

Early Buddhist ontology and cosmology

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12.5.4 Early Buddhist ontology

Early Buddhism does speak of “worlds” (*loka*) but not in the theistic or cosmic sense of any of the other ancient cosmologies. The physical world is seen as comprising *the 5 elements*: earth, water, fire, wind and space, such as stated in **the Mahā Rāhul’ovāda Sutta** (M 62).¹ Even then, these 5 elements are used as the bases for the “element-like meditations.”²

In the remarkable **Titth’āyatana Sutta** (A 3.61)—where the Buddha rebuts determinism, God-centred agency and fatalism—the 1st of the 4 “focuses of mindfulness” (*satipaṭṭhāna*)—the contemplation of the body (*kāyānupassanā*)—is defined as that of the same 5 elements (that is, the 4 primary elements + consciousness): we are composed of the same elements as the external world plus consciousness.³

12.5.5 Unlike other ancient cosmologies—which were basically that of “Earth and heaven”—early Buddhist cosmology speaks of **the 3 realms** (*ti, dhātu*),⁴ that is, the sense-realm (*kāma, dhātu*), the form realm (*rūpa, dhātu*) and the formless world (*arūpa, dhātu*).⁵ Here, *dhātu* (which usually means “element”) has the sense of “domain of experience or existence,”⁶ that is to say, “world.”

The Bhava Sutta 1 (A 3.76) and its reprise **the Bhava Sutta 2** (A 3.77), describe “existence” (*bhava*) as comprising karma (the field), consciousness (the seed) and craving (the moisture). In psychological terms, this means that the existential world, the world of beings, arises because of consciousness (*viññāṇa*) (we are the product of our environment). Each consciousness naturally evolves as it learns to fit in its environment: this is its “will to live” or “natural choice”⁷ in the form of craving (*taṇhā*). These are our intentions (unwholesome and wholesome thoughts, acts and speech) that shape our existence and further evolution or devolution.

In due course, the Commentaries systematized early Buddhist cosmology as comprising **the 3 kinds of worlds**, that is, those of space (*okāsa, loka*), of beings (*satta, loka*), and of formations (*saṅkhāra, loka*).⁸ Essentially, the world of space is the physical world, that is, the space-time continuum; the world of beings is the inhabited world comprising sentient life

¹ M 62,8-12/1:421-423 (SD 3.11).

² **Mahā Rāhul’ovāda S** (M 62,13-17/1:423 f), SD 3.11.

³ **Titth’āyatana S** (A 3.61,6/1:175 f), SD 6.8.

⁴ **Bhava S 1 = Bhava S 2** (A 3.76 = 77), SD 23.13; D 33,1.10(13)/3:215; cf S 2:150,1 for specific heavenly realms. The terms *kāma, dhātu*, *rūpa, dhātu* and *arūpa, dhātu* are found throughout the 5 Nikāyas.

⁵ The term *ti, loka* however is late canonical, appearing only in **Apadāna** (eg ThīAp 25.23/573, & passim). The term *kāma, loka* first appears in **Peṭakōpadesa** (Peṭk §810/198; Peṭk:Ñ 268 n810/2), an early paracanonical work on exegesis.

⁶ DP dhātu (4).

⁷ “Natural choice” in the sense of “choosing by its nature or instinct.”

⁸ Vism 7.37/204 f; DA 1:173 f; MA 1:397, 2:200.

and organic life; and the world of formations is our mentally constructed virtual world that defines us.⁹

It is thus vital to understand why early Buddhism neither highlights the physical universe (the “created” world of theism) nor the “creatures” inhabiting it. Buddhism sees both the becoming and the beings as a cosmic process involving *form (matter), feeling, perception, formations* and *consciousness*—the 5 aggregates. This is evident from the first discourse, **the Dhamma, cakka-p, pavattana Sutta** (S 56.11).¹⁰ The world of formations is what we have shaped against the “real world” out there. When we dismantle this fabricated virtual world of aggregates, we will then experience true reality and free ourselves from suffering.

12.5.6 Early Buddhist cosmology is clearly the most developed of religious cosmologies by way of being structured on the 3 trainings (*sikkha-t, taya*): *moral virtue, mental concentration and wisdom*. In terms of **moral ethics**, the Buddhist cosmos is unequally divided between the suffering states (*duggati*: the asuras, pretas, animals and hell-beings) and the heavenly states (*sugati*, 26 heavens), with an in-between state, that is the human world.¹¹ The suffering states are the 4 subhuman realms (the asura demons, the animals, the pretas and the hell-beings), that is, those who have habitually cultivated bad karma (*pāpa, kamma*) or unwholesome karma (*akusala, kamma*). The heavenly realms are the habitats of beings who have wholesomely cultivated their minds through **mental concentration** (*samādhi*).

The suffering states are so pervaded and overwhelmed with pain and suffering that the beings therein simply have neither the mental capacity nor the opportunity for any spiritual cultivation. The heavenly states are so imbued with joy, light and space, that the beings there are simply not inclined to spiritual cultivation because they generally feel that they are already enjoying it.¹²

In between the suffering states and the heavenly realms, there is **the human realm**, where humans experience both pain and pleasure, and thus have the capacity for seeing these feelings as the bases for suffering. These bases for suffering are feelings (*vedanā*) arising from our sense-experiences and thoughts. Hence, even the absence of both pain and pleasure, that is, neutral feeling, can be the basis for suffering (due to boredom and ignorance). Insofar as we, as humans have the capacity for **wisdom**, and we direct that wisdom to seeing the impermanent or “process” nature of feelings, and wisely seeing how this relates to our karmic potential, our capacity for good and beyond, we will then gain freedom from suffering, that is, awakening.

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⁹ SD 15.7 (3.5.1 (2)); SD 17.6 (3.1.3.2).

¹⁰ S 56.11,5/5:421 (SD 1.1).

¹¹ For a table of the 31 planes of existence, see DEB app 3 or SD 1.7 app.

¹² The exceptions are the “non-percipient beings” (*sañña, satta*) who are in a state of suspended animation, and the “pure abodes” (*suddh’āvāsa*), the exclusive dimensional realm of non-returners (*anāgāmi*) to work off their karma and attain nirvana. See **Viññāṇa-t, thiti** (SD 23.14, esp Table 3).