

Buddhist Cosmology

A story from the *Kevaddha Sutta* ('Discourse to Kevaddha') indicates how in the traditional Buddhist view of things the universe is not to be thought of as just inhabited by the beings that make up the human and animal world but also by various classes of *deva* or 'god' that form a hierarchy of increasing subtlety and refinement.

Thus the world comprises 'its gods, its Māra and Brahmā, this generation with its ascetics and brahmins, with its princes and peoples' (*Dīgha Nikāya* i. 62). Moreover, elsewhere, the earliest texts inform us that there is not just one such world with its gods, its Māra and Brahmā; in fact the universe as a whole comprises vast numbers of 'world-spheres' or 'world-systems' (*cakra-vāda/cakka-vāla*) each with its gods, its Māra and Brahmā. Clusters of a thousand 'world-spheres' may be ruled over by yet higher gods, called Great Brahmās . . .

So how many world-systems are there in all? The early Nikāya/Āgama texts sometimes talk in terms of 'the thousandfold world-system', 'the twice-thousandfold world-system', and 'the thrice-thousandfold world-system'.

According to Vasubandhu, the last of these embraces a total of 1,000,000,000 world-systems, according to Buddhaghosa, 1,000,000,000,000.' (see for example *Anguttara Nikāya* i. 227-8). But even such a vast number cannot define the full extent of the universe; it is merely the highest explicit number of world-systems reported in the tradition. . . .

The earliest strata of Buddhist writings, the Nikāyas/Āgamas, do not provide a systematic account of the Buddhist understanding of the nature of the cosmos, but they do contain many details and principles that are systematized into a coherent whole by the Abhidharma traditions of Buddhist thought. . . .

According to the developed cosmology of the Abhidharma, *samsāra* embraces thirty-one levels or realms of existence—that is, there are thirty-one basic classes of beings comprising the round of rebirth, and any being may be born at any one of these levels. Indeed, one should rather say that every being has during the course of his or her wandering through *samsāra* at some time or another been born in every one of these conditions apart, that is, from five realms known as 'the Pure Abodes'.

Beings born in these realms, such as the Great Brahmās of the realm of the Supreme Gods just mentioned, have reached a condition in which they inevitably attain *nirvāna* and so escape the round of rebirth.

The most basic division of the thirty-one realms is threefold. First there is the world of the five senses (*kāma-dhātu,-loka*), which comprises eleven realms ranging from the realms of hell and ‘the hungry ghosts’, through the realms of animals, jealous gods, and human beings, to the six realms of the lower gods; the common characteristic of beings in all these realms is that they are all endowed with consciousness and five physical senses.

Above this there is ‘the world of pure form’ (*rūpa-dhātu,-loka*) which consists of sixteen realms (the highest of which are the Pure Abodes just mentioned) occupied by various higher gods collectively known as Brahmās; these refined beings have consciousness but only two senses— sight and hearing.

Finally there are the four realms of ‘the formless world’ (*arūpa-dātu, loka*) occupied by a further class of Brahmās who have only consciousness.

These thirty-one realms, from bottom to top, thus reflect a basic movement from gross to subtle. It is the lower levels of the universe, that is the world of the five senses, that arrange themselves into the various distinct ‘world-spheres’ or *cakra-vādas*. . . .

What determines in which realm a being is born? The short answer is *karma* (Pali *kamma*): a being’s intentional ‘actions’ of body, speech, and mind— whatever is done, said, or even just thought with definite intention or volition. In general, though, with some qualification, rebirth in the lower realms is considered to be the result of relatively unwholesome (*akuśala/akusala*), or bad (*pāpa*) karma, while rebirth in the higher realms the result of relatively wholesome (*kuśala/kusala*), or good (*punya/puñña*) karma. Correspondingly, the lower the realm, the more unpleasant and unhappy one’s condition; the higher the realm the more pleasant, happy, and refined one’s condition.

One should note, however, that this hierarchy does not constitute a simple ladder which one, as it were, climbs, passing out at the top into *nirvāna*. In fact, *nirvāna* may be obtained from any of the realms from the human to the highest of the Pure Abodes and the four formless realms, but not from the four lowest realms. Yet, rather than attaining *nirvāna*, beings generally rise and fall, and fall and rise through the various realms, now experiencing unhappiness, now experiencing happiness. This precisely is the nature of *samsāra*: wandering from life to life with no particular direction or purpose.

Cosmology and Psychology: Macrocosm and Microcosm

It is easy to conclude that the detailed enumeration of realms is the result of an overactive scholastic imagination and is thus of no practical interest, but to begin to understand the system we must turn to the subtle and exact psychological insights of the Abhidharma understanding of consciousness and the processes governing its occurrence.

The key to understanding the Buddhist cosmological scheme lies in the principle of *the equivalence of cosmology and psychology*. I mean by this that in the traditional understanding the various realms of existence relate rather closely to certain commonly (and not so commonly) experienced states of mind. In fact Buddhist cosmology is at once a map of different realms of existence and a description of all possible experiences. This can be appreciated by considering more fully the Buddhist understanding of the nature of karma.

At root, karma or ‘action’ is considered a mental act or intention; it is an aspect of our mental life: ‘It is “intention” that I call *karma*; having formed the intention, one performs acts (*karma*) by body, speech and mind’ (*Anguttara Nikāya* iii. 415). Thus acts of body and speech are driven by an underlying intention or will (*cetanā*) and they are unwholesome or wholesome because they are motivated by unwholesome or wholesome intentions. Acts of body and speech are, then, the end products of particular kinds of mentality. At the same time karma can exist as a simple ‘act of will’, a forceful mental intention or volition that does not lead to an act of body or speech.

The nature of bad action is usually illustrated by reference to a list of the ten courses of unwholesome action (*karma/kamma-patha*) which consist of three bodily courses of action (taking life, taking what is not given, sexual misconduct), four vocal courses of action (lying, divisive speech, hurtful speech, frivolous speech), and three mental courses of action (covetousness, ill-will, wrong view) (*Dīgha Nikāya* iii. 269) . . .

Essentially the psychological states that motivate the ten unwholesome courses of action—strong greed, hatred, and delusion—lead to rebirth in the unhappy destinies or ‘descents’: in a hell realm, as a hungry ghost, an animal, or a jealous god. In fact rather a precise correlation exists here: dominated by greed one becomes a hungry ghost, a class of beings ever discontent and anguished because of being unable to satisfy their greed; dominated by hatred one enters one of the hell realms where one suffers terrible pain; dominated by ignorance one becomes an animal ruled by the instincts of food and reproduction.

On the other hand the psychological states that give rise to the ten wholesome courses of action—desirelessness, friendliness, and wisdom—lead to rebirth in the happy realms: as a human being or in one of the six realms of the gods immediately above the human realm where beings enjoy increasingly happy and carefree lives. Wholesome action can also be characterized by way of the triad of terms that are often used to sum up the practice of the Buddhist path: generosity (*dāna*), ethical conduct (*sīla/sīla*), and meditation (*bhāvanā*). The first two essentially embrace conduct already covered by the ten wholesome courses of action; the third term takes us into rather different territory and refers to the cultivation of various spiritual exercises of contemplation and meditation in order to develop states of deep peace and concentration (*śamatha/samatha*, *samādhi*, *dhyāna/jhāna*) and insight and wisdom (*vipaśyanā/vipassanā*, *prajñā/pañña*). As result of attaining these states to different degrees one is reborn as a Brahmā in one of the realms of pure form; essentially such beings are thus conceived of as existing absorbed in states of meditation.

In their analysis of consciousness into a hierarchy of various classes, the Abhidharma systematizations further bring out the way in which cosmology is essentially a reflection of psychology and vice versa. The basic structure of this hierarchy of consciousness parallels quite explicitly the basic structure of the cosmos . . .

Thus in sum one can say that Buddhist cosmology takes the form of a hierarchy of certain realms of existence related to certain kinds of mentality. The dynamics of the system viewed from the perspective of the human realm might be stated along the following lines. When a human being experiences unpleasant mental states, such as aversion, hatred, or depression, then there is a sense in which that being can be said to be experiencing something of what it is like to exist in a hell realm— in other words, he makes a brief visit to the hell realms; when those unpleasant states pass (as they inevitably will), the being will return to the mental state natural to human beings— a mental state which is understood to be essentially wholesome and pleasant. But if those states of aversion, hatred, and depression become the habitual states of mind for that being, the danger is that he will end up visiting the hell realms for rather longer than he might have envisaged— in other words, when the wholesome conditions that placed him in the human realm are exhausted and he dies, he might find himself not just visiting hell but being reborn there.

Similarly, if a human being should have a somewhat intense experience of such happy states of mind as friendliness and generosity, then that is to experience briefly how it feels to be a *deva* in one of the various heaven

realms immediately above the human realm; once more, if those states of mind become habitual and second nature to that being, he is likely to be reborn among those *devas*. If a being experiences the even more subtle and refined states of mind associated with the various levels of meditation—the so-called *dhyānas*—he temporarily visits the Brahmā worlds; if he becomes a master of *dhyāna*, he can be reborn as a Brahmā.

Such is a world-system, but world-systems are not static; they themselves go through vast cycles of expansion and contraction across the vast aeons of time. According to the Abhidharma and commentarial traditions of both the Theravādins and Sarvāstivādins, world-systems contract in great clusters (Buddhaghosa in his *Visuddhimagga* speaks of a billion world-systems contracting at a time) . . .

In a certain sense the elaborate and fantastic traditional cosmology of Buddhism is nothing more than a full account of all possible experience: this is the world, the universe in its entirety. It may not be circumscribed spatially and temporally but there is no possible manner of being or conceivable experience that is not included here. Wherever one goes, whatever one experiences, it is encompassed by this map of *samsāra*.

For Buddhist theory the cosmological scheme defines the round of rebirth—the uncertain, unstable, changing conditioned world of time and space—in its entirety. Thus just as in day-to-day experience one fails to find any physical or mental condition that is not changeable, that can give permanent satisfaction and happiness, so, even if one is reborn in the condition of a Brahmā living 84,000 aeons, the calm and peaceful condition of one's existence is not ultimately lasting or secure. Just as our ordinary happinesses are in this sense *duhkha*, so too are the lives of the Brahmās even though they experience no physical or mental pain.

It is a curious fact of the developed cosmological scheme that it comprises just thirty-one realms. There is some reason for thinking that the number thirty-two connotes completion and fulfilment in Buddhist thought: the body is described as consisting of thirty-two parts; the Great Man has a body with thirty-two marks. Yet *samsāra* has only thirty-one realms. What is missing is *nirvāna*. But then *nirvāna* is precisely not a state or condition that can be defined spatially or temporally; one cannot be reborn in *nirvāna*, nor can one come to *nirvāna* however far or long one journeys:

That the end of the world where one is not born, does not age, does not die, does not pass away, does not reappear is to be known, seen or reached by travelling—that I do not say . . . And yet I do not say that one makes an end of suffering without reaching the end of the

world. Rather in this fathom-long body, with its perceptions and mind, I declare the world, the arising of the world, the ceasing of the world, and the way leading to the ceasing of the world (*Samyutta Nikāya* i. 61-2; *Anguttara Nikāya* ii. 47-9).

The Buddhist cosmological account represents the complete description of the conditioned world—the whirling circle (*vatta*) of *samsāra*. This is *duhkha* on the macrocosmic scale. One's personal day-to-day experiences, on the other hand, are *duhkha* on the microcosmic scale.

In short, what we experience from day to day is a microcosm of the cosmos at large. For Buddhist thought the law that governs the workings of both the microcosm of individual experience from moment to moment and also the birth and death of beings across vast aeons is one and the same: 'dependent arising' (*pratītya samutpāda/paticca-samuppāda*).

Cosmology, Folk Religion, and Modern Science

I have suggested that the elaborate Buddhist cosmological schema that we have been considering is in part to be understood by reference to Buddhist psychology. The equivalence between psychology and cosmology is old and to be regarded as intrinsic to the system and not a stratagem employed by Buddhist modernist apologetics in order to render a primitive, pre-modern understanding of the world palatable to contemporary tastes.

Yet this should not be taken as meaning that Buddhist cosmological descriptions were traditionally read simply as accounts of mental states in symbolic and imaginative language. Quite clearly they were not, nor are they so read in traditional Buddhist cultures today. For many Buddhists, in the present as in the past, the beings and realms described in the cosmology are as 'real' as the Queen of England and Buckingham Palace.

Yet equally clearly there can be intellectually more naïve and more sophisticated ways of understanding the Buddhist cosmological world-view. But again we should avoid coming to the conclusion that somehow the psychological interpretation represents the 'real' Buddhist understanding, whereas a literal understanding feeds the popular imagination and, as such, must be suffered by sophisticated intellectuals.

What we have to do with here is a question of a different conception of the nature of 'reality': a conception that allows what we would call a psychological and symbolic interpretation to coexist with a literal interpretation. Whatever ultimate interpretation one puts on traditional Buddhist cosmology, it remains a flexible framework within which to make sense of a rich spectrum of experience.

Nevertheless at another practical level this cosmological framework has allowed Buddhism to accommodate and take under its wing certain aspects of what might be called, for want of a better term, 'folk religion'. This process of accommodation is as old as Buddhism itself— perhaps older. Many of the gods and different kinds of being found in the ancient cosmology have been absorbed into the Buddhist scheme of things from pre-existing folk and religious traditions.

In precisely the same way they have been absorbed and adapted by Jain and Brahmanical tradition. Thus figures such as Brahmā and Śakra or Indra, such classes of being as Asuras, Gandharvas (celestial musicians), Yaksas and Yaksinīs, Rāksasas (types of demon and nymph), Nāgas (mythical serpents), Garudas (mythical birds), and other classes of minor deities dwelling in forests, groves, and trees—all these form part of a vast Indian mythical and folk-religious heritage that the various Indian traditions draw upon . . .

In the fully developed Buddhist cosmology, these sorts of beings are generally associated with the gods of the lower sense-sphere heavens. But their presence in the Buddhist scheme of things in part reflects a simple fact of the cultural milieu in which Buddhism grew.

We are concerned here with something which is in principle as relevant to Indian religion today as it was 2,000 years ago. Then, as now, most people lived in a world alive with fairies, demons, goblins, ghosts, nymphs, dragons, angels, as well as various gods. Such beings are as real to people's experience as any human being. For the most part, in the context of the practice of contemporary Hinduism, the interaction and dealings with such beings concerns matters of day-to-day living rather than questions of the ultimate cessation of suffering. Thus such beings are seen as causing various kinds of disease by 'possessing' one; or they may be able to grant fulfilment of certain aspirations, help with a harvest or passing an exam; the acknowledgement of these beings assists the smooth running of day-to-day matters and grants a measure of protection against calamity.

The various cultures beyond India where Buddhism has established itself over the last 2,500 years have been very similar to India herself in this respect. The existence of various kinds of beings has been taken for granted, as has the fact that they may be able to assist in limited ways with everyday human affairs . . .

Such behaviour troubled some early Western observers of the practice of Buddhism in its traditional cultures and led them to conclude that the people who participated in these practices were not 'true' Buddhists.

This conclusion was based in part on a failure to appreciate the nature of the relationship between this kind of practice and the cultivation of the Buddhist path; in part on an image of Buddhism artificially constructed from a selective reading of early Buddhist texts; and in part on an exclusivist conception of the nature of ‘a religion’—one is either a Hindu or a Buddhist, one cannot be both—which is inappropriate to the Asian context.

It has sometimes been claimed that the belief that such beings can answer one’s pleas for assistance flies in the face of the Buddhist theory of karma: expecting a god to provide the cure for an illness must be inconsistent with the belief that falling ill is the inevitable result of one’s own previous unwholesome actions. But this is to misunderstand the Buddhist theory of action and result, which is not a species of determinism.

From the Buddhist perspective certain experiences in life are indeed the results of previous actions; but our responses to those experiences, whether wished for or unwished for, are not predetermined but represent new actions which in time bear their own fruit in the future. The Buddhist understanding of individual responsibility does not mean that we should never seek or expect another’s assistance in order to better cope with the troubles of life. The belief that one’s broken leg is at one level to be explained as the result of unwholesome actions performed in a previous life does not mean that one should not go to a doctor to have the broken leg set.

There was and is no need in Buddhist theory to deny the existence of ‘divine’ beings or to repudiate the Buddhist villager’s efforts to get their help. The only comment that Buddhist theory has to make in this context is that divine beings—like doctors—won’t be able to get to the root of the problem: they may help one get what one wants in the short term, but they are unable to bring about the final cessation of suffering.

The world of the earliest Buddhist texts is a world, like the contemporary Indian villager’s, alive with various kinds of being. The Buddha and his followers are represented as being visited by these various beings, as having discussions with them, as teaching them, as being questioned by them, and as being honoured by them. Yet in their reading of the texts many nineteenth-and early twentieth-century scholars felt inclined to treat such accounts of ‘supernatural’ beings as later mythical additions to an earlier more sober and purely philosophical stratum of Buddhist literature that was originally uncluttered by such material. Indeed this outlook continues to influence the approach of some scholars.

Yet the fact remains that these so-called mythical elements are so embedded in, so entangled with the conceptual, ethical, and philosophical dimensions of early Buddhist literature that the task of extricating them is extremely problematic. The arguments for excising the mythic material often become circular: we know that the mythic passages are later because early Buddhist teaching was a purely ethical and philosophical system uninterested in myth, and we know that early Buddhist teaching was devoid of myth because the mythic passages are later.

What can be said with certainty is that we have no evidence, either in the ancient texts or in the different contemporary traditions, for a ‘pure’ Buddhism that does not recognize, accommodate, and interact with various classes of ‘supernatural’ being. Such a pure Buddhism is something of a theoretical and scholarly abstraction. This point needs particular stress in relation to Theravāda Buddhism since the notion that the Theravāda tradition represents—or ought to represent—a pure, unadulterated tradition of precisely this kind is widespread and yet is a largely theoretically constructed model of what Theravāda Buddhism is.

I suggested above that a Buddhist’s dealings with and interaction with ghosts, demons, and spirits is for the most part tangential to his or her practice of the Buddhist path. This is certainly so, and yet the separateness of these two dimensions of a Buddhist’s life can be over-emphasized. In the earliest texts the world of the Yaksas, Nāgas, Gandharvas, and so on merges with the world of the sense-sphere *devas*. Such beings precisely acquire ethical and spiritual associations in the theory and practice of ancient Buddhism, and such associations are not irrelevant to our appreciation of the role of the gods in the practice of contemporary Buddhism.

A traditional Buddhist contemplative meditation exercise involves the recollection of the qualities of the gods (*devatānussati*) as beings who have arrived at a fortunate and happy condition as a result of their good karma:

There are the gods of the Four Kings, the gods of the Thirty-Three, the Yama gods, the Contented gods, the gods who Delight in Creation, the Masters of the Creations of Others, the gods of Brahmā, and yet higher gods. Endowed with faith those gods passed away from the human realm and were reborn in that condition; such faith is present in me too. Endowed with virtue, learning, generosity, and wisdom those gods passed away from the human realm and were reborn in that condition; such virtue, learning, generosity, and wisdom are present in me too (*Visuddhimagga* vii. 115).

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The kind of thinking indicated by this passage suggests how the world of ghosts, demons, spirits, and gods merges and blends with the world of Buddhist practice. But perhaps the most graphic illustration of this comes from Buddhist art. Early stone reliefs depicting the Buddha's enlightenment show the gods of various kinds gathering around the tree of awakening. The Great Stūpa at Sāñcī (second century BCE), a representation of the cosmos itself, is encircled by a walkway entered by four gateways; here the decoration depicts animals, Yaksas and Yaksinīs, Nāgas and Gandharvas, and the gods; at the centre is the great dome of the stūpa enshrining sacred relics. The interior of Buddhist shrine rooms through the ages has similarly often been decorated with murals depicting the various realms and beings of the cosmos.

Source: Taken, with minor edits, from Gethin, R. (1998) *The foundations of Buddhism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. (Pages 112-132.)