how unbelievable it is, that there is such a being, that there is such a **yaksha** (*yakkha*), that there such an attaining of selfhood!”²⁰⁸

Although the word *yakkha* is not found in all readings, it is a significant word here. It may be a link between these early canonical stories and the later Peta,vatthu accounts. In the Peta,vatthu, *yakkha* is sometimes used as an alternative for *peta*, or as complementary to it.²⁰⁹ However, therein, it is mostly applied to a powerful class of pretas called *petā mah’iddhikā*, not to the suffering types.

Buddhaghosa, however, in both his Commentaries on the Saṃyutta and the Vinaya, explains *peta* as “a being arising in the preta world” (*[peta,lokaṃ nibbattaṃ sattaṃ, SA 2:216; VA 2:506]*). The transformation seems complete in **the Dhammapada Commentary**, where there are stories of similar beings seen by Moggallāna under similar circumstances. When their stories are presented to the Buddha, he identifies them as **pretas** in the following stories:

The crow preta (DhA 5.12a); the snake preta (DhA 5.12b); the sledge-hammer preta (DhA 5.13); the boa constrictor preta (DhA 10.6); the pig preta (DhA 20.6); the skeleton preta (DhA 22.2). In fact, these stories refer back to the Saṃyutta sutta accounts. Thus, at this stage, we can see that the word **peta** has evolved from being a *generic* term, broadly meaning “the departed,” and become more specific, meaning “preta,” referring a particular *type* of suffering subhumans.²¹⁰

3.2.5.4 The Āṭānāṭiya Sutta (D 32) mentions *peta* when introducing the southern quarter, which is guarded by the great king, Virūlhaka, lord of the dwarf-orcs (*kumbhaṇḍa*).²¹¹ The ancient Indians associated the word *peta* with the south,²¹² which, says the Commentary, is the direction in which the dead is brought out (of the city).²¹³ The south is the direction by which the dead should be taken out (through the city gate) for cremation.²¹⁴

Paragraph 5 of the Āṭānāṭiya Sutta has a tricky sentence: *Yena petā pavuccanti | pisuṇā piṭṭhi,mam-sakā | pāṇātipātino luddhā | corā nekatikā janā | ito sā dakkhiṇā,disā | iti nam ācikkhati jano*.²¹⁵ We know from the Tiro,kuḍḍa Sutta (Khp 7 = Pv 1.5) that “there is no farming there, | nor cattle-herding found. | Business, too, there are none, nor buying and selling with money” Hence, the “pretas” mentioned here cannot be a part of the great king Virūlhaka’s celestial realm.

The Sutta is merely alluding to the south (*dakkhiṇa*) as a general direction, in connection with their city, where criminals are brought for execution and die suffering to become pretas and other suffering beings. Hence, it would be more appropriate to translate the above Pali passage as follows:

“People say this: ‘They say the pretas—slanderers, back-biters [who talk bad about others behind their backs], killers, the violent, thieves, cheats—are from this southern quarter.’”²¹⁶

3.2.5.5 The most instructive description of the pretas and Dharma-inspired teachings about them is found in **the Tiro,kuḍḍa Sutta**,²¹⁷ preserved in the Khuddaka,pāṭha and the Peta.vatthu. Although this

²⁰⁸ *Acchariyam vata bho abbhutam vata bho, eva,rūpo pi nāma satto bhavissati, eva,rūpo pi nāma yakkho* bhavissati, eva,rūpo pi nāma atta,bhava,paṭilābho bhavissatīti.* (S 2:255,16-19 = V 3:105,18-21). On *yakkho*, see S 2:255 n4.

²⁰⁹ Pv 1.3.3/9d, 2.9.10/255c+257d, 2.9.2/258a, 2.9.10/266c, 2.9.21/324a, 4.1.6/521c, 4.1.50/565a, 4.1.51/566d, 4.1.52/567d, 4.1.53/568d, 4.1.56/571d, 4.1.58/573d, 4.1.73/587b.

²¹⁰ **Kāka,peta Vatthu** (DhA 5.12a/2:65 f); **Ahi,peta V** (DhA 5.12b/2:66 f); **Saṭṭhi.kūṭa,peta V** (DhA 5.13/2:68 f); **Ajagara,peta** (DhA 10.6/3:60 f); **Sūkara,peta V** (DhA 20.6/3:410 f); **Aṭṭhi.saṅkhalika,peta V** (DhA 22.2/3:479).

²¹¹ D 32,5/3:197 f (SD 101.1).

²¹² *Iti sā dakkhiṇā,disā | iti nam ācikkhati jano* (D 32,5/3:198,1 f), SD 101.1.

²¹³ Comy: **Yena petā pavuccantīti petā nāma kāla,kata te yena disā,bhāgena nīhariyantīti vuccanti** (DA 3:964,21 f).

²¹⁴ This is confirmed by **Mahā,parinibbāna S** (D 16) which describes how the Mallas carried the Buddha’s remains through the south gate for cremation (D 16,15/2:160), SD 9.

²¹⁵ D 32,5/3:197,27*-198,2* (SD 101.1a).

²¹⁶ For a discussion on this tr problem, see Witanachchi op cit 2005:416.

seems to be a late compilation, it is clearly an effort to ensure that we have right view about the pretas and act wholesomely for our mutual benefit as cosmic neighbours.

The Sutta describes **pretas** as “homeless” nonhumans who wander about, often returning to familiar places, especially their erstwhile homes. For various reasons, people do not recall them, especially in times of fest and plenty. Hence, the pretas suffer on account of their karma (being attached to their past).

In other words, they are emotionally dependent beings, and we can properly relieve them of this emotional burden. It is unhelpful to mourn for them, especially ritually or ostentatiously—the pretas remain as they are and continue to haunt us.

However, when relatives (and others) gather joyfully to celebrate with “fitting food and drink,” recalling departed relatives (and others) with **gratitude and lovingkindness**, we inspire joy in the pretas: our erstwhile relatives, friends, and others: we are all connected on samsara’s long road [3.1.1.3]. It is this arising of joy in the pretas that frees them from their suffering state, not rituals or prayers by proxy..

Clearly, it helps when we offer alms to virtuous monastics. Such meeting of great good only generate joy and love amongst us in the name of the pretas. They gather, too, and rejoice, blessing the humans that are present in body and spirit, being freed of their old karmic burden to move on happily.

Sadly, many of us tend to be too busy to see study the suttas to understand our own capacity for goodness. We so easily fall for pious peddlers of rituals and schemes that feed on our guilt, fear and ignorance. We turn to burning offerings in a calendar of cultural duties and superstitions, rather than spontaneously showing mutual love and gratitude to our ancestors. The suttas remind us to return to the warm simplicity of goodness by wholesome self-effort. That way we surely would not become pretas ourselves.

3.2.5.6 EVOLUTION OF THE PRETA CONCEPT: A SUMMARY

(1) Belief in the pretas is common in ancient India, especially amongst the brahmins. To reach out to the brahmins, the Buddha provisionally accepts the idea of **pretas** as a means of correcting their views, thus serving as lessons for others (like us today). We can see such an instruction in **the (Dasaka) Jāṇussoṇi Sutta** (A 10.177). This also probably marks the earliest Buddhist encounter with the idea of pretas. They are accepted “as is”—as departed ones—but explained in significantly Buddhist ways. [3.2.5.1]

(2) **The 2nd stage** in the evolution of the preta-idea in early Buddhism is represented by **Moggallāna’s** visions of strangely miserable beings that do not seem to have a class of their own: they are habitually and dramatically suffering from their karmic fruits. This shows that the early Buddhists accepted “preta-like” beings as existing *on their own*, but without any type or name being assigned to them. [3.2.5.2]

Without a realm of their own, the pretas are, as it were, *caught in between worlds*, lurking in the shadows between the human and the subhuman, as depicted in the “5-destiny” (*pañca, gati*) cosmos [6.1.1.2], or the “6-realm” cosmos [6.1.1.3]. They live in **an intermediate state** fed by insatiable craving, propelled by past karma. They are driven, instinctively, by constant hungry and thirst, a physical manifestation of their previous karmic tendencies. Hence, they are mere shadows of their past, unable to free themselves from it.

(3) **The 3rd stage**. One of the earliest hints we have of these beings as not inhabiting the heavens (as the brahmins believed), and that they arise on account of their bad karmic fruits, is found in their special mention in **the Āṭṭāṇāṭṭiya Sutta** (D 32), as arising in “the south,” the quarter outside the city where the dead are cremated or left in the charnel ground—and where criminals are executed. Clearly, many, if not most, of them would become *pretas* on account of their habitual greed and lust. [3.2.5.3]

²¹⁷ Khp 7 = Pv 1.5 (SD 2.7), with comy at SD 48.1 (8.1).

Such visions are certainly effective as lessons in the painfully negative effects of bad karma. In fact, we find more of such stories being told, such as in the Dhammapada Commentary, where they are identified as **pretas**, even named.²¹⁸ Such stories were subsequently compiled into an anthology: **the Peta,-vatthu**. The preta-stories have been canonized as an early Buddhist text. [3.2.5.5]

(4) **The 4th stage**, the most important, in the development of the preta-teachings in early Buddhism is found in **the Tirokuḍḍa Sutta** (Khp 7 = Pv 1.5). This key text explains the psychology of the preta and how we can actually help them to be free of their unfortunate predicament. In this way, the brahminical *petti* has been fully converted into the Buddhist *petā* (Skt *preta*).

(5) One last note. **The stereotypical preta**—with bloated belly, pencil-thin neck, pinhead mouth, needle-eye gullet and emaciated limbs—appear in neither the Pali sources nor the SE Asian traditional accounts, where they first appeared in late cosmological texts in the last millennium. This suggests that such a stereotype of the “hungry ghost” is the result of influences from north Indian or the Sanskrit traditions.²¹⁹

3.2.6 The asuras

3.2.6.1 Like the pretas, **the asuras** (*asura*), too, it seems, do not have their own realm, ever since they were overthrown from Tāvatiṃsa by Sakra and the 33 devas [1.4.2.4]. They were said to inhabit below the seas at the foot of Mount Sumeru. Since they are within sight of Tāvatiṃsa in the distant peaks of Sumeru, reminded of their downfall, they often launch attacks on Tāvatiṃsa, trying to regain their erstwhile domain.

3.2.6.2 Since they were once gods (*sura*) but were overthrown, they are called **asura**, “non-gods” (*a-sura*) or “**antigods**.” On account of their habitual violence and belligerence, they are known as “**titans**.” In this sense, too, they represent a psychological type: the habitually and violently exploitative person drawn to power for its own sake, without any consideration for others, except for their utility. This is the asura type, such as a narcissistic boss or self-propelled leader who cares only for *self, statistics and success* with almost no concern for the well-being or humanity of his workers or charge.

3.2.6.3 When the 33 devas led by Sakra ousted the asuras led by Vepa,citti²²⁰ (and others) from Tāvatiṃsa, the asuras²²¹ became sworn enemies of Sakra and his devas ever since.²²² That is, until Sakra eloped with Vepa,citti’s daughter and married her. The love affair was “fated” in the sense that they both had been married in their past lives, too. Sakra and Vepa,citti, in due course, reconciled, and the deva-asura war ended with a happy marriage alliance.²²³

²¹⁸ This does not suggest that DhA is older than Pv, but that the stories in DhA were prob older, and independently also served as the source for Pv, which was compiled before DhA.

²¹⁹ See *Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism*, 2014:676 Preta.

²²⁰ On the origin of his name, see SD 39.2 (2).

²²¹ On the asuras’ downfall and their battles with the devas, see SD 54.21 (2.2).

²²² For details and sources on the deva-asura hostility, see SD 39.2 (1). On the deva-asura wars, see SD 39.2 (2).

²²³ For texts relating to Sakra, see SD 54.22 (2) The Sakra epic. For the story of Sakra’s marriage with Sujā, Vepa,citti’s daughter, see **Māgha V** (DhA 2.7). on Sujā, see SD 54.22 (6.2.3, 8.2.5).

3.3 HUMANITY AND GODLINESS

3.3.1 The recollection of deity

3.3.1.1 In early Buddhism, there is not only an external cosmology, especially that of the heavens, such as those of the 4 great kings (*cātum, mahā, rājika*), the 33 (*tāva, tiṃsa*), and so on, but also an *inner* cosmology that we can cultivate through meditation: **the recollection of deity** (*devatānussati*). This is the 6th of the 6 recollections (*cha anussati*)²²⁴ or the 10 recollections (*dasa anussati*).²²⁵

3.3.1.2 The recollection of deity should be done in this manner.

“Here are the deities of the 4 great kings (*cātum, mahārājika*). There are deities [devas] higher than them, that is, **the 33 devas** (*tāva, tiṃsa*).

They had **faith** (*saddhā*), such that dying here they were reborn there; such faith is present in me, too.

And those deities had **moral virtue** (*sīla*), such that dying here, they were reborn there; such faith is present in me, too.

And those deities had **learning** (*suta*), such that dying here, they were reborn there; such faith is present in me, too.

And those deities had **charity** (*cāga*), such that dying here, they were reborn there; such faith is present in me, too.

And those deities had **wisdom** (*paññā*), such that dying here, they were reborn there; such faith is present in me, too.”

Recollecting in this manner, *the faith, the virtue, the learning, the charity and the wisdom* of both our own and those of the deities, at that time, our mind is freed of greed, hate and delusion. Our mind is peaceful at that time, inspired by the deities. (A 10.60,3), SD 15.3.

3.3.1.3 We do not have to go to heaven to feel peaceful and joyful. We can cultivate heavenliness or godliness within us in this manner. This is the kind of joy that can free us from distraction during meditation. Technically, recollection of deity only brings us access concentration (*upacāra samādhi*), a late term meaning a deep concentration just short of full concentration or dhyana itself. Yet, this samadhi habitually cultivated, or the constant recollection in this manner creates the habitual karma that brings us rebirth as a deva in the sense-world heavens. When this is combined with the perception of impermanence (*anicca, saññā*), properly and habitually done, brings us **streamwinning** in this life itself, and a happy rebirth in the next life to continue our practice.²²⁶

3.3.2 The 4 divine abodes

3.3.2.1 Even more efficacious than the various kinds of recollections (*anussati*), perceptions (*saññā*) or methods mentioned [3.3.12] is **the cultivation of the 4 divine abodes** (*brahma, vihāra*),²²⁷ especially when we are able to bring it (beginning with the 1st abode) to full concentration (dhyana). The phrase

²²⁴ The 6 recollections (for joy and insight) on (1) the Buddha (*buddhānussati*), (2) the Dharma (*dharmānussati*); (3) the (noble) sangha (*saṅghānussati*); (4) moral virtue (*sīlanussati*); (5) charity (*cāgānussati*); and (6) deities (*devatānussati*): **(Chakka) Mahānāma S** (A 6.10) + SD 15.3 (3 f); SD 15.7 (1.1.2).

²²⁵ The 10 recollections (for constant mindfulness) are on (1-6) [as prec]; and mindfulness of (7) death (*marāṇas, sati*); (8) the body (the 32 parts) (*kaya, gata, sati*); (9) the breath (*ānāpāna, sati*); and (10) recollection on peace (*upasamānussati*) (virtue of nirvana): A 1:30, 41; Vism 197. For a list of the 40 meditations: SD 15.1 (Table 8.1).

²²⁶ On streamwinning, further see **Entering the stream**, SD 3.3.

²²⁷ See **Brahma, vihāra**, SD 38.5.

brahma, vihara literally means “abodes of Brahma.” This tetrad of meditations is clearly the Buddha’s most brilliant teaching to counter and debunk brahmin theology, literally, to the highest heavens.

We often see, in the suttas, brahmin followers of the Buddha being taught the cultivation of the divine abodes. This effectively helps these erstwhile God-believers to wean off their conditioning or dependence on a divine Father-figure. Understandably, although the first 3 divine abodes—lovingkindness (*mettā*), compassion (*karuṇā*) and joy (*muditā*)—can only bring us up to only the 3rd dhyana. Only with the 4th divine abode—equanimity (*upekkhā*)—are we able to reach the 4th dhyana.

However, any of these dhyanas can help in the application of **clear insight** for a direct vision into true reality and awakening. Having mastered even the 1st abode (lovingkindness), or even after some time enjoying the dhyanic bliss of abiding in lovingkindness, we emerge from. We then apply this profoundly calm and clear mind to seeing into impermanence, and so on.

3.3.2.2 While the brahmins early envisioned their **Great Brahmā** as an Almighty Creator very much the way any God-centred religion even today would, that is, as the God of power, the Buddha teaches that if Brahmā is to be of any service to the world he thinks he has created is to show it **love** (*mettā*). In itself, *mettā* simply means “friendship” but, in the early Buddhist sense, it specifically means “unconditional acceptance, boundless love.” It is very much more purified and embracing than the world generally think or imagine *love*. Hence, we have rightly settled for its quaint but functional translation, **lovingkindness**.²²⁸

In keeping with the early Buddhist idea of keeping **the teaching above the teacher**—as taught in **the Gāraṇa Sutta** (S 6.2)²²⁹—that is, the supremacy of the teaching, truth and awakening above all else, the Buddha transforms Brahmā the God into *brahma, vihāra*, “godliness.” Rejecting any kind of Deity-worship and externalization or ritualization of spirituality, the Buddha insists on proper spiritual practice as the “supreme worship” (*parama, pūjā*).²³⁰ More real than the world or universe out there is the virtual world within, the inner microcosm (or microcosmos), if we are to make any sense of Buddhist cosmology.

3.3.2.3 How are **the divine abodes**, properly cultivated,²³¹ far more efficacious than the various kinds of recollections (*anussati*), perceptions (*saññā*) and meditation methods? [3.3.2.1]. Of the early Buddhist meditation methods, only breath meditation,²³² the kasinas²³³ (too difficult for most) and the divine abode of equanimity are able to attain the 4th dhyana. In other words, these meditations can reach the highest level of mental purification possible—and the Buddha, having attained them, teaches them.

Yet, to attain the path and awakening, especially as an arhat, even the 1st dhyana calm, applied with insight²³⁴ directly to the vision of true reality, is sufficient to attain the path and awakening. Another vital point is that the divine abodes teach us to cultivate wisdom’s counterpart, **compassion** (the 2nd divine abode). The divine abodes, in other words are simply the gradual refinement of love. Spiritual love is boundless **love**, shown to all unconditionally; when love is put into action, it is **compassion**: active love for the suffering, especially for those who do not deserve our love. An even finer aspect of love is selfless **joy** in the goodness and success of others.

Finally, there is the most peaceful love of all, that is, **equanimity** an attitude of unconditional embrace of karma and being so that we can wholesomely deal with them so long as we are unawakened, or

²²⁸ On the origin of the English word, “lovingkindness,” unhyphenated in the Buddhist use, see SD 38.5 (1.1.3.2).

²²⁹ S 6.2/1:138-140 (SD 12.3), close parallel of **Uruvela S 1** (A 4.21/2:20 f), SD 55.3.

²³⁰ See **Mahā, parinibbāna S** (D 16,5.3.2) + SD 9 (7.2).

²³¹ See **Brahma, vihara**, SD 38.5.

²³² On breath meditation, see **Ānāpāna, sati S** (M 118,5-7+15-22), SD 7.13; **Mahā Rāhu’ovāda S** (M 62,24-30), SD 3.11.

²³³ On the kasina (*kasina*) meditations, see **Bhāvanā** SD 15.1 (9.2); on colour kasina, see **Mahā Parinibbāna S** (D 16,3.29-32), SD 9; SD 15.1 (1.5-1.8).

²³⁴ On working with insight, see **Bhāvanā**, SD 15.1 (4).

even when we are awakened for the benefit of the unawakened. These divine abodes are to be directed to the whole cosmos: the front quarter, the left quarter, the hind quarter, the left quarter, the quarter below, and the quarter above, everywhere.

4 A psychology of early Buddhist cosmology

4.1 A THREE-TIERED WORLD

4.1.1 COMPETING WORLDS?

4.1.1.1 Damien Keown, in his entry on “Cosmology and rebirth” in **the Routledge Encyclopedia of Buddhism** (2007:249), observes that “Buddhist cosmology often seems untidy and contradictory, and this is because it is made up of competing schemes which do not always integrate perfectly with one another.” Take, for example, **the 5 realms** of early Buddhism; then, there is the later **6 realms** of the Mahāyāna.²³⁵ [3.2.2.1]

In the “5-realm” scheme—the hells, the animal realm, the preta domain, the human world and the heavens of the gods—do not include the asuras as a separate realm since they are part of the “earth-bound” heavens based on Mount Sumeru [3.2.6.1]. The later scheme lists the asuras as *a separate realm*, highlighting their peculiar negative emotions of jealousy and violent exploitativeness.

In early Buddhist mythology, **the devas and the asuras** are finally reconciled with the marriage of Sakra, lord of the devas, to Sujā, the daughter of Vepa,citti, lord of the asuras—in a kind of divinely happy version of *Romeo and Juliet*—there is thus no need to see the asuras as being separate from the devas.

The later scheme, however, seems to see the 6 realms as archetypal models of being which should be accepted unconditionally and then to resolve them within ourself with the attaining of awakening. A modern Dharma teacher would invariably find these 2 schemes, not as competing, but rather as versions of the cosmological myths of the devas and asuras, where contrasting emotions or personalities can be happily resolved into positive emotions in terms of the 4 divine abodes [3.3.2.3].

4.1.1.2 Early Buddhist cosmology is rooted in the same ancient cosmology as that of the Indo-Europeans, which conceive the world as basically divided into 3 layers: the earth, the sky and the heavens. The surface of the earth is inhabited by humans. Above it, are various atmospheric phenomena—the sun, the moon, wind, clouds, lightning and thunder—which are personified as gods, such as Thor, the Norse god who is thought to produce thunder when he strikes with his hammer, Mjöllnir (comparable to Sakra’s “lightning thunderbolt (of molten iron)” (*vajra*) in his manifestation as Vajra,pāṇī, the Buddha’s guardian.²³⁶

Beyond this are the various heavens (such as Asgard) and realms (such as Valhalla, Trudheim and Bredablik) of Norse mythology. The early Buddhists see matter as becoming finer and subtler in the higher worlds. The lowest of the 3 worlds according to early Buddhism is the world of physical senses dominated by pleasure (*kāma*) and its quest; hence, called **the “sense-sphere”** (*kāmāvacara*).²³⁷ Beyond that is **the form-sphere** (*rūpāvacara*), the dhyanic world of pure radiance; and the highest, **the formless sphere** (*arūpāvacara*), is inhabited by invisible meditative beings of pure energy.

²³⁵ Often, for convenience, “Mahāyāna” is used broadly to refer to later Buddhist developments north (Vajrayāna) and east Asia, when it is clear from the context.

²³⁶ On Vajira,pāṇī’s *vajra*, see SD 21.3 (4.2); SD 54.22 (4.5.3.1).

²³⁷ Early Buddhism uses 3 triads of terms: *kāma.loka*, *rūpa.loka*, *arūpa.loka*; *kāmāvacara*, *ruāvacara*, *arūpāvacara*; *kāma,dhatu*, *rūpa,dhatu*, *arūpa,dhatu*. The 1st triad refers to the 3 worlds as time-space “locations” (*okāsa.loka*) [2.1.2]; the 2nd triad, the 3 worlds as arising from the 4 elements (*dhātu*) (earth, water, fire and wind) [2.1.1.1], and forming some kind of “system,” as in *loka,dhātu*, “world-system” [2.1.1.2]; the 3rd triad the worlds as “movement” (*avacara*), ie, accessible through rebirth or, in the case of the higher worlds, through meditation.

4.1.2 COSMIC ECOLOGY

4.1.2.1 Early Buddhist cosmology and mythology depict humans essentially living in close harmony or interbeing with other beings, nature and the cosmos as a whole. The natural forces or “the elements”—*earth, water, fire and wind*, manifestations of what we today understand as solid, liquid, heat and gas—work to bring it into being or destroy it in an endless cosmic cycle [1.5].

4.1.2.2 On a social level, there is also a close connection between **the world** we live in as society and **the universe** as the space that supports it and in which our existential drama folds and unfolds. While **the Aggañña Sutta** (D 27) shows how society evolves and prospers with the world [1.5.4.4 f], **the Cakka,vatti Sīha,nāda Sutta** (D 26) relates how it declines when society’s kings and leaders become selfish, greedy and negligent.

A secondary theme in **the Aggañña Sutta** is about how when the gods get entangled with the world and exploits it, they become more worldly and destructive [1.5.4.3]. This lesson in **ecology** is even more real and salient today with the selfish and greedy exploitation of natural resources, such as destroying our rainforests and mangroves, and the burning of fossil fuels, are contributing to the decline of our natural environment and of life itself.

Buddhist cosmology is still meaningful and valuable today in reminding us that when we need both wisdom (initiative and diligence for a better life) and moral virtue (respect for others and for nature) contribute to longer and better lives for us, and our world becomes a more pleasant and healthier place for us. The contrary is true, with deleterious impact on us, when people are ignorant, selfish and destructive.

4.2 MENTAL WORLDS

4.2.1 Cosmology and learning

4.2.1.1 According to the short but instructive **Neyy’attha Nīt’attha Suttas** (A 2.3.5+6), two complementary suttas in the Aṅguttara, the Buddha reminds us that whenever we read a sutta, we should first note whether it is a teaching “whose sense has been drawn out” (*nīt’attha*), an explicit teaching, or “whose sense is to be drawn out” (*neyy’attha*), an implicit teaching, and to teach them accordingly.²³⁸

An explicit teaching speaks directly of true reality, such as the 3 characteristics (impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and non-self), or the 5 aggregates (form, feeling, perception, formations and consciousness), and so on. **An implicit teaching** employs figurative language, stories, metaphors and various literary devices, or speaks of symbolic acts as skillful means to present and clarify the teachings. In this latter case, the Buddha speaks in terms of beings, humans, devas, cosmology, psychology, or a “practitioner”—that is, in a “person-based” manner.

4.2.1.2 In other words, **an implicit teaching** (*neyy’attha*) employs actors, agents, symbols, even technical language, to point to some true reality. An implicit teaching, as a rule, is something we already know or are familiar with. This is used as a pointer or bridge to what we need to know, that is, some aspect of true reality [4.2.1.1]. Often this is the kind of teaching which is used for those who have difficulties with the Buddha’s teaching as truth, usually because of past conditionings (especially religious indoctrination) or simply unfamiliarity with the nature of the Buddha Dhamma, or because of learning difficulties.

An explicit teaching is a one that points directly to true reality. In this case, our mind directly knows and sees these truths: impermanence, suffering, non-self. This teaching is usually used for a “diffuse learner” or a “quick learner” [4.2.2.0]. **An implicit teaching**—which uses parables, illustrations and examples—works better with a “tractable learner” or a “word-learner.” [4.2.2.0]

²³⁸ A 2.3.5+6/1:60 (SD 2.6b). See also SD 47.20 (1.3); SD 89.10 (1).

4.2.2 The 4 kinds of learners

4.2.2.0 These 4 kinds of learners (in the non-technical sense of one who learns) are mentioned in the **Ugghaṭitaññū Sutta** (A 4.143) and defined in the **Puggala Paññatti** (Pug 4.5), thus:

- (1) **A quick learner** (*ugghaṭitaññū*) is one who penetrates the Dharma²³⁹ *the moment it is spoken*.²⁴⁰ [4.2.2.1]
- (2) **A diffuse learner** (*vipacitaññū*) is one who penetrates the Dharma that is spoken in brief, when its meaning is *being analysed in detail*.²⁴¹ [4.2.2.2]
- (3) **One who is tractable** (*neyya*) is one who realizes the Dharma, in stages, through recitation, questioning, wise attention and by associating with, serving and waiting upon spiritual friends.²⁴² [4.2.2.3]
- (4) **A word-learner** (*pada,parama*) is one who, though listening much, reciting much, remembering much, speaking much, penetrates not the Dharma, only knowing, at best, some teachings on merely the *word level*.²⁴³ [4.2.2.4]

There are interesting psychological connections between the 4 kinds of learners and the 5 spiritual faculties (*pañc'indriya*)—faith, energy, mindfulness, concentration, wisdom—as mentioned in the **Pubba,koṭṭhaka Sutta** (S 48.44). Special note should be made of “the faculty of faith” (*saddh'indriya*). It is neither blind faith (simply accepting another’s word) nor charisma-based faith (accepting as truth on account of a person). It is “rooted” (*mūlika*) in some kind of direct understanding or vision of true reality.²⁴⁴

4.2.2.1 (1) **A quick learner** is one who is intuitive in that he is able to understand the teaching and truth from a brief statement, usually on account of his **wisdom, energy and concentration**. Wisdom arises partly from sutta study, comprising understanding a teaching *in the letter and the spirit, a good command of language, and a good sense of wit*.²⁴⁵ Energy comes from inner joy or deep interest in the Dharma. He needs to harmonize his faculties with **mindfulness** regarding *faith*. When he feels impatience with slower learners, he should cultivate lovingkindness for himself and to those people.

4.2.2.2 (2) **A diffuse learner** is able understand a teaching or truth from some sustained teaching to which he listens deeply, or from focused study and analysis. He usually has developed faculties of wisdom and energy, but has to harmonize his wisdom with *faith*. and his *energy* with *concentration*. When he shows any impatience with the other kinds of learned, he should cultivate lovingkindness and patience.

4.2.2.3 (3) **The tractable learner** is faith-inclined and needs good guidance. His faith needs to be harmonized with wisdom (that is, study and reflection). He usually has good **energy**, too, which needs to be harmonized with concentration: he needs to boost it up with meditation, especially breath medita-

²³⁹ *Dhammābhisamaya*, ie, penetrating into or gaining knowledge of the 4 truths (PugA 223; BA 127), which refers to the attainment of any of the paths to sainthood. Where streamwinning is meant, we see the term *dhama,cak-khu,paṭilābha* (attaining of the Dharma-eye). See S:B 526.

²⁴⁰ *Yassa puggalassa saha udāhaṭa,velāya dhammābhisamayo hoti* (Pug 4.5/41).

²⁴¹ *Yassa puggalassa saṅkhittena bhāsītassa vitthārena atthe vibhajiyamāne dhammābhisamayo hoti* (Pug 4.5/41).

²⁴² *Yassa puggalassa uddesato paripucchato yoniso manasikaroto kalyāṇa,mitte sevato bhajato payirupāsato evaṃ anupubbena dhammābhisamayo hoti* (Pug 4.5/41).

²⁴³ *Yassa puggalassa bahum pi suṇato bahum pi bhaṇato bahum pi dhārayato bahum pi vācayato, na tāya jātiyā dhamābhisamayo hoti* (Pug 4.5/41). On the 4 kinds of learners, see Pug 4.5, SD 3.13(3.3).

²⁴⁴ S 48.44/5:220-222 + SD 10.7 (2+3) incl “temperament and learning.”

²⁴⁵ On the 4 analytic skills (*paṭisambhīdā*), in *dhama, attha, nirutti* and *paṭibhana*: SD 28.4 (4); SD 41.6 (2.2).

tion. When he feels any disappointment with himself, or any negative emotion towards other kinds of learners, he should cultivate lovingkindness to himself and others.

4.2.2.4 (4) The word-learner can only remember a few words of the teaching and is likely to be a strongly **faith**-inclined person. Hence, he has to cultivate mindfulness to boost his faculties of energy, concentration and wisdom. Listening to the **implicit teachings** (such as parables and stories) [4.2.1] should inspire *joy* in him, which, in turn, rouses his energy. He should also cultivate some suitable meditation for concentration that gives a clearer and sharper mind, or the patience to listen and study the same teaching repeatedly until he well understands it. Then, he should reinforce all this until he remembers them with wisdom, no matter how long it takes. After all, Dharma training is a life-long process with gradual progress.

4.2.3 The inner cosmology

4.2.3.1 In most organized religions (especially the God-centred), cosmology is subsumed as the handmaid of theology, glorifying the God-idea. In early Buddhism, however, cosmology is closely connected with **psychology**: the world that we see or imagine all around, above and below us reflect how we think and live. Like all existence, all the cosmological realms are experienced as states of mind that are with neither beginning nor end, but that keeps feeding themselves like a cosmic serpent devouring his own tail [3.2.2.2].

Early Buddhist cosmology, then, is a **psychocosmography**, a description of the different realms of beings and mental states, a kind of cosmic geography, and also a **psychocosmology**, a knowledge and description of all possible modes of being. The former is rooted in **rebirth**, the latter in **karma**, the two ends of the uroboros, the snake devouring its own tail, perpetuating its own suffering in samsaric fashion with neither beginning nor ending. The cosmos, then, is a reflection of the feeding of our lives with *greed, hate and delusion*, or, it can teach us to free ourselves from it all with *non-greed, non-hate and non-delusion* (that is charity, love and wisdom).

4.2.3.2 In a humorous account in **the Kevaḍḍha Sutta** (D 11), the Buddha relates how a monk with teleportation powers visits all the heavens successively up to the 1st-dhyana brahma world with the question about where “everything” (the 4 elements) disappear without a trace²⁴⁶ [1.3.3.2]. He is finally told to return to the Buddha for the right answer (that is, nirvana). There is a set of suttas giving a similar teaching about the infinity of the cosmos in terms of space, associated with the devaputra Rohitassa.

The Buddha famously sums up this remarkably unique teaching on cosmology and psychology in this immortal quartet to the young god (*deva,putta*), Rohitassa, in **the Rohitassa Sutta** (S 2.26), thus:

The world’s end can never be reached by way of going [through the world],
and yet without reaching the world’s end, there is no release from suffering.
(S 2.26), SD 7.2; (S 35.116), SD 7.4; (A 4.45), SD 52.8a²⁴⁷

The first 2 lines (the 1st row) refer to “psychocosmography,” the external cosmic geography of various realms and beings, which is samsara itself, that is, the **rebirths** we go through. The last 2 lines (the 2nd row) refer to “psychocosmology,” how we know and see these as **karma**, our intentional acts. These rebirths as karmic results and their locations cannot be stopped—this is what the first 2 lines of the quartet mean. They are caused by karma, whose **intentions** (*cetanā*) arise in the mind. When we understand the

²⁴⁶ D 11,67-85/1:116-223 (SD 1.7).

²⁴⁷ **Lok’anta,gamana S 1** (S 35.116/4:93), SD 7.4; (**Devatā**) **Rohitassa S** (S 2.26/1:61), SD 7.2; (**Catukka**) **Rohitassa S** (A 4.45/2:47-49), SD 52.8a.

nature of thoughts and learn to refine and free them from the karmic rut of greed, hate and delusion, then, we can end rebirth—this is what the last 2 lines mean.

4.2.3.3 Cosmology, then, is what we *were*, what we *will be*, and what we *are* right now in time and space. It is impermanent, changing, becoming otherwise; hence, it is unsatisfactory; there is neither agency nor essence (neither God nor Being) underlying all these cosmic states and events: empty phenomena rolls on and on—this is the principle of **nonself**.²⁴⁸

When we understand and accept this, our samsaric journey turns away from the cyclic path, and take **a spiral path** of “depending ending,”²⁴⁹ beginning with streamwinning heading for arhathood and nirvana. In this connection, the Buddha makes another remarkable statement to the same young deva, Rohitassa, thus:

“So, avuso, **in this very fathom-long body**,²⁵⁰ along with its perception and mind, I declare
the world,
 the *arising* of the world,
 the *ending* of the world, and
 the *way leading to the ending of the world.*” (S 2.26,9/1:62), SD 7.2²⁵¹

This passage is the answer to the Buddha’s enigmatic statement, “... and yet without reaching the world’s end, | there is no release from suffering” [4.2.3.2]. The “world” (*loka*) here refers to “formations” (*saṅkhārā*) [6.2], that is, this “conscious body” (*sa,viññāṇaka kāya*), which is synonymous with “(this) body, | along with its perception and mind}” in **the Rohitassa Sutta** quote above.

4.2.3.4 The 4 noble truths are not out there, but *right here within our own mind*, where we must work to understand them, and so free ourselves from suffering and awaken to nirvana. In this sense, the whole cosmos is teaching us: what we see outside is the macrocosm, what we live within is the microcosm. We cannot and need not dismantle the macrocosm—it is “neutral,” as stated in **the Nibbedhika (Pariyāya) Sutta**²⁵²—we can and must dismantle the microcosm within, which brings awakening and freedom. [5.4.2]

This conscious body wherein **the 4 noble truths** are found, then, refers to the 5 aggregates of clinging, as stated in **the Dhamma,cakka Pavattana Sutta** (S 56.11).²⁵³ The 5 aggregates are *form*, *Feeling*, *perception*, *formations and consciousness*. The last 4 aggregates constitute “the mind.” The aggregate “form” is our body—in this case, we can see it as comprising the 5 physical senses: *the eye, ear, nose, tongue and body*—these 5 with the mind constitutes “**the all**” (*sabba*), highlighted in **the Sabba Sutta** (S 35.23): all that we can know are *these 6 sense-faculties and their 6 sense-objects*—the “all.”

²⁴⁸ On nonself as the principle underlying all things, see **Dhamma Niyāma S** (A 3.134), SD 26.8.

²⁴⁹ Dependent ending is the opposite of dependent arising; see **Upanisā S** (S 12.23), SD 6.12; **Dependent arising**, SD 5.16 (18+19.3.2); SD 53.15 (2.1).

²⁵⁰ “In this very fathom-long body,” *imasmiñ-ñ-eva vyāma,matte kaḷevare*. The word *kaḷevare* is probably cognate with the English “cadaver.” The expression **vyāma,matta** has a Skt cognate, *vyāma,mātra*, which, according to Śata-patha Brahmaṇa 1.2.5.14 is the measure of the Vedic altar, with a man’s shape. It is not only the counterpart of sacrifice, but also the manifested counterpart of the Creator, Prajā,pati, “and his body is understood as being identical with the cosmos within which all changes take place. If we deny the existence of the Creator, these changes can occur only in a human being.” (Jurewicz 2000:79). Comy glosses these 4 statements as those of the 4 noble truths. Thus the Buddha shows: “I do not, avuso, make known these 4 truths in external things like grass and wood, but right here in this body composed of the 4 great elements.” (SA 1:117 f)

²⁵¹ Also at A 4.45,9/2:48 (SD 52.8a).

²⁵² A 6.63,3.4/3:411 (SD 6.11).

²⁵³ S 56.11,5/5:421 (SD 1.1).

A beautiful way of putting this is that “the all is teaching us, **everything is teaching us!**”²⁵⁴

4.3 BUDDHAS AND NIRVANA

4.3.1 With neither beginning nor ending

4.3.1.1 In the **Pāṭika Sutta** (D 24), the Buddha declares, “I know the beginning of things (*aggañña*), and not only that, but I know what is beyond that.”²⁵⁵ Does this statement contradict the Buddha’s statement in the **Rohitassa Sutta 1** (A 4.45)? Elsewhere, the Buddha declares that the world has no beginning [1.5.3.2]; but here he says that “the world’s end cannot be reached by going” [1.5.3.1]. This is because the world has *no* ending, too. This is all caught in **time**, and time is *cyclic*, with neither beginning nor end. The beginning of time cannot be known: it arises from ignorance, which is without end. It is we who end it with liberating wisdom.

“**The beginning of things**” that the Buddha refers to here is regarding why we suffer: its beginning or root is ignorance: he knows this. This is the 1st and 2nd noble truths. He also knows the other 2 noble truths: the path (which he has taken) and its ending (nirvana, which he has attained).²⁵⁶ This is the only way to be free from the endless cycle of samsara.

4.3.1.2 Note that **nirvana** (*nibbāna*) is not included amongst the 31 planes of rebirth [App], which constitutes the conditioned world of space and time. We cannot be reborn in nirvana; it is neither space (a place) nor time (an event): nirvana is unconditioned. Since we are not born there, we also do not die there; it is thus death-free (*amata*). But this is as far as language can take us.

The Buddha and the arhats understand just what this means: their liberation is the same, except that the Buddha is the first to awaken in our epoch (buddha-period). **The Buddha**, on the night of his awakening, reflects on **dependent arising** and understands how, rooted in ignorance, suffering arises. Then, he reflects on **dependent ending** as he sees how with the end of craving, the dominos of suffering fall down forever.

4.3.2 The buddhas and the cosmos

4.3.2.1 It is said, “Difficult is the arising of buddhas [3.1.2.5]. However, we live in a “fortunate aeon” (*bhadda,kappa*), since we have a total of 5 buddhas for this world-period. The Buddha of our epoch is **Gotama** or Sakyamuni. The 3 buddhas before him were Kakusandha, Koṇāgamana and Kassapa; and the future buddha will be Metteyya.²⁵⁷ Some aeons may not have any buddha at all.

It is also the natural rule that **only 1 buddha** will arise, indeed, need to arise, in a single universe. He turns the dharma-wheel (*dhama,cakka*), and what follows is called his “dispensation” (*sāsana*) [4.3.2.2]. In other words, there will be no other buddhas during that period. Since the Buddha has arisen to declare the true teaching, there is no need for other buddhas; since the Dharma-wheel has arisen, there is no need to re-invent the wheel.²⁵⁸ [5.2.1]

²⁵⁴ This quote has also been used by Aj Chah, *Everything is Teaching Us* [2004], 2007, 2018, and by Aj Sumedho, “Attachment to teachers,” 1992:136: SD 3.14 (11).

²⁵⁵ *Aggaññāṃ cāhaṃ ... pajānāmi, tañ ca pajānāmi, tato ca uttaritarāṃ pajānāmi* (D 24,2.14/3:28,8), SD 63.3. This quote is also at SD 47.8 (1.3.1).

²⁵⁶ The 4 truths are usu listed as 1-2-3-4 in the teaching sequence; here, they are listed 1-2-4-3 in the “practice” sequence: **Mahā Saḷ-āyatana S** (M 149,11 etc) + SD 41.9 (2.4); SD 53.26 (2).

²⁵⁷ See SD 36.2 (3.1.2).

²⁵⁸ See **Bahu,dhātuka S** (M 115,14), SD 29.1a.

4.3.2.2 In terms of time, the Buddha’s teaching is called a **dispensation** (*sāsana*); in terms of space, the Buddha’s sphere of influence is known as his **buddha-field** (*buddha, khetta*).²⁵⁹ A buddha-field is not confined to a particular world-system into which he is born. The Abhidhamma and Commentaries distinguishes these 3 kinds of buddha-fields:

- (1) **the field of birth** (*jati, khetta*), which extends over the 10,000 world-systems (*dasa, sahassa cakka-vāḷa*) [1.5.2.4] that tremble when he is conceived, born, awakens, teaches the 1st time, gives up his life-formations, and attains final nirvana;
- (2) **the field of authority** (*āṇā, khetta*), which extends to the 1,000,000,000,000 [trillion] world-systems (*koṭi, sata, sahassa cakkavāḷa*) throughout which, says tradition, the utterance of the great protective discourses (*mahā, paritta*)²⁶⁰ is efficacious [2.2.3.2]; and
- (3) **the field of range** (*visaya, khetta*), which potentially extends to an infinite number of world-systems.²⁶¹ The Paṭisambhidā, magga says: The Buddha’s knowledge or “omniscience” is such: “As much as there is to be known, that is his knowledge; as much as that is his knowledge, that is as much as there is to be known” (*yavatakaṃ neyyaṃ, tāvatakaṃ ñāṇaṃ; yāvatakaṃ ñāṇaṃ, tāvatakaṃ neyyaṃ*), “what he knows is coextensive with what is to be known, which is to be known is coextensive with his knowledge” (*neyya, pariyantikaṃ ñāṇaṃ, ñāṇa, pariyantikaṃ neyyaṃ*) (Pm 2:195). There is nothing beyond his range. (VbhA 432)

Elsewhere, we have compared these numbers to the 4 kinds of world systems [2.2.3.3].

(1) The Buddha’s field of birth refers to how far knowledge of the arising and presence of the Buddha is known in the cosmos, which clearly refers to the various heavens. It is difficult to know how the commentators imagine such information spreads, but it is easy to understand when the celestial beings in such a field has the power of clairvoyance or some form of information relaying—such as that suggested at the end of **the Dhamma, cakka Pavattana Sutta** (S 56,11).²⁶²

(2) The Buddha’s field of authority may mean the extent of belief in the efficacy of the power of the protective powers of the teachings, or better, the reach of the Buddha’s teaching in cosmic terms. Apparently, this includes how far our meditation, such as that of the cultivation of lovingkindness will reach. However, in practical terms, the true meditator does not measure lovingkindness in spatial terms, but rather in terms of the joy and purity of his own mind in doing the practice.

(3) The Buddha’s field of range seems to be how far the Buddha is able to travel (that is, astral travel). We must imagine the Buddha, with his special powers, would be able to transport or teleport himself to any world anywhere, if there is a need to. But, then again, we must wonder what sort of need that would be. The idea of buddha-fields is not found in the suttas; it is the commentator’s effort to project or extend the Buddha’s spiritual powers, an idea that was probably in vogue during his times. [2.2.3]

5 Other universes and worlds

5.1 WHEN THIS WORLD ENDS

5.1.1 Early Buddhist cosmology speaks of multiple world-systems (what we understand as solar-systems but bigger) and thousands such universes within a larger universe, and there are numerous other such

²⁵⁹ Tha 1087; Ap 1:4, 26, 29, 44, 2:444; Vism 414.

²⁶⁰ Āṭṭhāṇāṭṭiya (D 3:194), Mora (J 2:33), Dhajagga (S 1:218), Ratana (Sn 2.1 parittas (VbhA 431 f).

²⁶¹ Vism 13.31/414.

²⁶² S 56.11,17-19/5:423 f (SD 1.1).

universes beyond these [1.5.2.4]. Moreover, **a single world-system** is divided in 3 tiers of smaller worlds, that is, *the sense-world, the form world and the formless world*.

After the period of expanded stability, the world-system slowly and steadily contracts, that is, devolves into a “big crunch,” brought on by either fire, wind or water [1.5.3.4]. Even at the lowest level of cosmic destruction, all of the physical universe *and* the 1st dhyana world are destroyed. It is said that where the beings cultivate lovingkindness or some form of suitable meditation, they are able to be reborn at least in the lowest of the surviving realms, that is, in one of the 2nd-dhyana realms. According to the suttas, they “mostly” (*yebhuyyena*)²⁶³ arise in Ābhassara.²⁶⁴

5.1.2 However, in the case of the 3 subhuman planes—the pretas, animals and hell-beings, especially the last, none of them are able to meditate or generate any good karma to be able to reborn in even the lowest of the undestroyed realm. The commentator, **Dhammapāla**, in his subcommentary to Buddhaghosa’s *Dīgha* commentary (DA 1:110), where the latter fails to address the karmic fate of the 4 sub-human planes, proposes that they are reborn in the respective subhuman planes of other world-systems (DAṬ 1:198 f).²⁶⁵

5.2 MANY BUDDHAS?

5.2.1 One universe, one buddha

5.2.1.1 We have mentioned that **only 1 buddha**, that is, the fully self-awakened one (*sammā,sam,-buddha*), arises in each universe where he establishes his dispensation (*sāsana*) [4.3.2.1]. This is confirmed by various suttas and texts: **the Sampasādanīya Sutta** (D 28), **the Bahudhātuka Sutta** (M 115), **the Akkhaṇa Vagga** (A 1.15.10); **the Vibhaṅga** and its Commentary and **the Milinda,pañha**.²⁶⁶

All these sources clearly state or affirm that *it is impossible for 2 (or more) fully self-awakened buddhas to arise in the same universe*—just as only 1 world-monarch (*cakka,vatti*) arises in a world-system.²⁶⁷

5.2.1.2 The main reason for this seems to be the uniqueness of **the fully self-awakened one**, that is, one who has gained “supreme self-awakening” (*anuttara sammā sambodhi*), who thus has “omniscience,” the full understanding of “**the all**” (*sabba*) [1.2.2.4], defined as “knowing all that there is to be known” [4.3.2.2 (3)].

Due to the duration (countless aeons) and difficulty (experiencing great suffering and sacrifices) in the evolution of such a being—the apex of human and existential evolution—there can only be *one* such being, *sui generis*, and his wisdom is *sub specie aeternitatis*²⁶⁸—“that Blossom on our human tree | Which opens once in many myriad years— | But opened, fills the world with Wisdom's scent | And Love's dropped honey.”²⁶⁹

²⁶³ See SD 2.19 (2.5).

²⁶⁴ **Brahmajāla S** (D 1,39/1:17 etc), SD 25.2 = **Pāṭika S** (D 24,15/3:28), SD 63.3 = **Aggañña S** (D 28,10.2/3:84), SD 2.19. See SD 2.19 (2.3).

²⁶⁵ See SD 2.19 (2.5.2; 9.5.1).

²⁶⁶ Respectively: D 28,19/3:114 (SD 14.14); M 115,14/3:65 (SD 29.1a); **Akkhaṇa Vg** (A 1.15.10/1:27 = A 1.277); Vbh 336 (VbhA 431 f); Miln 236. See SD 49.8b (15.2.2).

²⁶⁷ M 115,14 (SD 29.1a).

²⁶⁸ See SD 36.13 (5). *Sui generis* is Latin meaning, one of a kind, unique; *sub specie aeternitatis*, “under the aspect of eternity,” is from Baruch Spinoza, describing what is universally and eternally true, without any reference to or dependence upon the temporal aspects of reality. See SD 50.1 (3.5.1.2).

²⁶⁹ Edwin Arnold, *The Light of Asia*, 1879: bk 1: http://www.gutenberg.org/files/8920/8920-h/8920-h.htm#link2H_4_0001.

5.2.2 Many universes, many buddhas?

5.2.2.1 The Sammoha,vinodanī, commenting on the Vibhaṅga’s statement on the uniqueness of the Buddha in a universe (Vbh 336), says thus:

“[After explaining the 3 buddha-fields:] But as regards these 3 fields, there is no sutta (that says) ‘Buddhas appear in another world-sphere apart from this world sphere.’ But there are (suttas that say) that they do not.

For, there are the 3 baskets (*ti,piṭaka*): the Vinaya Piṭaka, the Sutta Piṭaka and the Abhidhamma Piṭaka. There are the 3 councils: the council of the elder Mahā Kassapa, the council of the elder Yasa, and the council of the elder Moggali,putta Tissa—these are the 3 councils.

In the words of the Buddha in the 3 baskets handed down in these 3 councils, there is no sutta (that says): ‘Leaving aside this world-sphere, buddhas appear elsewhere.’ But there are (suttas that say) that they do not.” (VbhA 2:431)

5.2.2.2 Quoting the early suttas [5.2.1.1], **Vasubandhu** [2.1.3.2] echoes the same opinion but adds the possibility it is possible for many buddhas to appear. However, even then, when many buddhas may appear at the same time, each will appear *in a different universe*, and that *they will not leave their universe*.²⁷⁰

Vasubandhu notes that some might object to this, quoting the “Brahma Sūtra”²⁷¹ (where the Buddha declares:} ‘I exercise my power over even a 3,000 great universe” [2.2.3]. He clarifies this issue as follows:

“Certainly, it is not proper that many buddhas should appear at the same time in the same universe, but, on the other hand, nothing prevents many buddhas from appearing at the same time: thus they appear in different universes. The universes are infinite in number; hence, even if the Blessed One lives an entire aeon, he cannot go about the infinity of the universe as he does here (in this world), all the more so if he only lives a human life-time.” (Abhk 3:94d)

5.3 DANGERS OF A MATERIALIST COSMOLOGY

In this section, we will reflect on some miscellaneous but salient topics that are not technically related to cosmology, but concerns how we view Buddhism, our world and the hereafter. Many aspects of Buddhism, or issues related to Buddhism, need to be examined or re-examined, even corrected or discarded for a clearer and safer approach to the path of awakening.

5.3.1 The 3 wheels

5.3.1.1 Early Buddhism often uses the figure of **the wheel** (*cakka*) to evoke a sense of fullness, rightness and goodness: *cakka,vāla* (the wheel-like universe), *cakka,vatti* (the wheel-turning world monarch), and *dhamma,cakka* (the wheel of truth). The Buddha’s teaching is often referred to as **the Dharma-wheel** (*dhamma,cakka*) for a number of reasons.

²⁷⁰ Abhk 3.94d; Abhk: PR 485.

²⁷¹ Abhk (ed Pradhan) 1:183.3 f. Brahma,sūtra = *Thsañs-pa’i mdo*; Paramartha and Xuanzang, 梵王經 (simplified 梵王经) *Fàn wáng jīng* = *Brahma,rāja,sūtra* (= MĀ T1.547a) [Abhk:PR 2:546 n536] but T1.547a (MĀ 78) is actually 梵天請佛經 *Fàntiānqǐng fójīng* which is the Chin version of **Brahma Nimantanika S** [M 49,9/1:329], SD 11.7. The Buddha’s power is only implied there, and he makes no such quote. In fact, the Abhk quote parallels more closely with **(Tika) Abhibhū S** (A 3.80,14-16), SD 54.1.

This Dharma as the true teaching is discovered and taught by the Buddha, who would otherwise—if he had remained to live a household life—would become a wheel-turning monarch (*cakka, vatti*). The Buddha's teaching is universally true, reflecting the true reality of the whole universe in terms of space-time and of existence and being, that is, the universal characteristics of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and nonself. The whole universe, all life and existence, turn on this wheel of truth.

Now we see the wheel pasted *static* above Temple doors and in attractive pictures as each Guru preaches his Dharma. Each Guru tries to be different, special, even unique, to attract and hold followers, and gain their support. This is the rise of **self-identity view**.

5.3.1.2 After the Buddha's time, many monks and nuns thought, now that the Buddha was not around, they might or had to do what they liked. They simplified the teachings, making **the words** more important than the way, the practice. Since they showed less or no love or respect for the suttas, they lost touch with the Dhamma that it preserves. Now they only need to recite the words of the teaching making musical sounds and impressive voices.

They were afraid to criticize the Buddha for saying things like "The supreme worship is to practise the Dharma," since it was one of his last instructions. They did something worse: they quietly ignored such advice, and continued with their project of simplifying the teaching and the practice. They were not happy when lay-people changed for the better with sutta study or meditation. They were afraid of losing their patrons, supporters and servants. They feared they would become poor and unable to retire comfortably.

The people were taught to keep repeating some words. When we keep repeating them, they began to sound more true, even magical. They thought, now that the Buddha was not around, they should ritually call his name, or better **vow** to become Buddhas. After all, it's the intention that counts; so they made the vowing a ritual. Since it was a *simplified* Buddhism, that was all that needed to be done.

To make the reciting more interesting, they made use of gadgets to distract their minds from the routine when it became dull. This was how the 2nd wheel was turned in the devolution of the Buddha Dhamma into Buddhism. It was the time of **the prayer-wheel**. Instead of turning the mind around to the path, they only need to keep turning the prayer-wheel, imagining that merits were generated by their rituals and vows (when just the opposite is true).

It is no more how we practise, *how* peaceful and clear our mind is. It is now how many times the ritual act is performed, how much wealth we have so that we are useful to the monastics and their Temples. This is the rise of **attachment to rituals and vows**.

5.3.1.3 When the religious teachers notice how the ignorant lay followers desired solace and guidance from religion, they decided to teach them the simplified Buddhism. This kept the laity coming to the Temples and dependent on the teachers as Gurus. The devas, demons and pretas became objects of worship, and the monks and nuns became priests and priestesses. In fact, they became such good religious performers that scholars call them **virtuosi**. This means that they are professionals, and professionals charge and earn professional fees. The Dharma-wheel has now become **the money wheel**.

When we lose touch with the living Dharma, we turn to the dead for profit. When we lack faith in renunciation, we turn to acquiring wealth and things. This is rooted in deep-seated **doubts** in the Dharma of account of neglecting spiritual learning and practice.

5.3.1.4 These are **the 3 fetters** (*samyojana*) that chain us to the world that is part of the cosmos of beings and suffering. The wheel of life is also the wheel of death. We have forgotten to stop this wheel from turning. Instead we are chained to this wheel pushing and turning it flowing along with beginningless and endless samsara.

5.3.2 Pretas and paradises

5.3.2.1 Early Buddhist cosmology is a world filled with beings, many suffering in tight places, some struggling to better themselves, and some enjoying the bliss of heavenly space. It is a **living universe**. But where there is life, there is also death, even though it is just a moment, like the turning of a page in the cosmic book of life. Buddhist cosmology teaches us to live, and to live well by acting well, feeding our life with good karma of speech, body and mind, that is, to live the Buddha Dharma, that teaching that awakens us with liberating truth.

When we do not see this **lesson in living** that the universe is teaching us, then, it is as good or as bad (it no more matters) as living as pretas. We can also sink under the burden of such unhelpful beliefs: we follow **the Buddhism of the dead**, fallen into the rut of a **preta-based folklore** driven by funds, food and fear.

Notice the astronomical number of zeros in the “Hell-bank Notes” that local traditional Buddhists burn as if the dead can receive it. If they are already *dead*, what use is such money? And if such currency does reach them, there must be a really bad inflation there in hell or amongst the pretas (we are not sure which). The most meaningful thing to do here is to burn *real* money if we truly love our departed ones. That would be silly, right? (The burning that is.)

5.3.2.2 The 7th moon “ghost festival” of the ethnic Buddhists might as well be called “ecological pollution month.” We not only burn so much offerings that pollute the air and smoke up the upper floors of our flats, but we make wasteful offerings with lit candles and smoky joss-sticks by the wayside. They are for those beings—pretas or hell-beings (again we are not very clear about this)—who are unable to consume them. When we perform such meaningless rituals because we think we can afford to, then, we become like the “powerful pretas” (*petā mah’iddhikā*) ourselves, caught in this samsaric subhuman world.

In 2020, Singapore media reported how some concerned public-spirited “freegans”²⁷²—people committed to cutting down wasteful production and consumption—worked with thousands of foreign labourers from lower-income countries, many of whom cannot afford the products sold in the bright local shopping malls. After midnight (when the candles and joss have burnt out, and to avoid publicity), these broad-minded freegans roam those areas of abandoned offerings, mostly fruits and confectionary, but often enough edible food. These were duly checked, cleaned, washed and packed as gifts for the living who enjoy the simple pleasures of life. This is a better life than feeding a dead cult.²⁷³

5.3.2.3 Buddhism took centuries to take root in **China**. The first documented translation of a Buddhist text into Chinese was done in 143 CE. Around the time of Kumārajīva (344-413), the 4 major Sanskrit **Āgama** texts were translated into Chinese. This valuable development means that they are the only other surviving Sūtra Pīṭaka, generally comparable to the Pali *sutta piṭaka*, especially the 4 Nikāyas (and their Chinese translations from the *Sanskrit*): the Dīgha Nikāya (*dīrgh’āgama*), the Majjhima Nikāya (*majjhim’-āgama*), the Saṃyutta Nikāya (*saṃyukt’āgama*) and the Aṅguttara Nikāya (*ekottarika āgama*).

The Chinese Tripiṭaka, 大藏經 **Dàzàngjīng**, took about a millennium to be completed, from about the 2nd through the 12th centuries CE. The best known of which is the Taishō Shinshū Daizokyō (大正新脩大藏經, the Taishō New Edition of the Great Canon), the Taisho Tripiṭaka.²⁷⁴ Of its 100 volumes, the most valu-

²⁷² The word “freegan” is a portmanteau of “free” and “vegan.”

²⁷³ <https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/singapores-freegans-find-treasure-trash> & <https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/freegans-collect-7th-lunar-month-fruit-offerings-reduce-waste>.

²⁷⁴ The Taishō is mostly based on the 2nd Korean xylographic ed of its Buddhist Canon, the Koryō Taejanggyong. Hence, the Taishō is not exactly a critical ed but a modern typeset version of the reputedly accurate Korean Canon,

able for us are the 1st 2 volumes, which preserve the Āgamas, the Chinese translations of northern version of the 4 Nikāyas.²⁷⁵ The other texts were mostly Mahāyāna texts and Chinese works, many of them done by local scholastics, even royalty.²⁷⁶ Many of the Chinese texts—certainly, Chinese Buddhism—became significantly influenced by Confucianism and Daoism.²⁷⁷

5.3.2.4 Chan Buddhism developed in China from the 6th century CE, and during the Tang (618-907) and Song dynasties (960-1279) became dominant and powerful,²⁷⁸ through their influence (amongst other lesser factors), Buddhism in China had become *Chinese*. With the Sinicization of Buddhism, the arhats and saints of early Buddhism were rejected as foreign and debunked. The Buddha was effectively Daoized and became a kind of Supreme Immortal embodying the Dharmakāya (similar to the Brahminical *brahman*). The Vinaya, too, took more of a Confucian flavour. Then, the 1st Ming emperor (who was familiar with the worldly ways of Chinese monasticism) banned the ordination of Buddhist clergy that was growing in wealth, power and influence.²⁷⁹

While the Chinese **Chan masters** of the Song dynasty were fabricating truths and huckstering Chan to the literati and upper classes, a more populist form of Chinese Buddhism was gaining momentum. This was the cult of **Amitabha** and his **Western Paradise**. When we carefully examine the nature of Amitabha, conceived as an “eternal” Buddha, he is effectively the Chinese Buddhist apotheosis of the Buddha, an omnipresent Deity free of the nasty aspects of western theologies.²⁸⁰ For their souls (the Chinese never really gave up this idea) to enter Amitabha’s paradise, they only need to recite his Name. The Word has indeed become God which gives them access to Paradise. Chinese Buddhism now has a sinicized theology and ethnic cosmology.

5.4 BENEFITS OF A MYTHICAL COSMOLOGY

5.4.1 A universe of experience

5.4.1.1 On account of our being still unawakened, we may need to see most of early Buddhist cosmology as **myth**. We may here understand myth as narratives about our potential in the fullness of space and time (that is the cosmos). Whatever we read, hear, see or know here is in some way about ourself: what we *were*, what we can *be*, what we are. These are lessons—if we learn well from them—which will better our lives, even bring us closer to the path of awakening.²⁸¹

5.4.1.2 Just as we, in our mind, body and speech, *personify a microcosm* of the whole Buddhist cosmos, the whole Buddhist cosmos is an extension, universalization of *what we were, are and will be—a macrocosm*. The early Buddhist cosmology, then, is a grand and full depiction of all possible experience. Though not beyond time and space, it is *not* limited by time and space. All manner of being and conceivable experience are found here, and repeatedly so. In fact, this cosmos moves in circles and cycles: we keep returning to square one—so long as we do not know how to stop this samsara.

with an updated rearrangement of its contents according to modern historiographical criteria, with helpful internal numbering missing from other similar Chinese Canons (such as CBETA).

²⁷⁵ On “The Chinese Buddhist canon,” see *How Buddhism Became Chinese*, SD 40b (2.6.4).

²⁷⁶ See “Canonization process: the meaning of *jīng*,” see SD 40b (2.6.4.5).

²⁷⁷ See SD 40b (2.3.8.1) Confucianized morality; (2.3.8.2) Daoized wisdom.

²⁷⁸ On Chan Buddhism in China, see SD 40b (5).

²⁷⁹ See SD 40b (2.3.6 f).

²⁸⁰ See eg R J Corless, “Monotheistic elements in early Pure Land Buddhism,” *Religion* 6,2, 1976:176-189.

²⁸¹ On the meaning of myth in Buddhism, see SD 52.1 (1.2 f).

5.4.1.3 Even in our mundane daily life, we never really find any physical or mental condition that is not impermanent, changing, becoming otherwise. We keep doing the same things over and over, hoping that we will find some satisfaction or happiness in it, but we never really do. The cosmos out there, too, is a conditioned and impermanent world of time and space, on a cosmic scale. Hence, even when we are reborn as a formless and blissful brahma with the longest lifespan in the cosmos—84,000 aeons or world-cycles—we are still not ultimately happy or secure. What’s worse, when our sojourn there is done, we fall from that high state to a low unpleasant one, even the lowest hell. Karma is unforgiving.

5.4.2 The brain

According to early Buddhist cosmology, our world-system in its entirety comprises a total of **31 planes**: samsara has 31 realms [App]. This is **the macrocosm**: the universe out there [4.2.3.4]. And our physical body, **the microcosm**, too, has a constellation of 31 parts, beginning with the “skin pentad” (*taca,pañcaka*) “head-hair, body-hair, nails, teeth, skin.”²⁸² It was only in later times, that “the brain” was added to the list—either because the scholastics thought it was an incomplete set or that it deserved a better set name than “the faeces tetrad”—“large intestines, small intestines, stomach-contents, faeces.” With the brain “in the head” (*matthake mattha,luṅgam*), it becomes a more dignified “brain pentad,”²⁸³ making it “the 32 body-parts.”²⁸⁴ The body remains as it is, changing and decaying, like the universe.²⁸⁵

Now, only **nirvana** (*nibbāna*) is missing from the Buddhist cosmos. It is not included amongst the 31 planes for a simple reason, perhaps, not so simple reasons: it is indefinable in space-time terms since it is neither a state nor a condition; hence, we cannot be reborn there, nor “go there” no matter how long we try to journey! [4.2.3.2]. Like the Buddha, who “has attained” nirvana, both are *sub species aeternitatis* [5.2.1.2].

6 Cosmology as karma and rebirth

6.1 THE 3 WORLDS AND 31 PLANES

6.1.1 Worlds and destinies

6.1.1.1 We end our survey of early Buddhist cosmology by reminding ourselves of *what* we are, *where* we are, *whither* we are heading: the various worlds and realms, and the **karmic-rebirth** connection. The early Buddhist cosmos comprises 31 planes or realms that are basically divided into **the 3 worlds** (*ti,loka*): the sense-world, the form world and the formless world. The first—**the sense world** (*kāma,loka* or *kāma,-dhātu*)—is sometimes called the “world of desire” since they are, as a rule, driven by (body-based) sensual desire (*kāma*).

The word **kāma** also means “lustful desire,” which arises from being attracted and desiring objects of the senses, thus serving as the 5 cords of sense-pleasures (*pañca kāma,guṇa*).²⁸⁶ The word *guṇa* also has the sense of “multiplying”: these sense-pleasures simply keep attracting their own kind, and thus multiplying themselves. The other 2 worlds are those of the form brahmas and the formless brahmas [6.1.2 f].

6.1.1.2 The suttas sometimes speak of **the 5 destinies**, destinations or realms (*pañca,gati*). **The Pañca,gati Sutta** (A 9.68), for example, mentions *the hells, the animal realm, the preta domain, the human*

²⁸² On the 31 body-parts, see **Giri-m-ānanda S** (A 10.60,6), SD 19.16.

²⁸³ **Kāya,gata,sati S** (M 119,7), SD 12.21.

²⁸⁴ *Dva-t,tiṃs’ākāra*: M 119,7 (SD 12.21); **Dva-t,tiṃs’ākāra**, Khp 3.

²⁸⁵ An auspicious set of 32 body parts does exist in the form of the “32 marks of the great man” (*mahā,purisa lakkhaṇa*), another late addition to the early canon: **Lakkhaṇa S** (D 3), SD 36.9 esp (4); SD 36.9 (3+4).

²⁸⁶ On the 5 cords of sense-pleasures, see M 13,7 n (SD 6.9); A 6.63,3.2 + SD 6.11 (2.2.2.6).

world, and the deva heavens.²⁸⁷ The last is a generic term that includes all the diverse planes of devas and brahmas of the 3 worlds [6.1.1.1].

The first three are called the planes of misery or suffering states (*apāya bhūmi*), the fallen state (*vinipāta*), or the bad destinies (*duggati*). The human world and the celestial planes are, on the other hand, collectively called the good or happy destinies (*sugati*). The oldest cosmological model probably included only 10 realms: the 3 suffering states (the hells, preta-world and animals), the humans, and the 6 sense-world heavens (*sagga*) [1.4.2]. The last are inhabited by **the devas**, who enjoy far longer lives of greater happiness, beauty, power and glory than we do in the human or subhuman world.

6.1.1.3 Although **the asuras** often feature in various suttas, especially as battling against the devas of Tāva,tiṃsa, these “anti-gods” are never slotted as a realm of their own, but vaguely categorized as the devas or included amongst them, since they were once devas. Later texts, especially of the Mahāyāna, however, speak of the “**6 realms**,” that is, the 5 destinies [6.1.1.2] and the asuras [1.5.2.1].

The 6-realm model—the hell-beings, the pretas, animals, the asuras, humans, and the devas—had become popular by the time Buddhism spread to China and East Asia [3.2.3]. This new model was, in time, associated with the rise of the 6-syllable mantra (*Om maṇi padme hūm*) of the Avalokiteśvara cult in Vajrayāna (Tibet and northern Asia).²⁸⁸ It is also possible that the 6-realm model became popular as a framework for the cultivation of lovingkindness, especially on account of this Mahāyāna development.²⁸⁹

6.1.1.4 The sense world comprises 11 realms (in an ascending order of well being):²⁹⁰

- the 4 suffering states (*āpaya*): hell-beings (*niraya*), pretas (at first called “departed ones”) (*petti,visaya*), animals, (*tiracchāna,yoni*) and asuras or titans (*asura,kāya*)²⁹¹ [3.2.6];
- the human world (*manussa,loka*);
- the 6 realms of the sense-world devas (*deva*): the 4 great kings (*cātum,mahā,rājika*), the 33 (*tāvatīm-sa*), the blissful (*yāma*), the contented (*tusita*), those delighting in creation (*nimmāna,ratī*) and those who lord over others’ creation (*para,nimmita,vasavatti*).

Their common characteristics are that they have consciousness and 5 physical senses. The devas or celestial beings, however, have a more refined physical body and special powers, on account of their past good karma. The way they are described, interestingly, reminds us very much of the way that aliens are depicted in space fiction series like Star Wars and Star Trek.

In other words, early Buddhism does not reject the possibility that these devas (and the higher beings) are possibly **aliens**. Even in the normal sense of the word, alien, describes the devas since their realms are in a different time-space continuum although we are in the same universe (just as radio waves and other waves exist in our atmosphere and universe).

6.1.2 The form world

6.1.2.1 Above the sense world is **the world of form** (*rūpa,loka* or *rūpa, dhātu*) comprising 16 realms, divided into 4 dhyana-based worlds, that is, the **brahmas** (*brahmā*, as they are called) of the 1st-4th dhyana-

²⁸⁷ A 9.68/4:459 (SD 2.20).

²⁸⁸ See A Studholme, *The Origins of Om Mani Padme Hūm*, 2002.

²⁸⁹ See SD 2.20 (2).

²⁹⁰ For further details, see App.

²⁹¹ See D 3:7,17-8,11, 264,11; pl A 1:143,17 (= *cattāro apāyā*, Comy); Kvu 361,1-4 (KvuA 105,1); J 5:186,24*; SA 2:97,5; ItA 2:118,17; UA 418,18; Thī 475 (ThīA 285,29); Vism 427,22; SnA 310,21. Cf *asura,gaṇa*, “the asura community,” Pm 2:302,29.

nas. Since they have transcended the physical body, their sensual desire has essentially abated. The life-span of each brahma realm increases exponentially according to their level.

They have consciousness (which is dhyanic) but only 2 senses: sight and hearing.²⁹² Compared to sense-world beings who depend on the 5 faculties to “sense” things, these brahmas are far advanced sensually. Not only are they able to far better sense what we bodily experience, but they do so with profound pleasure, if they need or want to, just by putting their minds to it.²⁹³

6.1.2.2 The highest of the form realms are the 4th-dhyana **pure abodes** (*suddh’āvāsa*). Unlike the other planes of existence, the pure-abodes brahmas do not gain birth on account of karma, but rather in terms of cutting down on *both* bad (*akusala*) and good (*kusala*) karma. Only non-returners—those who have broken the 5 lower fetters²⁹⁴—arise here to attain arhathood in due course (by ending the higher fetters).²⁹⁵

6.1.3 The formless world

6.1.3.1 The highest of the 31 planes are the 4 **formless worlds** (*arūpa, dhātu* or *arūpa, loka*). These are inhabited by brahmas who have or need only consciousness, without any physical basis. Each of these 4 realms are successively subtler than the preceding one. They have no need of the physical senses because they constantly enjoy the profound bliss of the formless dhyanas. In other words, they are essentially beings in deep meditation, or those who enjoy the bliss arising from their formless attainment (*arūpa samāpatti*) (these high formless states are not called “dhyanas,” *jhāna*).

6.1.3.2 These 31 planes, from bottom to top, are populated by beings who suffer the grossest forms of suffering to those who enjoy the subtlest of body-free mental bliss. On account of the nature of these formless world brahmas—they have no physical bodies but are **pure mental beings**—they do not really form a part of the physical universe. Hence, they are not in any way affected by the cycles of cosmic evolution and devolution [1.5.3.3 f].

6.1.3.3 Rebirth into any of these realms (except for the 4th-dhyana pure abodes) [6.1.2.2] is condition or driven by karma or through dhyanic meditation. In terms of **karma**, when our bad karmic fruits ripen, we fall into one of the subhuman states or in some human life ridden with unsatisfactoriness. When our good fruits ripen, we are propelled in happy human life or one of the 6 sense-world heavens. Through proper dhyana meditation, we attain one of the form realms, or even one of the formless realms.

Yet, all these states (except those of the pure abodes) are samsaric by nature: they are impermanent and part of a cosmic “Snakes and Ladders” game [3.2.1.1] we are caught in. They are karmic realms, and we are caught in this karmic game of pain and pleasure, sorrow and joy, in a seemingly endless cycle, conditioned by karma. Only when we overcome karma is rebirth ended, and the unconditioned, nirvana, attained. This is the lesson of early Buddhist cosmology.

²⁹² Except in the case of the non-percipient beings (*asañña, satta*) of the 4th dhyana, who live in a suspended state of animation for 500 aeons. Once a thought arises in them, they fall from that state and are reborn elsewhere.

²⁹³ For a listing of the 31 planes, see Appendix. For details on the individual categories of these beings (and others of the 31 planes), see Punnadhammo, *The Buddhist Cosmos*, 2018: ch 3.

²⁹⁴ The 5 lower fetters (*orāma, bhāgiya saṃyojana*) are: (1) self-identity view (*sakkāya, ditṭhi*), (2) spiritual doubt (*vicikicchā*), (3) attachment to rituals and vows (*sīla-b, bata, parāmāsa*); (4) sensual lust (*kāma, rāga*), and (5) aversion (*paṭigha*). See **Oram, bhāgiya S** (S 45.179) + SD 50.11 (2); SD 10.16 (1.6.7).

²⁹⁵ The higher fetters (*uddham, bhāgiya saṃyojana*) are: (6) lust for form existence (*rūpa, rāga*), (7) lust for formless existence (*arūpa, rāga*), (8) conceit (*māna*), (9) restlessness (*uddhacca*), (10) ignorance (*avijjā*). See **Uddham, bhāgiya S** (S 45.180) + SD 50.12 (2.4); SD 10.16 (1.6.8).

6.2 The 3 worlds as ontology

6.2.1 The Commentaries record the sutta explanations and usages of the term *loka* (“world”) as being threefold, that is, as:²⁹⁶

- | | | |
|-----------------------------|------------------------|---|
| (1) the physical world | <i>(okāsa,loka)</i> | the space-time dimension; |
| (2) the world of beings | <i>(satta loka)</i> | living beings and organic life; and |
| (3) the world of formations | <i>(saṅkhāra,loka)</i> | our mentally projected world that defines us. |

6.2.2 These are the “3 worlds” in ontological terms, by way of *existence and being*. In important ways, **the physical world** (*okāsa,loka*) or cosmos is always present, serving as the stage for our karmic lives and rebirths; hence, it is our past, the roots from which we have sprung, as it were, and continue to be sustained physically. **The world of beings** (*satta,loka*) refers to our present lives of karmic evolution or karmic degradation, depending on our current actions. This is *the social and psychological realities* that we create for ourselves and exist in. But they are essentially our desires, dislikes and delusions projected as the *external* realities of which we are the actors.

6.2.3 While the physical world is the external support for our existence and being, it is the **the world of formations** (*saṅkhāra,loka*), our formative world, that we really are. Our true nature (like that of the other 2 worlds) are *impermanent* (incessantly changing), *unsatisfactory* (never really going the way we want it), and *non-self* (neither really seem to be what they really are). Our **greed** (*lobha*) keeps is running after the impermanent, feeding us with the idea of having; **hate** (*dosa*) is that unhappy feeling, a dissatisfaction that keeps us doing things to satisfy our sense of *having*; and **delusion** keeps us being so and going, conditioned to endlessly repeating our actions through the mind, body and speech with the notion that when we keep repeating things, they become real, like the world around us—so we think. These, essentially, are the formations (*saṅkhāra*) that we were, are and will be. It is another word for **karma** (*kamma*).

6.3 Conclusion

Early Buddhist cosmology is telling us that everything in the universe is teachings us Dharma. No matter where we look or imagine of the universe, the inevitable truth we see or will see is that of **impermanence**. The universe begins with us—the microcosm—and covers all the whole universe, or what we can understand or imagine of it: the macrocosm. As we are, so it is; we are all intimately interconnected, interdependent and impermanent.

No matter how much we know or think we know of the universe, or even of ourself, this knowledge is only provisional. For, in time to come, we wake up with a better understanding of what we have assumed in the past. The reality is that the past is ignorance; the present is learning; the future will be wisdom—if and when we keep on learning and understanding **true reality**.

Our understanding of early Buddhist cosmology—and its purpose in the Buddha’s teaching—starts with our careful examining and acceptance of the nature of our own world. It makes good sense to be diligent in working to understand our own world, since we inhabit it. In many ways, we have created it in our own mind. Buddhist cosmology helps us learn to see it for what it is, and what it can be.

Just as the universe, even this very moment, is changing, evolving, we, too, are *changing*, evolving—when we see **change**, accept it for what it is. In that way, we begin to see true reality. Our journey towards the path of awakening has begun.

— — —

²⁹⁶ Vism 7.37/204 f; DA 1:173 f; MA 1:397, 2:200.

Appendix. The 31 planes according to the Pali sources²⁹⁷

<u>WORLD</u> (<i>dhātu</i>)	<u>COSMOLOGY</u>	<u>PSYCHOLOGY</u>
REALM (<i>bhūmi</i>)	LIFE-SPAN	KARMA (leading to rebirth in corresponding realm)
FORMLESS WORLD (<i>arūpa, dhātu</i>)	Neither-perception-nor-non-perception (<i>n'eva, saññā, nāsaññ'āyatana</i>) Nothingness (<i>ākiñcaññ'āyatana</i>) Infinite consciousness (<i>viññāṇañc'āyatana</i>) Infinite space (<i>ākāsānanc'āyatana</i>)	84,000 aeons 60,000 aeons 40,000 aeons 20,000 aeons Formless attainments (<i>arūpa samāpatti</i>)
FORM WORLD (<i>rūpa, dhātu</i>)	The peerless (<i>akaniṭṭhā</i>) The clear-visioned (<i>sudassī</i>) Of clear beauty (<i>sudassā</i>) The serene (<i>atappā</i>) The durable (<i>avihā</i>) Non-percipient beings (<i>asañña, satta</i>) Abundant Fruit (<i>veha-p, phala</i>)	16,000 aeons 8,000 aeons 4,000 aeons 2,000 aeons 1,000 aeons 500 aeons 500 aeons Non-percipient attainment (<i>asañña, samāpatti</i>) Ordinary 4 th dhyana
↑ destroyed by wind	Radiant glory (<i>subha, kiṇha</i>) Boundless glory (<i>appamaṇa, subha</i>) Limited glory (<i>paritta, subha</i>)	64 aeons 32 aeons 16 aeons 3 rd dhyana
↑ destroyed by water	Streaming radiance (<i>ābhassara</i>) Boundless radiance (<i>appamān'ābha</i>) Limited radiance (<i>paritt'ābha</i>)	8 aeons 4 aeons 2 aeons 2 nd dhyana
↑ destroyed by fire	Great Brahma (<i>mahā brahmā</i>) Brahma's ministers (<i>brahmā purohita</i>) Brahma's retinue (<i>brahmā pārissajja</i>)	1 aeon ½ aeon ¼ aeon 1 st dhyana
SENSE WORLD (<i>kāma, dhātu</i>)	Lords of other's creations (<i>paranimmita, vasavatti</i>) Those who delight in creation (<i>nimmāna, ratī</i>) The contented (<i>tusita</i>) The Yāma gods (<i>yāma</i>) The thirty-three (<i>tāvātimsa</i>) The 4 great kings (<i>cātum, mahārājika</i>) Human beings (<i>manussa</i>) [Titans Ghosts Animals Hell beings <i>asura, kāya</i> <i>petti, visāya</i> <i>tiracchāna, yoni</i> <i>niraya</i>]	128,000 cy 64,000 cy 16,000 cy 8,000 cy 2,000 cy 500 cy variable unspecified unspecified unspecified unspecified THE DESCENTS (<i>apāya</i>) 10 courses of unwholesome karma motivated by greed, hate and delusion [cy = celestial years]
		FORM SPHERE PURE ABODES (<i>suddh'āvāsa</i>) Path of non-returning (<i>anāgāmi, magga</i>) Supramundane 4 th dhyana FORMLESS SPHERE (<i>arūpāvacara</i>) FORM SPHERE (<i>rūpāvacara</i>) 4 th
		SENSE-SPHERES (<i>kāmāvacara</i>) HAPPY DESTINIES (<i>sugati</i>) 10 courses of wholesome karma motivated by non- attachment, loving- kindness and wisdom

²⁹⁷ See Vbh 422-426 (life-span); Vism 7.40-44 (*okāsa, loka*), 13.41-63 (destruction); Abhs 5.1-17 (the 31 planes SD 1.7 (Appendix).

Bibliography

For other titles, see the SD Guide (SD 01)

Gethin, Rupert

1997 "Cosmology and meditation: From the Aggañña-Sutta to the Mahayana." *History of Religions* 36,3 Feb 1997:183-217. Download from <http://ccbs.ntu.edu.tw/FULLTEXT/JR-EPT/rupert.htm>.

Punnadhammo Mahāthero

2018 *The Buddhist Cosmos: A comprehensive survey of the early Buddhist worldview according to Theravāda and Sarvāstivāda sources*. Neening, ON: Arrow River Forest Hermitage, 2018. Download: <https://www.arrowriver.ca/book/cosmo.pdf>.

070423 200916 201008 201119 210108 210111