

# Bits and pieces from Theravāda Buddhist Cosmology

**\*\*\*Caveat: These are just things  
of interest to me and in no way  
are meant as suggestions,  
conclusions of any kind\*\*\***

Much of this is derived from a Burmese Buddhist cosmology  
manuscript studied by James Bogle, Ashin Sopaka and Preeda  
Phatharasathianchai



# Theravāda Buddhist Cosmology

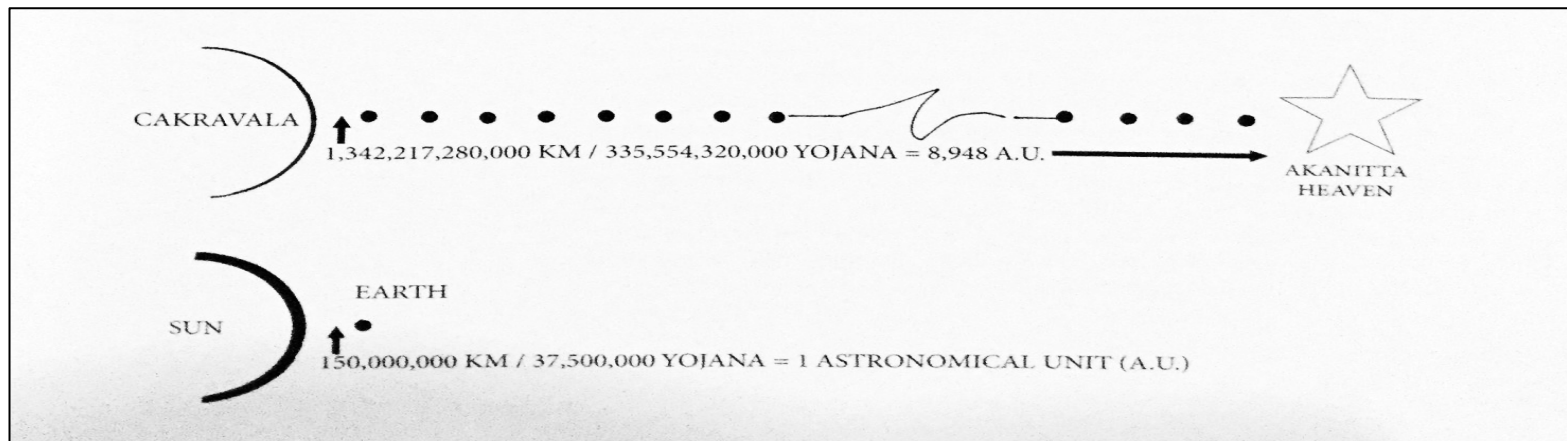
- The cosmos is a world of gods, deities, heavens, and hells that are orderly, structured, and segmented. The Buddhist cosmos has multiple worlds, each with heavens and hells, which reflect the consequences of one's past
- These heavens and hells are transitory; places of great and almost immeasurable periods of time where over long periods of time change can occur
- This world universe is Cakravāla, the inhabited cosmologically unit we inhabit and of Saṃsāra, which deals with cycles of endless rounds of life and death, creation and destruction, etc.
- Complex, multi-tiered thoughts and places supported by a cosmos of great dimensions that includes a complex geography of great oceans, rivers, forests, mountains, continents, suns, and moons
- The reality of this perceived world is that it comes into being through Karma and is destroyed by Karma—the actions and results of human activity
- This cosmos is a “world system,” one of many, which are subject to cycles of development and decay. These cycles can take eons and eons of time
- Eventually, as decay deepens, lifespans shorten, mortality disappears and destruction occurs by either wind, water, or fire. The world system dissolves and remains in a state of emptiness
- Then, like a burned out forest, or the aftermath of a great volcanic eruption, the emptiness is filled and life recreated

# Theravāda Buddhist Cosmology (continued)

- Professor Akira Sadakata commented: “When we read in the Buddhist scriptures the complex numerical descriptions of the universe, we feel overwhelmed. Even specialists find it difficult to understand the structure of Buddhist cosmology.”
- Buddhist thought sees time as cyclical rather than linear. Hence:
  - All the heavenly deities, or gods, live very long lives, but can be subject to rebirth after extremely long periods of time
  - The inhabitants of the hells are in a transitory status; albeit for extremely long periods of time; however, their time in hell is not permanent
  - The only permanent cessation of the cycle of life, death, rebirth (*Samṣāra*) comes upon attaining Nibbana
  - The cosmic universe is subject to the same cyclical events as other aspects of Theravada Buddhism and after eons of existence, will end when the eon of dissolution occurs
- The Buddhists cosmos has both abstract and concrete components, with myriads of other similar systems in existence throughout the cosmos, but only one main path of ethereal thought applies to all these systems. This is the *Cakravāla*—the Buddhist universe which deals with cycles of endless rounds of life, death, and rebirth, *Samṣāra*, in which humans and others exist.
- The *Cakravāla* itself passes through four ages; creation, habituation, cataclysmic events, and emptiness.
- In Theravāda Buddhism, the heavens are numerous, segmented, and transitory places separated by great distances. Some of these distances are mind boggling as are the sizes given for their inhabitants. Beneath the 26 heavenly realms there are 5 realms, each of which is concerned with a singular class of inhabitants.
- The Theravāda cosmos has 8 major hells and numerous subsidiary ones, the major hells and all the minor ones are confined to a single realm (*Niraya*) and are also segmented and transitory. This is a reflection of, and teaching tool for, the results of karma on life in the hereafter.

# Measurements of Time and Distance

- Words: There are three terms that should be understood for the cosmos: (1) Yojana, which deals with measurement, (2) Mahakappa and Celestial years, which deals with time, and (3) Jhana, which deals with meditation.
- Yojana. An ancient Indian term of measurement approximately 4 to 20 kilometers. In truth no one knows the exact distance. The great dimensions of the cosmic universe are overwhelming and the distances of the heavens from the *Cakravāla* are extraordinary
  - As an example, the distance from the earth to the sun averages 150 million kilometers, or 37,500,000 yojanas. The distance is called an Astronomical Unit. Eleven of the Theravāda Buddhist heavens when measured from the surface of the cosmic ocean, exceed that figure.
  - The heaven of the highest/supreme devas/gods (Akanittha: the 'Great or Non-junior Ones', i.e. 'Highest Gods', are the inhabitants of the highest heaven of the Pure Abodes), is over 8,948 astronomical units' distances from the ocean surface of the *Cakravāla* (see below)

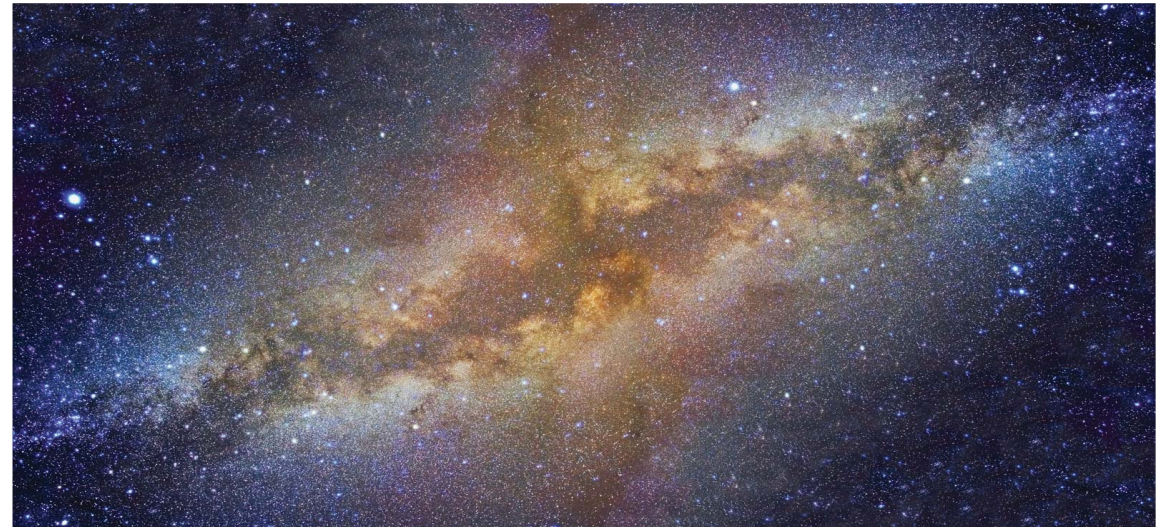
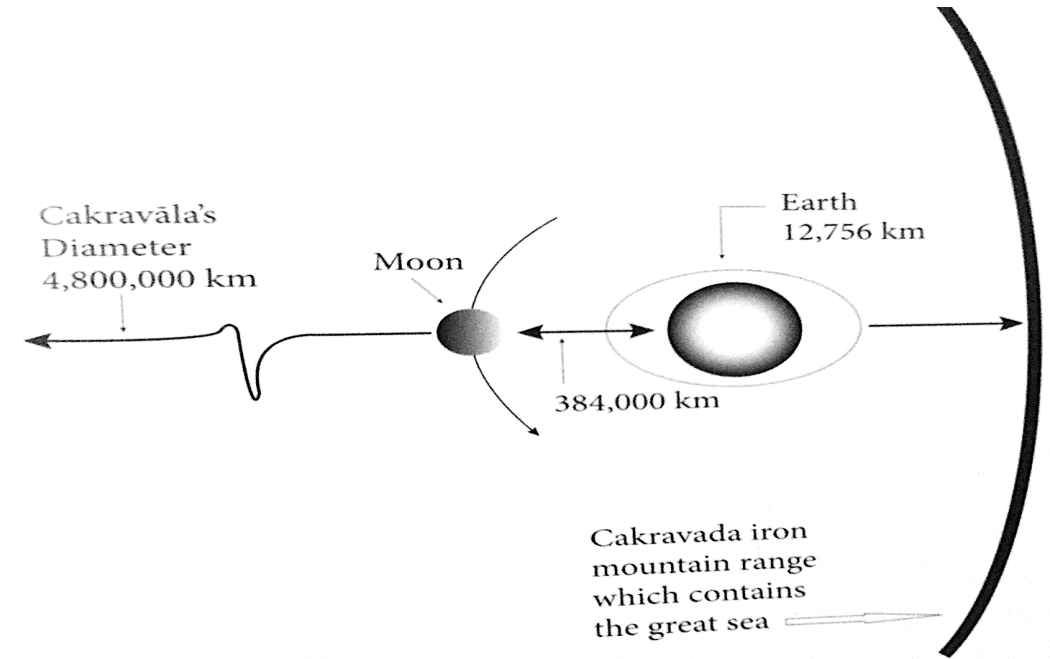


# Measurements of Time (continued)

- Mahakalpa and Celestial years. An ancient Indian measurement used to calculate great and almost immeasurable periods of time. One Mahakalpa has been described as the duration of a day for the deity Brahmā (the creator god in Hinduism).
- The Buddha did not give the exact length of the Mahakalpa in terms of years. However, he gave several astounding analogies to understand it.
  - “Imagine a huge empty cube at the beginning of a kalpa, approximately 16 miles in each side. Once every 100 years, you insert a tiny mustard seed into the cube. According to the Buddha, the huge cube will be filled even before the kalpa ends.”
  - “Imagine a gigantic rocky mountain at the beginning of kalpa, approximately 16 x 16 x 16 miles (dwarfing Mount Everest). You take a small piece of silk and wipe the mountain once every 100 years. According to the Buddha, the mountain will be completely depleted even before the kalpa ends.”
  - In another instance, when some monks wanted to know how many kalpas had elapsed so far, Buddha gave the below analogy: “If you count the total number of sand particles at the depths of the Ganges river, from where it begins to where it ends at the sea, even that number will be less than the number of passed kalpas.”
- The most common values given for MahaKalpa are  $10^{51}$   $10^{59}$  or  $10^{63}$  Celestial years have been identified as 18,250 earth years equal one Celestial Year
- Jhāna. Defined by Buddha as Right Concentration, where the mind becomes solely focused on the object of attention, without becoming distracted.

# Geophysical Aspects of the Cakravāla

- The Cakravāla is a linear structure which encompasses a range of properties from hells below to heavens above. At the center of the Cakravāla is a great soaring Mount Meru surrounded by mountains, oceans, and continents. The placement of the elements of the world is extremely orderly with nothing left to chance. Above the soaring central mountain are the multi-layered heavens. Below the mountains, continents, and ocean are the segmented hells. The size of the Cakravāla as described in texts is immense
- Recently, Astronomers were baffled by 'Cosmic Mountain Ranges' Jutting Through the Milky Way. Astronomers are learning that in some regions of our galaxy, stars have clumped into features that resemble ones on Earth — streams, waves, arches and mountain ridges  
(<https://www.livescience.com/milky-way-has-geographic-features.html>)
- The researchers focused on a series of eight ridges in the Milky Way that are folded up alongside each other like a mountain range. The Gaia data showed that the ridges, which were sandwiched together in the middle layer of the Milky Way's disk, each had collections of unique stars studding their summits



# Mount Meru

- Mount Meru is located in the center of the universe and is the home of the gods, according to Buddhist, Jain, and Hindu beliefs
- In Cambodia, Angkor Wat is thought to be a replica of the cosmic universe built in sand stone and denotes degrees of separation
- Mount Meru symbology may also be found in Thailand at Wat Arun—the temple of the dawn
- Mount Meru is the great vertical cosmic “axis mundi” of Buddhist cosmology and is the pillar of both the structural and spiritual worlds
- Mount Meru is the focus and center of a very orderly world

