

# 24

## (Chakka) Bhava Sutta

The (Sixes) Discourse on Existence | A 6.105

Theme: Growing space in the samsaric crowd

Translated & annotated by Piya Tan ©2020

### 1 Sutta summary and significance

#### 1.1 SUTTA SUMMARY

The **(Chakka) Bhava Sutta** (A 6.105) is a very short sutta on the urgency of our renouncing samsara, that is “the 3 worlds,” referred to as **the 3 kinds of existences** (*bhava*),<sup>1</sup> that is, the sense-world (*kāma, bhava*), the form-world (*rūpa, bhava*) and the formless world (*arūpa, bhava*).

The only way out of samsara is by practising **the 3 trainings**, that is, training in moral virtue, in mental cultivation and in insight wisdom. Essentially, moral training frees the body defilements [1.2.1]; mental training calms and clears the mind [1.2.2]; and wisdom training brings us to the path of awakening. [1.2.3]

#### 1.2 SUTTA SIGNIFICANCE

##### 1.2.1 Training in moral virtue (*sīla, sikkhā*)

Training in moral virtue concerns the *bodily* renunciation of **wrong action** (killing, stealing, sexual misconduct),<sup>2</sup> **wrong speech** (lying, slander, harsh speech, frivolous chatter),<sup>3</sup> and **wrong livelihood** (any kind of work that is against the 5 precepts or that harms self, others and the environment).<sup>4</sup>

The basis of moral virtue is **the 5 precepts**, which embodies natural morality, meaning that breaking them entails negative karma. They violate the natural states or values of life, happiness, freedom, truth and wisdom.<sup>5</sup>

For monastics, they have to well understand the Vinaya and its rules, and keep to them since they have pledged to do so and which form the basis for proper mental cultivation, and both the bases for liberating wisdom: this is the essence of the 3 trainings.<sup>6</sup>

##### 1.2.2 Training in mental cultivation (*samādhi, sikkhā*)

**1.2.2.1** Training in mental cultivation begins with the letting go of *external* distractions by finding a suitable place or environment for living and practice. Then, we work to renounce *internal* distractions by the cultivation of **right effort** (*sammā vāyāma*): the efforts of restraining *un arisen* bad,<sup>7</sup> of abandoning *arisen* bad; of cultivating *un arisen* good; of *guarding* [maintaining] arisen good.<sup>8</sup> These processes work to arouse energy for our spiritual practice and prevents losing it by unwholesome actions or thoughts.

<sup>1</sup> On *bhava*, see SD 23.13 (1).

<sup>2</sup> On right action, see SD 10.16 (4).

<sup>3</sup> On right speech, see SD 10.16 (3).

<sup>4</sup> On right livelihood, see SD 10.16 (5).

<sup>5</sup> On the 5 precepts, see **Dīgha, jānu S** (A 8.54,13), SD 5.10; **Veḷu, dvāreyya S** (S 55.7), SD 1.5 (2); **Sīlānussati**, SD 15.11 (2.2); SD 21.6 (1.2); SD 37.8 (2.2).

<sup>6</sup> On the 3 trainings, see **(Ti) Sikkhā S** (A 3.88), SD 24.10c; **Sīla samādhi paññā**, SD 21.6; SD 1.11 (5).

<sup>7</sup> “Bad” here is a shorthand for “unwholesome state(s).”

<sup>8</sup> On right effort, see **Mahā Sakul’udāyi S** (M 77,42), SD 49.5a; **(Catukka) Padhāna S** (A 4.14), SD 10.2; SD 10.16 (6).

**1.2.2.2** We then direct our energies to **right mindfulness** (*sammā sati*), that is, the “mental signs” [objects] for samadhi or mental concentration [1.2.2.3]. Beginners usually begin with the body as the focus of mindfulness (*kāyānupassanā*), especially the breath meditation.<sup>9</sup> While watching the breath (before concentration arises), we note whatever feelings that arise, whether pleasant or unpleasant, or that it is neither: this is the practice of taking feeling as the focus of mindfulness (*vedanā’nupassanā*).<sup>10</sup>

Then, whenever a thought arises, we direct the mind to it as the focus of mindfulness (*cittānupassanā*). As for a feeling, so, too, for a thought: we simply see it as being *impermanent*, or we note its arising and passing away.<sup>11</sup> At some point, we watch the appearance of reality—any of the 5 mental hindrances, or the 5 aggregates, or the 6 sense-spheres, or the 7 awakening-factors, or the 4 noble truths—as the focuses of mindfulness (*dhammānupassanā*).<sup>12</sup>

For beginners, it is difficult to focus the mind strictly following the stated sequence of the satipatthanas. We attend to whichever sign or object (*nimitta*) that arises before us. As we master the practice, we will, in due course, be able to naturally cultivate satipatthana in their stated sequence of practice.<sup>13</sup> This is *not* the goal of the practice; it simply means that we are better at it. The actual goal of satipatthana as right mindfulness is that of right concentration, which may arise at any time during our practice. [1.2.2.3]

**1.2.2.3** In simple terms, according to **the Cūḷa Vedalla Sutta** (M 44), **right concentration** (*sammā samādhi*) is the “one-pointedness of mind” (*cittassa ek’aggatā*), that is, a fully focused mind directed to any of the 4 focuses of mindfulness (*satipaṭṭhāna*).<sup>14</sup> This is the commonest explanation for right concentration, especially in connection with monastic training whose goal is that of attaining arhathood, for which dhyana is necessary.<sup>15</sup>

**1.2.2.4** On the other hand, non-dhyana samadhi is sufficient for **lay practice** (including monastics who have difficulties attaining dhyana), including those who “enjoy sensual pleasures” (*kāma, bhogī*),<sup>16</sup> that is, those lay practitioners who work for a living, live family lives or are incelibate within the spirit of the 5 precepts [1.2.1]. This kind of practice is more focused on cultivating mindfulness (*sati*) than attaining dhyana (*jhāna*). Here, the main practice for the laity is that of **the perception of impermanence** (*anicca saññā*), which leads to attaining, in this life itself, streamwinning, the 1<sup>st</sup> stage of the path of awakening.<sup>17</sup>

### **1.2.3 Training in wisdom** (*paññā, sikkha*)

**1.2.3.1** The 3 trainings that we practise now before even attaining streamwinning may be called **the path to awakening**, since we have yet to attain the path of awakening which begins with that of the streamwinner. Technically, the path to awakening has the familiar 8 limbs, 6 of which we have discussed above: right speech, right action, right livelihood [1.2.1]; right effort [1.2.2.1], right mindfulness [1.2.2.2],

<sup>9</sup> On *kāyānupassanā* or body-based meditation, see SD 30.3 (2.6.2.1); SD 13.1 (5 esp 5A).

<sup>10</sup> On *vedanā’nupassanā* or feeling-based meditation, see SD 13.1 (5B).

<sup>11</sup> On *cittānupassanā* or mind-based meditation, see SD 13.1 (5C).

<sup>12</sup> On *dhammānupassanā* or reality-based meditation, see SD 13.1 (5D).

<sup>13</sup> See SD 13.1 (6.1).

<sup>14</sup> M 44,12 (SD 40a.9).

<sup>15</sup> On why dhyana is necessary for attaining arhathood (and non-returning), see **Samatha & vipassana**, SD 41.1 (2.2.2.4); **Bhāvanā**, SD 15.1 (13); **Samadhi**, SD 33.1a (2.2-2.5); **The layman and dhyana**, SD 8.5 (9).

<sup>16</sup> On the *kāma, bhogī* laity, see **Mahā Vaccha, gotta S** (M 73,10/1:491), SD 27.4; SD 54.9 (4.2).

<sup>17</sup> See **(Anicca) Cakkhu S** (S 25.1), SD 16.7.

and right concentration [1.2.2.3]. For these trainings to be “right” (*sammā*), each of them must be rooted in **right view**.<sup>18</sup>

**1.2.3.2** There are basically 2 kinds of right view:<sup>19</sup>

(1) the mundane (“with influxes,<sup>20</sup> partaking of merit, ripening in birth-bases”)—this is accepting that there is goodness in giving and charity; karma; the human and other realms; the family; rebirth; and possibility of knowing and cultivating good.<sup>21</sup>

(2) the supramundane (“noble, without influx, supramundane, a path-factor”): this refers to the arhat’s right view or awakening.

**1.2.3.3** In between these 2, there is the right view that is the full understanding (*pariññā*) of the 4 noble truths: that of suffering, of its arising, of its ending, and of the way leading to its ending, as defined in **the Sacca Vibhaṅga Sutta** (M 141).<sup>22</sup> As the arhat’s right view, this is the same as the 2<sup>nd</sup> kind of right view, the supramundane, just mentioned. As unawakened practitioners, our understanding of the 4 truths, since we lack the direct experience, is still theoretical but beneficial to us.

A vital part of what constitutes “suffering” is **impermanence**, as famously found in the triad of universal characteristics of impermanence, suffering and non-self. Everything is impermanent. Whatever is impermanent is unsatisfactory (suffering). That which is impermanent and unsatisfactory has no essence, no selfhood.<sup>23</sup>

In simple terms, as our reflection on impermanence [1.2.2.4] deepens and we understand its reality more directly, there comes a point when we will attain streamwinning, when we no more identify with any of the 5 aggregates: our body (or any kind of form), feeling, perception, formations or consciousness.<sup>24</sup> We have no doubt regarding the Buddha, his teaching or the noble sangha; and we have let go of superstition (attachment to rituals and vows). We have broken the 3 fetters.<sup>25</sup> [1.2.4.1]

**1.2.3.4** Wisdom training comprises the examining and mastering of right view [1.2.3.2] and cultivating **right intention** (*sammā saṅkappa*). Although this path-factor seems restricted to intentions (*cetanā*), in practice, it includes whatever thoughts that we are aware arising in our mind. The moment we direct our mind to it, that thought is said to be “intention.” However, as long as it remains in the mind, that is, it is not expressed through speech or the body, it is merely a mental karma: we have not broken any of the 5 precepts.<sup>26</sup>

However, when we keep on directing our mind to unwholesome thoughts, and allow them to stay and proliferate, they are very likely to be expressed bodily or verbally; then, we have created bad karma accordingly of body or of speech. Hence, it is wise for us to nip such thoughts as soon as they bud in our mind. This is, in fact, applying **the 1<sup>st</sup> 2 right efforts**: those of restraining unarisen bad and of abandoning arisen bad [1.2.2.1].

<sup>18</sup> On right view, see SD 10.16 (1.8).

<sup>19</sup> See SD 10.16 (1.8.2).

<sup>20</sup> “Influxes” (*āsava*) are these 4—those of sense-desire (*kām’āsava*), of (desire for eternal) existence (*bhav’āsava*), of wrong views (*diṭṭh’āsava*), of ignorance (*avijjāsava*)—that keep us stuck to this samsaric cycle of lives and deaths. The set of 3 influxes (omitting views) is prob older: SD 30.3 (1.3).

<sup>21</sup> For the sutta formula, see **Mahā Cattārīsaka S** (M 177,7), SD 6.10.

<sup>22</sup> M 141,24 (SD 11.11).

<sup>23</sup> On this, see SD 57.22 (1.2.3.7).

<sup>24</sup> On the 5 aggregates, see **(Upādāna) Parivaṭṭa S** (S 22.56), SD 3.7. Definition: SD 3.7 (6+7).

<sup>25</sup> These are the 3 fetters broken by a streamwinner: see **Emotional independence**, SD 40a.8.

<sup>26</sup> On right intention, see SD 10.16 (2).

**1.2.3.5** The restraining of unarisen bad (especially thoughts) and abandoning arisen bad (including the restraint of existing bad actions of body and speech) is called **moral training** (or training in moral virtue) [1.2.1]. This is, more importantly, the basis for **mental training**, that comprises cultivating unarisen good (in thought, speech and action, especially the first), and maintaining arisen good—these are **the last 2 right efforts** [1.2.2.1].

Right intention [1.2.3.4] here assumes a vital role as an urgent motivation or will (*chanda*) for personal (moral) and mental (meditative) growth. This is the natural effect when we understand **the meaning of life**, as embodied in the 1<sup>st</sup> 2 noble truths—suffering pervades all existence; suffering is rooted in craving: we clearly see **the purpose** of life as embodied by the last 2 noble truths—suffering can be ended; there is the way to its ending.<sup>27</sup>

The most effective method—or the basis or foundation—for fully understanding the 4 noble truths (so that we are free from suffering) is to understand right where it all starts: the mind. The best (most direct and effective) method of knowing, taming and freeing the mind is **meditation** (*bhāvanā*), which is the 2<sup>nd</sup> of the 3 trainings [1.2.2].

The mental cultivation yields the harvest of **wisdom** (the 3<sup>rd</sup> training), which is basically a clear understanding and acceptance of the universal reality of impermanence [1.2.3.3]. This insight into the true reality that is impermanence brings about true **knowledge** (*sammā ñāṇa*) and **freedom** (*sammā vimutti*), where the training-path ends, with our becoming true **learners** (*sekha*) of the Dhamma as streamwinners, once-returners and non-returners, and finally awakening as arhats. [1.2.4]

### **1.2.4 Knowledge and freedom**

**1.2.4.1** The factor following the last factor of the noble eightfold path (*magga*) is called **right knowledge** (*sammā ñāṇa*), that is, a clearer and fuller understanding of what we really are which is the same as the true reality all around us. This is the knowledge that truly *fre*es us from suffering. Since knowledge matures in stages as wisdom, we evolve in stages along the supramundane path of awakening (*lok’uttara magga*). This impressive term is simply another word for the 4 kinds of path saints—the streamwinner, the once-returner, the non-returner and the arhat.

Technically, “right knowledge” as a factor refers to how we become true learners of reality (*sekha*), that is, the streamwinner, the once-returner and the non-returner. The “learning” or skill here is that of breaking the fetters or burdens that prevent us from really knowing oneself and from growing or evolving into true individuals (*sappurisa*), liberated persons.<sup>28</sup>

**1.2.4.2** We become “true individuals” or noble saints (monastic or lay) when we significantly progress on the path of awakening. As the 1<sup>st</sup> kind of true individual, **the streamwinner** (*sotāpanna*), we are neither defined nor limited by our body, we are free of doubt about reality (in terms of impermanence), and we are not superstitious, that is, we are emotionally independent.<sup>29</sup> We are sure of attaining arhathood (full awakening) within 7 lives (which, however, may take a very long time, but is certain of awakening).<sup>30</sup> [1.2.3.3]

When, as streamwinners, we further evolve spiritually by weakening the 3 unwholesome roots of lust, hate and delusion, we are certain to fully awaken as arhats after one more rebirth in this world: hence, we are called **once-returners** (*sakad-āgāmī*).<sup>31</sup> When, as once-returners, we destroy all the fet-

<sup>27</sup> See SD 57.22 (1.2.3.6).

<sup>28</sup> On right knowledge, see SD 10.16 (9).

<sup>29</sup> See **Emotional independence**, SD 40a.8.

<sup>30</sup> On the streamwinner, see SD 10.16 (11).

<sup>31</sup> On the once-returner, see SD 10.16 (12).

ters that limit us to our body and mind (views and ignorance), we spiritually evolve into **non-returners**. As non-returners, upon dying here, we are reborn in the “pure abodes,” a dimensional existence where we finish off our karma to fully awaken as **arhats** without any need of being reborn at all.<sup>32</sup> As arhats, we are forever free from rebirth.<sup>33</sup>

**1.2.4.3** The final stage of discipleship, the final fruition of the noble path, is that of **right freedom (sammā vimutti)**, that is, true and full liberation from suffering: we become arhats, truly worthy of all goodness in the spiritual sense.<sup>34</sup> The arhat has broken both the 5 lower fetters, which binds us to the sense world [1.2.4.2], and the 5 higher fetters, which binds us to the form world and the formless world. Hence, as arhats, we have broken all the 10 fetters,<sup>35</sup> and we are free from the 3 worlds: we “have made an end of suffering,” as stated in **the (Chakka) Bhava Sutta** (A 6.105) [§4].

## 2 The 3 worlds

### **2.1 THE SENSE-WORLD**

#### **2.1.1 The 3 worlds**

The whole of samsara as we know it comprises the 3 worlds (ti,loka), called **the 3 kinds of existences (tayo bhavā)**,<sup>36</sup> that is, the sense-existence (*kāma,bhava*), the form existence (*rūpa,bhava*) [2.2], and the formless existence (*arūpa,bhava*) [2.3; §2]. In meditative terms, these worlds or existences are called “spheres” (*avacara*), the word used in **Table 2**. They all refer to the same thing. **The sense-world (kāma,-loka)** or sense-existence, is so called because the beings there—the 6 sense-world devas [2.1.1.2], humans, and the 4 lower worlds—are all dependent on their 6 senses, that is, the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind.

#### **2.1.2 The 1<sup>st</sup> station of consciousness**

**2.1.2.1** Psychocosmologically,<sup>37</sup> in terms of the 9 abodes of beings (nava satt’āvāsa),<sup>38</sup> human beings, some beings in the lower worlds, and the 6 sense-world heavens (Cātum,mahārājika,<sup>39</sup> Tāvātimsa, Yāma,<sup>40</sup> Tusita, Nimmāṇa,raṭī and Para,nimmita,vasavatti),<sup>41</sup> are said to belong to **the 1<sup>st</sup> station of con-**

<sup>32</sup> On the non-returner, see SD 10.16 (13).

<sup>33</sup> Technically, the non-returner has broken all the “5 lower fetters” (*oram,bhāgiya saṃyojana*) (those that hold us back in the sense-world): (1) personality views; (2) spiritual doubt; (3) attachment to rituals and vows; (4) sensual lust, and (5) repulsion. See SD 57.26 (1.1.2.1).

<sup>34</sup> On right freedom, see SD 10.16 (10),

<sup>35</sup> The 10 fetters (dasa saṃyojana) comprise the 1<sup>st</sup> 5 of the 10 fetters (*dasa saṃyojana*) [prec n], ie, 5 lower fetters [above n] and the “higher fetters” (*uddham,bhāgiya saṃyojana*), viz: (6) lust for form existence (*r(ṇ)pa,rāga*); (7) lust for formless existence (*ar(ṇ)pa,rāga*); (8) conceit (*māna*); (9) restlessness (*uddhacca*); (10) ignorance (*avijjā*). So called because they fetter us to the higher world, viz the form-realms and formless realms (*rūpārūpāvacara*); hence, they are called “external” fetters (*bahiddhā,samyojana*): **Ajjhatta Bahiddhā Saññojana Sutta** (A 2.4.5), SD 80.5; also SD 10.16 (1.6.6-8); SD 11.1 (5.1.4); SD 3.3 (2); SD 56.1 (4.4).

<sup>36</sup> On the 3 worlds, see SD 54.3a (3.2.1; 4.1).

<sup>37</sup> “Psychocosmologically” is a neologism (adverb) meaning *relating to the nature of the mind in that kind of existence*, esp in connection with **the 9 abodes of beings (nava satt’āvāsa)**, SD

<sup>38</sup> The 9 abodes of beings is a teaching-set that classifies beings according to how they exist cognitively, ie, how their consciousness works, in any of 4 ways, called “stations of consciousness” (*viññāṇa-t,ṭhiti*). See **(Navaka) Satt’āvāsa S** (A 9.24), SD 57.18.

<sup>39</sup> Cātum,mahā,rājika and Tāva,timsa, 1<sup>st</sup> 2 sense-world heavens, are said to be “earth-bound”: SD 54.3a (3.4-3.5).

**Table 2: The 3 worlds and the 9 abodes of beings** (7 stations for consciousness + the 2 spheres)<sup>42</sup>

**Formless realm** (*arūpâvacara*) or “formless sphere” (*arūpâyatana*), esp in meditation attainment

<i>Sphere only</i> : <sup>43</sup>	1 Sphere of neither-perception-nor-non-perception	<i>n’eva,saññā,nâsaññâyatana</i>
7 <sup>th</sup> station for consciousness	2 Sphere of nothingness	<i>âkiñcaññâyatana</i>
6 <sup>th</sup> station for consciousness	3 Sphere of infinite consciousness	<i>viññāṇaċcâyatana</i>
5 <sup>th</sup> station for consciousness	4 Sphere of infinite space	<i>âkāsānañcâyatana</i>

**Form realm** (*rūpâvacara*) or “form-sphere” (*rūpâyatana*), esp in meditation attainment

4 <sup>th</sup> dhyana	[Not stations: Sphere only: <b>4<sup>th</sup> station for consciousness:</b>	5-9 The pure abodes 10 Sphere of non-percipient beings 11 Gods of abundant fruit	<i>suddh’āvāsa</i> <i>asañña,sattā</i> <i>veha-p,phala</i>
	3 <sup>rd</sup> dhyana <i>same in body, same in perception</i>	12 Gods of radiant glory 13 Gods of boundless glory 14 Gods of limited glory	<i>subha,kiñha</i> <i>appamāṇa,subha</i> <i>paritta,subha</i>
2 <sup>nd</sup> dhyana <b>3<sup>rd</sup> station for consciousness:</b> <i>beings same in body, different in perception</i>		15 Gods of streaming radiance 16 Gods of boundless radiance 17 Gods of limited radiance	<i>âbhassara</i> <i>appamāṇ’âbha</i> <i>paritta,subha</i>
		1 <sup>st</sup> dhyana <b>2<sup>nd</sup> station for consciousness:</b> <i>beings different in body, same in perception</i>	18 Great Brahmā 19 Brahmā’s ministers 20 Brahmā’s assembly [host]

**Sense realm** (*kāmâvacara*)

1 <sup>st</sup> station for consciousness: <i>beings different in body, different in perception</i>	21 Gods who lord over others’ creations	<i>para.nimmita,vasavatt×</i>
	22 Gods who delight in creating	<i>nimmāṇa,rat×</i>
	23 The contented gods	<i>tusita</i>
	24 The Yāma gods	<i>yāma</i>
	25 The gods of the 33	<i>tāvatiṃsa</i>
	26 The gods of the 4 great kings	<i>cātum,mahā.rājika</i>
	27 Human beings	<i>manussa,loka</i>
<b>2<sup>nd</sup> station for consciousness:</b> <i>beings different in body, same in perception</i>	28 The host of titans [asuras]	<i>asura,kāya</i>
	29 The realm of the departed [pretas]	<i>pitti,visaya</i>
	30 The animal kingdom	<i>tiracchāna,yoni</i>
	31 Hell	<i>niraya</i>

<sup>40</sup> On the Yāma devas, see SD 54.3a (3.6).

<sup>41</sup> On these heavens, see SD 54.3a (3.4-3.6).

<sup>42</sup> See SD 39.1 (1.4); **Mahā,nidāna S** (D 15,33), SD 5.17, Table 1; **Saṅgīti S** (D 33,2.3(10)). **Satta Viññāṇa-ṭ,ṭhiti S** (A 7.41 = A:B 7.44), SD 96.5, which Comys say are the “grounds for the rebirth-consciousness” (*paṭisandhi,viññāṇ-assa ṭhānāni*, AA 4:25; NcA 59; PmA 1:111). (**Viññāṇa**) **Bija S** (S 22.54) says “the 4 stations of consciousness” (*viññāṇa-ṭ,ṭhiti*) should be seen as the earth element (like soil for plants), ie, it has the first 4 aggregates (form, feeling, perception, formations) as its station (*ṭhiti*) (S 22.54,7) n, SD 8.3(9). For table on the 31 planes: SD 1.7 (App).

<sup>43</sup> This is called a “sphere” (*avacara*), not a “station” (*ṭhiti*), because the consciousness is extremely subtle here so that it cannot be said to exist or not exist.



**sciousness** [21-27], wherein they have different bodies and different perceptions. Humans, for example, each have his or her own body and their minds work (they “cognize”) each in their own way. All the other beings existentially function in this manner.

**2.1.2.2** The beings in **the 4 lower realms** (*catu apāya*, “the 4 descents”) or suffering states (*duggati*)—the titans, the pretas, animals and hell (or the hells)—have different bodies (like humans), but unlike us, they all share the same perception, that is, a suffering one, on account of the result of their negative karma. In **Table 2**, these beings are listed according to their realms, namely, the host of titans (*asura, kāya*), the realm of the departed (*pitti, visaya*), the animal kingdom (*tiracchāna, yoni*, literally, “animal birth”) and hell (*niraya*).

We can, psychologically, speak of these 4 suffering states as some kind of **psychological stereotypes** or character types, since the beings of each of them feel, and are likely to react in similar ways. The asuras or titans are characterized by exploitative violence; the pretas, by insatiably addictive behaviour;<sup>44</sup> animals, by ignorance, fear, rituals, herd mentality and predictability; and hell-beings, by painful violence.

Humans are unique, in the sense that we are only *born* with a human body, but our **mind** (*mano*) needs to be conditioned by the compassion and wisdom of our parents, carers and peers, and cultivated by our own efforts to become truly human, or better, humane. As such, most of us often overtly or covertly show signs of subhuman tendencies and habits. This is the kind of karma that brings us to the negatively commensurate rebirth in the lower realms.<sup>45</sup>

## 2.2 THE FORM WORLD

### 2.2.1 The form world as realms

**2.2.1.1** Unlike the sense-world beings, who rely on their physical senses and the mind, **the form world** (*rūpa, loka* or *rūpa, dhātu*) comprises 4 realms of brahmas (divine beings) who have transcended the sense-world on account of their dhyana attainment. Hence, they neither have nor need the physical senses, except for those of seeing and hearing. Since these brahmas have transcended the sense-world, and have attained dhyanic states, they enjoy profound dhyanic bliss, which feed and sustain them.

**2.2.1.2** Interestingly, like the beings of the subhuman suffering states, the brahmas of **the 1<sup>st</sup> form dhyana**, are classified as **the 2<sup>nd</sup> station of consciousness** [28-31; 18-20], that is, they have different bodies but the same perception. Unlike the subhuman beings, these brahmas persistently enjoy profound dhyanic (transsomatic or superhuman) bliss. In simple terms, they enjoy pure mental bliss free from any kind of bodily limitation, and have great mental powers.

They are also characterized by great radiance emanating from their ethereal being. There are 3 classes of these 1<sup>st</sup>-dhyana brahmas, and the higher or more evolved amongst them have greater radiance and psychic powers than the lower brahmas. However, on account of their unawakened state, they still hold various wrong views, especially the notion that they have very long lives, even live forever.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>44</sup> As a class of beings, the pretas evolved [SD 57.10 (3.2.5.6)] from being “the departed” (the deceased who are caught in some kind of limbo) [SD 48.1 (8.1); SD 2.6a (4)] to persistently suffering beings [SD 57.10 (3.2.5)] to “hungry ghosts” of the Chinese [SD 40b.1 (1.4)].

<sup>45</sup> See **Appa, mattaka Vg** (A 1.19), SD 57.7; **Pañca, gati Peyyāla Vg**, SD 57.28. On feral children: *Gale Ency of Psychology* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed), sv, 2001:246 f.

<sup>46</sup> See eg **Brahmā Baka S** (S 6.4), SD 11.6. On the 1<sup>st</sup>-dhyana brahmas, see SD 54.3a (3.7).

**2.2.1.3** On the next celestial level of existence are the **2<sup>nd</sup> form dhyana** brahmas, who are rooted in the **3<sup>rd</sup> station of consciousness** [15-17]. These are the devas (gods)<sup>47</sup> of limited radiance (*paritta,subha*), of boundless radiance (*appamāṇ'ābha*) and of streamwing radiance (*abhassara*). They have *bodies that look* and function in identical ways—they are radiant in the same way at their respective levels of being—but they *perceive joy in different ways*, that is, of different intensity. However, since their minds can easily attain the 2<sup>nd</sup> dhyana, they all experience thought-free dhyanic bliss.<sup>48</sup>

**2.2.1.4** The devas of the **3<sup>rd</sup> dhyana heavens**—the devas of limited glory (*paritta,subha*), of boundless glory (*appamāṇa,subha*) and of radiant glory (*subha,kiṇha*)—are those of the **4<sup>th</sup> station of consciousness** [11-14]. Their *bodies of glorious radiance look identical*, and they experience *the same kind of 3<sup>rd</sup>-dhyana bliss*.<sup>49</sup> The bliss experienced by these devas are of a serene kind, since the 3<sup>rd</sup> dhyana is free from the exuberance of zest (*pīti*), with only joy (*sukha*).<sup>50</sup>

**2.2.1.5** Included in this category (in terms of the station of consciousness) are the devas of abundant fruit (*veha-p,phala*), the lowest of the **4<sup>th</sup> dhyana heavens**, the only devas at that dhyana level to be classified as such.<sup>51</sup> The other deva-realms of the 4<sup>th</sup> dhyana are those of the sphere of non-percipient beings (*asañña,sattā*), which is regarded only as a “sphere” (*āyatana*) [2.3.1.1]. Then, there is a special class of brahmas, those of the pure abodes (*suddh'āvāsa*), comprising only of non-returners, and none of which is a station for consciousness since the non-returners are bound for arhathood in these abodes. [2.3.2.1]

## **2.2.2 The form world as meditative states**

**2.2.2.1** In early Buddhism, the “outer” cosmology of beings and realms is often viewed as an extension of our own mind and meditation. In our long journey in samsara, we have somehow been born in the sense-world realms countless times.<sup>52</sup> On account of our bad karma, we are reborn in the various subhuman realms or in an unhappy human state where we have difficulty knowing and practising the Dhamma.<sup>53</sup>

Our good karma and proper meditation bring us rebirth in the celestial heavens and dhyanic realms. In this sense, we are “led” by our mind into such states that we have “created” for ourself (Dh 1 f). Even where such existences last for aeons, they are all impermanent. Unless we have already reached the path (as streamwinners at least), when we “fall” (*cavati*) from these celestial and dhyanic states, with the ripening of our store of bad karma, we will be reborn in the lower states, even in hell itself.<sup>54</sup> [2.1.2.2]

<sup>47</sup> The gods of the dhyana worlds (both form and formless) are technically “brahmas” (*brahmā*), but often they are conveniently referred to by the generic term “devas,” (*deva*), a term applied to all celestial beings.

<sup>48</sup> On the meaning of this, see the 5 dhyana-factors (*jhān'aṅga*): SD 8.4 (6); **Vitakka,vicāra**, SD 33.4 (3). On the 2<sup>nd</sup>-dhyana brahmas, see SD 54.3a (3.8).

<sup>49</sup> On the 3<sup>rd</sup>-dhyana brahmas, see SD 54.3a (3.9).

<sup>50</sup> On *pīti* and *sukha*, and their difference: SD 8.4 (6.3 f).

<sup>51</sup> On the Vaha-p.phala brahmas, see SD 54.3a (3.10.2.2).

<sup>52</sup> The Bodhisattva (Siddhattha before becoming buddha) was said to have been born in practically all of the 31 planes, except for pure abodes [SD 10.16 (13.1.6.3)], which are not “stations for consciousness,” but a sort of dimensional realm for only non-returners. The Buddha knows this through his power of recalling his own past lives, the 1<sup>st</sup> of the 3 knowledges: **Cūḷa Hatthi,padōpama S** (M 27,23-25) SD 40.5; SD 1.8 (2.2.2).

<sup>53</sup> On the “inner” cosmology, see SD 57.10 (4.2.3).

<sup>54</sup> On the difficulty of human birth and the greater likelihood of being reborn in the lower realms, see **Appa,mattaka Vg** (A 1.19), SD 57.7; **Pañca,gati Peyyāla Vg**, SD 57.28.



**2.2.2.2** The lesson here is clear: we cannot rely on good karma alone—doing good is never enough; going to heaven is not always good—just as good and its effect are uncertain, impermanent and unsatisfactory, heaven, too, has trap-doors leading straight into hell. Samsara is a cosmic game of **Snakes-and-ladders**.<sup>55</sup>

Our best and only way of not getting trapped in samsara and its suffering states is to work to attain streamwinning in this life itself. Having reflected on **the (Chakka) Bhava Sutta** (A 6.105), we should aspire to attain streamwinning here and now, beginning with diligently keeping to the precepts and constantly reflecting on **impermanence**, as taught in **the (Anicca) Cakkhu Sutta** (S 25.1) and any of the other 9 suttas in the same chapter.<sup>56</sup>

## 2.3 THE FORMLESS WORLD

### 2.3.1 The formless world as realms

**2.3.1.1** When we look at the running numbers in *italics* from 1-31 (which refers to each of the 31 planes of existence), we will notice that numbers 1-4 are *the 4 highest realms of beings*. These are **the 4 formless realms**: the spheres of infinite space, of infinite consciousness, of nothingness, and of neither-perception-nor-non-perception. These realms are named after the kind of formless dhyana that sustain these respective states. [2.3.2]

As formless beings, the formless brahmas are free from the needs and limitations of the physical body. They are also free from the “fine-material” body of the form-world brahmas who are characterized by beautiful and pervasive radiance. These formless brahmas or gods are invisible to others and exist as **pure mental energy**, constantly in the bliss of deep meditation which are based on more refined levels of the 4<sup>th</sup> dhyana.<sup>57</sup>

**2.3.1.2** In terms of the teaching on the stations of consciousness, the 4 formless-dhyana realms are interesting anomalies. Firstly, each of the 1<sup>st</sup> 3 formless realms—the spheres of infinite space, of infinite consciousness, and of nothingness—are regarded, respectively, as **the 5<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> stations of consciousness**; that is as a station of consciousness in its own right.

The reason for this is mainly because these highly refined meditative realms are unlike any of the grosser form realms or the sense realms [2.3.1.1]. Their inhabitants have astronomically long life-spans: the “infinite space” brahmas, 20,000 aeons; the “infinite consciousness” brahmas, 40,000 aeons; the “nothingness” brahmas, 60,000 aeons; and the “neither-perception-nor-non-perception” brahmas, 84,000 aeons.

Furthermore, the 4<sup>th</sup> and last of these formless attainments (*samāpatti*), as they are technically called—the realm of **neither-perception-nor-non-perception**<sup>58</sup>—is not a station of consciousness, on account of the consciousness there being so subtle that it can neither be said to exist or not exist [2.3.2.2]. However, this is the highest realm in samsara, and like all things that exist, it is impermanent, and is not nirvana.

<sup>55</sup> On this ancient Indian game based on karma and samsara: SD 48.1 (6.3.1.5).

<sup>56</sup> S 25.1 (SD 16.7); also **(Anicca) Saññā S** (S 25.6), SD 17.4(10); **(Anicca) Khandha S** (S 25.10), SD 42.17. On Ok-kanta Samyutta: S 25/3:225-228.

<sup>57</sup> On the 4<sup>th</sup> dhyana and the formless dhyanas, see SD 24.11 (5); SD 53.23 (2.1.3).

<sup>58</sup> *N’eva,saññā,nāsaññāyatana*. On *saññā* meaning “consciousness,” see SD 18.8a (8.1).

### 2.3.2 The formless world as meditative states

**2.3.2.1** As already mentioned, **the 4 formless realms** are the spheres of infinite space, of infinite consciousness, of nothingness, and of neither-perception-nor-non-perception. These are actually names of the kind of formless dhyana that sustain these respective realms. These profound meditative states are basically ever subtler forms of the 4<sup>th</sup> dhyana, where the predominant characteristic is the bliss of equanimity, even-mindedness (*upekkhā*).

The lowest of the formless dhyana realms is called **the sphere (or base) of infinite space** (*ākāsānañcāyatana*) [4] because the beings therein dwell in a constant dhyanic state where the mental object is that of “infinite space” or boundless space.<sup>59</sup> The next level is **the sphere of infinite consciousness** (*viññāṇañcāyatana*) [3], where the mind fully and naturally experiences itself as being infinite (boundlessly and timelessly, as it were).<sup>60</sup> The third level is that of **the sphere of nothingness** (*ākīñcaññāyatana*), where the mind is free from even itself (consciousness) as a mental object: it takes “nothing” as object.<sup>61</sup>

**2.3.2.2** Now, in the 4<sup>th</sup> and highest of the formless dhyana—**the sphere of neither-perception-nor-non-perception** (*n’eva,saññā,nāsaññāyatana*)—the mental object is so subtle that the mind can neither be said to exist nor not exist. Hence, it is *not* a station for consciousness, but only a sphere of existence. The 4<sup>th</sup> formless dhyana is unique in this way.<sup>62</sup>

## 2.4 THE 2 “MERE” SPHERES AND THE 5 PURE ABODES

### 2.4.1 The 2 “mere” spheres

We have already mentioned the sphere of neither-perception-nor-non-perception as being merely a sphere and not a station of consciousness, since consciousness is super-subtle there [2.3.2.2]. There is an even more remarkable sphere where consciousness does not arise at all, and yet it is a state of existence of a living being: this is **the sphere of the non-percipient beings** (*asañña,sattā*). The beings there exist in a state of suspended animation or profound hibernation. The moment a thought arises in the being there, he “falls” from it and is reborn elsewhere. [10]

### 2.4.2 The 5 pure abodes

**2.4.2.1** The 5 realms of **the pure abodes** (*suddh’āvāsa*)—the supreme (*akaniṭṭhā*), the clean-visioned (*sudassī*), the clear-beauty (*sudassā*), the serene (*ātappa*) and the durable (*avihā*) [5-9]—are the highest of the 4<sup>th</sup>-dhyana realms. Unlike the other samsaric realms, they are *not* stations for consciousness, since only **the non-returners** arise there. These are not samsaric realms from which beings can fall [2.2.2.1], but a dimensional realm where the non-returners spend while cultivating for the attaining of arhathood without ever returning to this world. In fact, the pure abodes arise only when the Buddha appears in the universe, since only through practising his teachings is it possible to attain non-returning.<sup>63</sup>

**2.4.2.2** All **the 31 planes of existence** [Table 2] mentioned in this discussion are, in psychological terms, basically, different manifestations of “conscious bodies” (*sa,viññānaka,kāya*), that is, of form and

<sup>59</sup> See **Ākāsānañc’āyatana Pañha Sutta** (S 40.5/4:266), SD 24.15.

<sup>60</sup> See **Viññāṇañc’āyatana Pañha Sutta** (S 40.6/4:266 f), SD 24.16.

<sup>61</sup> See **Ākiñcaññ’āyatana Pañha Sutta** (S 40.7/4:267 f), SD 24.17.

<sup>62</sup> See **N’eva,saññā,nāsaññāyatana Pañha Sutta** (S 40.8/4:268), SD 24.18.

<sup>63</sup> MA 1:36; AA 4:190; see SD 10.16 (13.1.6.6). On the pure abodes, see D 3:237; M 3:103; Vbh 425; Pug 42-46. Also SD 10.16 (13.1.6).

consciousness arising in different realms of sentient existence in our universe, with a couple of exceptions, as we have noted of the pure abodes and the 2 “mere” spheres [2.3.1]. These stations of consciousness, then, are the supports for rebirth.<sup>64</sup> Nirvana is when all such stations have been transcended and no more rebirth arises. Without rebirth, there is no redeath; in this sense, nirvana, free from all existence, is “deathfree” (*amata*).

### 3 Related suttas

**3.0** Here is a list of discourses bearing the title, “**Bhava Sutta**,” discourse on existence—both from the Saṃyutta and the Aṅguttara, thus:

<b>(Jambu,khadaka) Bhava Sutta</b>	S 38.13/4:258	SD 75.22(13)
<b>(Magga) Bhava Sutta</b>	S 45.164/5:56	[Be S 45.165]
<b>Bhava Sutta 1</b>	A 3.76/1:223	SD 23.13a
<b>Bhava Sutta 2</b>	A 3.77/1:224	SD 23.13b
<b>(Chakka) Bhava Sutta</b>	A 6.105/3:444	SD 57.24

**3.1 The (Jambu,khadaka) Bhava Sutta** (S 38.13), also called Bhava,pañha Sutta, records a discussion between Sāriputta and the wanderer Jambu,khādaka on existence (*bhava*). There are the 3 worlds—of senses, of form and of formlessness—and the way out of them is the noble eightfold path. (SD 75.22(13)).

**3.2 The (Magga) Bhava Sutta** (S 45.164) speaks of the 3 kinds of existence—of the sense, of form and of the formless—and the way out of them is the noble eightfold path.

**3.3 The 2 Bhava Suttas** (A 3.76+77) give a succinct explanation of how the karma-process generates the rebirth process and “further rebirth.” The two texts are almost identical, advocating karma as what differentiates beings into their respective realms.<sup>65</sup> The two suttas differ only in the word for the content or nature of existence (*bhava*), or what is reborn and persists as “life.”

In **Bhava Sutta 1** (A 3.76), Ānanda asks the Buddha to what extent there is existence (*bhava*). Existence arises so long as there are the worlds of senses, of form and of formlessness. Action (*kamma*) is the field, **consciousness** the seed (*bīja*), and **craving** the moisture (*sneha*) that brings about rebirth in these worlds. (SD 23.13a)

**The Bhava Sutta 2** (A 3.77) is identical to Bhava Sutta 1, except that the supports for continued rebirth, consciousness and craving, are replaced by **volition** (*cetana*) and **aspiration** (*patthāna*). (SD 23.13b)

**3.4 The (Chakka) Bhava Sutta** (A 6.105) speaks of the 3 kinds of existences (*bhava*), and the way out of them is the 3 trainings (*sikkhā*). (SD 57.24)

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<sup>64</sup> See SD 23.14 (1); SD 39.1 (1.4).

<sup>65</sup> On karma, see **Sāleyyaka S** (M 41/1:285-290), SD 5.7 & **Karma**, SD 18.1.

## (Chakka) Bhava Sutta

### The (Sixes) Discourse on Existence

A 6.105

**1** Bhikshus, there are these 3 kinds of existences to be abandoned, these 3 trainings to be trained in.<sup>66</sup>

1.2 What are these **3 kinds of existences** to be abandoned?

**2** The sense-existence, the form existence, the formless existence.<sup>67</sup>  
These are the 3 existences to be abandoned.

2.2 There are these **3 trainings** to be trained in. What are the 3 to be trained in?

**3** The higher training in moral virtue, the higher training in the mind, the higher training in wisdom.<sup>68</sup>

These are the 3 trainings to be trained in.

**4** Bhikshus, when a monk has abandoned these 3 kinds of existences, and has completed these 3 trainings, this monk, bhikshus, is called one who has cut off craving; dismantled the fetter; by completely breaking through conceit, he has made an end of suffering.

*ime tayo bhava pahīnā honti  
imāsu ca tīsu sikkhāsu sikkhita, sikkho hoti  
ayaṃ vuccati bhikkhave bhikkhu  
acchejji taṇhaṃ  
vivattayi saṃyojanaṃ  
sammā mānābhisamayā  
antam akāsi dukkhassāti*

— evaṃ —

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<sup>66</sup> *Tayo'me bhikkhave bhava pahātabbā, tīsu sikkhāsu sikkhitabbam.* These are 2 triads, together forming a composite sextet.

<sup>67</sup> *Kāma, bhavo rūpa, bhavo arūpa, bhavo.*

<sup>68</sup> *Adhi, sīla, sikkhāya adhi, citta, sikkhāya adhi, paññā, sikkhāya.*