

The Buddhist Cosmos

The Thrice-Thousandfold World

Of space and time: world-systems

In Chapter 3 we saw how the Buddha's teaching seeks to address the problem of *duḥkha* or 'suffering'. For Buddhist thought, whatever the circumstances and conditions of existence—good or bad—they are always ultimately changeable and unreliable, and hence *duḥkha*. Complete understanding of the first noble truth is said to consist in the complete knowledge of the nature of *duḥkha*. One of the preoccupations of Buddhist theory, then, is the exhaustive analysis of all possible conditions and circumstances of existence. Buddhist thought approaches the analysis of *duḥkha* from two different angles, one cosmological and the other psychological. That is, it asks two different but, in the Buddhist view of things, fundamentally related questions. First, what are the possible circumstances a being can be born, exist, and die in? And second, what are the possible states of mind a being might experience? The complete Buddhist answer to these questions is classically expressed in the Abhidharma systems. In this chapter I want to look primarily at the first question, though, as I have just suggested, this cannot be entirely separated from the second. To begin with, however, I shall return to certain of those questions raised by the monk Māluṅkyāputta.

As we have seen, among the questions he demanded that the Buddha answer were whether or not the universe was eternal, and whether or not it was finite. The Buddha refused to give categorical answers, but that does not mean that he had nothing to say on the subjects raised by these questions. I have already introduced the bare concept of *saṃsāra* or the round of rebirth. But when did it all begin? How long, according to Buddhist thinking

on the matter, have you and I together with other beings been wandering from birth to death through *samsāra*?

In response to just this question the Buddha is said to have declared that *samsāra*'s beginning was inconceivable and that its starting point could not be indicated; he went on to ask the group of monks he was addressing which they thought was greater, the mother's milk they had drunk in the course of their long journey through *samsāra* or the water in the four great oceans. 'Certainly the mother's milk drunk by you is greater,' they were told.¹ We have, it seems, been wandering in *samsāra* for aeons. But how long is an aeon? When asked this question, the Buddha refused to answer in terms of numbers of years, or hundreds or even thousands of years; instead he gave a simile:

Suppose there was a great mountain of rock, seven miles across and seven miles high, a solid mass without any cracks. At the end of every hundred years a man might brush it just once with a fine Benares cloth. That great mountain of rock would decay and come to an end sooner than ever the aeon. So long is an aeon. And of aeons of this length not just one has passed, not just a hundred, not just a thousand, not just a hundred thousand.²

If this is how the age of the universe is to be conceived, what of its spatial extent? On another occasion the Buddha told a householder, Kevaddha, of a monk who wished to discover just where the four elements of earth, water, fire, and wind ceased completely.³ We can understand this as wishing to discover the limits of the physical universe. The monk was a master of meditation (*samādhi*) and so was able to attain a state of concentration in which he was able to visit the realms of various *devas* or 'gods' and put his question to them. First he approached the gods of the Four Kings; they were unable to answer his question but directed him to yet higher gods who in turn passed him on to still higher gods: 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. None could answer his question. Finally he approached Great Brahmā himself, who repeatedly answered only that he was Great Brahmā,

'mighty, unconquerable, all-seeing, master, lord, maker, creator, overseer, controller, father of all who are and will be'. In the face of the monk's persistence, Great Brahmā eventually took him aside and confessed that he too did not know where the elements cease and suggested that the monk return to the Buddha and put the question to him. The Buddha's answer, we are told, was that where the four elements cease completely is in the consciousness that knows nirvāṇa.⁴

This 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'.⁵ 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-vāḍa/cakka-vāḷa*) 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, but it would be wrong to conclude that there is any one or final overarching Great Brahmā—God the Creator. It may be that beings come to take a particular Great Brahmā as creator of the world, and a Great Brahmā may himself even form the idea that he is creator, but this is just the result of delusion on the part of both parties. In fact the universe recedes ever upwards with one class of Great Brahmā being surpassed by a further, higher class of Great Brahmā.⁶

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, 1,000,000,000,000.⁷ 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. There is no spatial limit to the extent of world-systems:

Buddhaghosa tells us in the *Atthasālinī* ('Providing the Meaning') that if four Great Brahmās from the realm of the Supreme Gods were to set off in the four directions at a speed which allowed them to traverse a hundred thousand world-systems in the time it takes a swift arrow to pass over the shadow of a palm tree, they would reach nirvāṇa without ever finding the limit of world-systems.⁸ Great Brahmās of the realm of the Supreme Gods are beings in their last existence who are certain of reaching final nirvāṇa at the end of their lives, which last 16,000 aeons. Bearing in mind the simile for the length of an aeon, I leave it to the reader to ponder how many hundreds of thousands of world-systems these Great Brahmās might traverse in 16,000 aeons.

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. Two great Abhidharma traditions have come down to us, that of the Theravādins, which has shaped the outlook of Buddhism in Sri Lanka and South-East Asia, and that of the Sarvāstivādins, whose perspective on many points has passed into Chinese and Tibetan Buddhism. The elaborate cosmological systems detailed in these two Abhidharmas are, however, substantially the same, differing only occasionally on minor points of detail. This elaborate and detailed cosmology is thus to be regarded as forming an important and significant part of the common Buddhist heritage. Moreover, it is not to be regarded as only of quaint and historical interest; the world-view contained in this traditional cosmology still exerts considerable influence over the outlook of ordinary Buddhists in traditional Buddhist societies. In the one or two instances in what follows where the Sarvāstivādin and Theravādin traditions differ, I have, as a matter of convenience, presented what is handed down in the Theravādin texts.

According to the developed cosmology of the Abhidharma, saṃsāra 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 (see Table 2). Indeed, one should rather say that every being has

TABLE 2. *The thirty-one realms of existence according to the Pali sources*

WORLD (<i>dhātu</i>)	COSMOLOGY REALM (<i>bhūmi</i>)	LIFE SPAN	KARMA (leading to rebirth in corresponding realm)	PSYCHOLOGY
FORMLESS WORLD (<i>arūpa-dhātu</i>)	Neither Consciousness nor Unconsciousness (<i>nevasaññānāsaññāyātana</i>) Nothingness (<i>akiñcaññāyātana</i>) Infinite Consciousness (<i>viññāṇāñcāyātana</i>) Infinite Space (<i>ākāśānañcāyātana</i>)	84,000 aeons 60,000 aeons 40,000 aeons 20,000 aeons	Formless attainments (<i>arūpa-samāpatti</i>)	FORMLESS- SPHERE MIND (<i>arūpāvacara</i>)
WORLD OF PURE FORM (<i>rūpa-dhātu</i>)	The Supreme (<i>akanitṭha</i>) The Clear-sighted (<i>sudassin</i>) The Lovely (<i>sudassa</i>) The Serene (<i>aiappa</i>) The Durable (<i>aviha</i>) Unconscious Beings (<i>asañña-satta</i>) Great Reward (<i>vehapphala</i>)	16,000 aeons 8,000 aeons 4,000 aeons 2,000 aeons 1,000 aeons	Path of non-return (<i>anāgāmi-magga</i>) or transcendent 4th <i>jhāna</i>	Fourth <i>jhāna</i>
WORLD OF PURE FORM (<i>rūpa-dhātu</i>)	Complete Beauty (<i>subha-kiṇha</i>) Boundless Beauty (<i>appamāṇa-subha</i>) Limited Beauty (<i>paritta-subha</i>)	500 aeons 500 aeons 64 aeons 32 aeons 16 aeons	<i>asañña-samāpatti</i> Ordinary 4th <i>jhāna</i> Third <i>jhāna</i>	FORM- SPHERE MIND (<i>rūpāvacara</i>)

↑ destruction by water	Streaming Radiance (<i>ābhassara</i>) Boundless Radiance (<i>appamāṇābha</i>) Limited Radiance (<i>parittābha</i>) Great Brahmā (<i>mahābrahmā</i>) Brahmā's Ministers (<i>brahma-purohita</i>) Brahmā's Retinue (<i>brahma-pārisajja</i>)	8 aeons 4 aeons 2 aeons 1 aeon 1/2 aeon 1/3 aeon	Second <i>jhāna</i> First <i>jhāna</i>
↑ destruction by fire	The Masters of the Creations of Others (<i>paranimmita-vasavattin</i>) Those who Delight in Creation (<i>nimmāna-ratin</i>) The Contented (<i>tusita</i>) The Yama Gods (<i>yāma</i>) The Thirty-Three Gods (<i>tāvātīṇsa</i>) The Gods of the Four Kings (<i>cātummahārājika</i>) Human Beings (<i>manussa</i>) Jealous Gods (<i>asura</i>) Hungry Ghosts (<i>petti-visaya</i>) Animals (<i>tiracchānayoṇī</i>) Hell Beings (<i>niraya</i>)	128,000 divine years 64,000 divine years 16,000 divine years 8,000 divine years 2,000 divine years 500 divine years variable unspecified unspecified unspecified unspecified	10 courses of wholesome karma motivated by non-attachment, friendliness and wisdom 10 courses of unwholesome karma motivated by attachment, aversion and delusion
WORLD OF THE FIVE SENSES (<i>kāma-dhātu</i>)			SENSE- SPHERE MIND (<i>kāmāvacara</i>)

Note: Table 2 is based on Vibhaṅga 422-6, Visuddhimagga vii. 40-4, xiii. 29-65; Abhidhammattha-saṅgaha 22-4.

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 *nirvāṇa* and so escape the round of rebirth. The most basic division of the thirty-one realms is three-fold. 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-dhātu, -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-vāḍas*. At the centre of a *cakra-vāḍa* is the great world mountain, Meru or Sineru. This is surrounded by seven concentric rings of mountains and seas. Beyond these mountains, in the four cardinal directions, are four continents. The southern continent, Jambudvīpa or 'the continent of the rose-apple tree', is the continent inhabited by ordinary human beings; the southern part, below the towering abode of snows (*himālaya*) is effectively India, the land where buddhas arise. In the spaces between world-spheres and below are various hells, while in the shadow of the slopes of Mount Meru dwell the jealous gods called Asuras, expelled from the heaven of the Thirty-Three by its king Śakra (Pali Sakka). On the slopes of Mount Meru itself and rising above its peak are the six realms inhabited by the gods of

the sense-sphere. A Great Brahmā of the lower realms of pure form may rule over a thousand such world-spheres, while Brahmās of the higher realms of the form-sphere are said to rule over a hundred thousand.

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 (*puṇya/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 nirvāṇa. In fact, nirvāṇa 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 nirvāṇa, 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 saṃsāra: 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.'⁹ 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).¹⁰

In the commentarial literature the notion of a course of action is explained with reference to an action's being performed with full intention and full awareness of what one is doing. Thus in order for the unwholesome course of action of killing to have occurred, five conditions must have been fulfilled: there must be a living creature, one must know the creature is living, one must intend to kill the creature, one must perform the necessary action, and finally the creature must actually die.¹¹ The nature of good action is similarly summed up in terms of the ten courses of wholesome action which consist in refraining from the seven courses of unwholesome bodily and vocal action and, for the mental courses of action, desirelessness, kindness, and right view.

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.¹² 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 care-free 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 (*śīla/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 (*vipāśyanā/vipassanā, prajñā/paññā*). 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.¹³

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. Irrespective of which cosmological realm a being inhabits, its state of mind might, at different times, be classified as belonging either to the sense-sphere (*kāmāvacara*), the form-sphere (*rūpāvacara*), or the formless-sphere (*arūpāvacara*), corresponding to the way in which beings exist either in the sense-world (*kāma-loka*), the form world (*rūpa-loka*), or formless world (*arūpa-loka*). Moreover, in detailing the types of consciousness or states of mind

that beings reborn in the various realms are able to experience (or have access to), the Abhidharma provides a further indication of the parallelism between the psychological order and the cosmological order.¹⁴ Beings in the lowest realms (hell, animal, hungry ghosts, Asuras) can only experience sense-sphere consciousness; beings in the human realm and the heavens of the sense-sphere characteristically experience sense-sphere consciousness but can in special circumstances (i.e. when attaining *dhyāna*) experience form and formless-sphere consciousness; the basis of existence in the form and formless worlds is form and formless-sphere consciousness respectively, but the beings born there also experience certain forms of both wholesome and unwholesome sense-sphere consciousness, but not those associated with hatred and unpleasant feeling. The logic governing this arrangement is as follows. A being in one of the lower realms must experience at least a modicum of wholesome consciousness, for otherwise he or she would be stuck there forever, never able to generate the wholesome karma necessary to bring about rebirth in a higher realm. Similarly beings in the Brahma worlds must experience some unwholesome consciousness, otherwise they would be for ever reborn in these blissful realms where no unpleasant bodily or mental feeling ever occurs, escaping *duḥkha* permanently rather than only temporarily (albeit for an aeon or two). Finally, beings such as humans who are in the middle are evenly poised; they may experience the most unwholesome kinds of consciousness or they may experience the most wholesome—they may go right to the bottom or right to the top.

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 Brahma 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); and when they contract, they contract from the bottom upwards, the lower realms of world-systems disappearing first.¹⁵ An ancient passage introduces this process of expansion and contraction as follows:

Now there comes a time when after a long period of time this world contracts. When the world contracts beings are for the most part born in the realm of Radiance. There they exist made of mind, feeding on joy, self-luminous, moving through the air, constantly beautiful; thus they remain for a long, long time.¹⁶

According to both traditions the passage quoted, referring as it does to the rebirth of beings in the realm of Radiance (a realm

corresponding in the psychological hierarchy to the level of the second *dhyāna*) at the time of world-contraction, describes this contraction as the result of destruction by fire. This fire starts in the lower realms of the sense-sphere and, having burnt up these, it invades the form realms; but, having burnt up the realms corresponding to the first *dhyāna*, it stops. The realms corresponding to the second, third, and fourth *dhyānas* and the four formless realms are thus spared the destruction. But destruction by fire is not the only kind of destruction, merely the most frequent—water and wind also wreak their havoc. When the destruction is by water, the three realms corresponding to the second *dhyāna* are included in the general destruction. The destruction by wind invades and destroys even the realms corresponding to the third *dhyāna*. Only the seven realms corresponding to the fourth *dhyāna* and the four formless realms are never subject to this universal destruction.

What becomes of the beings that occupy the lower realms when fire, water, and wind wreak their destruction? They cannot just disappear from the round of rebirth, for the only way to achieve that is to gain awakening as buddhas and arhats do. So these beings must go somewhere. Opinions differ as to what precisely happens to them. Some say that all the beings occupying the lower realms should be understood as being reborn in those higher Brahma worlds that escape the destruction—this is true even of the beings in the lowest hell realms. But rebirth in the Brahma worlds can only be gained as the result of the appropriate karma, namely the achievement of *dhyāna*. Such states of peace and calm are impossible in the lower realms, but Buddhaghosa explains that there is no being in *saṃsāra* that has not at some time or other performed the karma necessary for rebirth in the happy realms of the sense-sphere. Thus even beings born in hell realms as the result of the severest unwholesome karma will always have a latent good karma that can come to fruition at the time of the pending contraction of the world-system. Once reborn in a sense-sphere heaven, they subsequently cultivate the *dhyāna* leading to rebirth in the Brahma-worlds. On this view all beings must at some time have dwelt in the Brahma-realms

corresponding to the second, third, and fourth *dhyānas*, and periodically—though the periods may be of inconceivable duration—all beings return to these realms. But according to others, such as Vasubandhu and Dhammapāla, at the time of destruction hell beings whose unwholesome karma is not exhausted are reborn in a world-system not in the process of contraction.

Such mythic accounts may seem fantastic, yet embedded within them are important points of Buddhist thinking, such as, for example, the suggestion that all beings have the latent potential to attain—and indeed have some distant knowledge and experience of—the condition of the fourth *dhyāna*. The condition of the mind in the fourth *dhyāna* is, according to the classical theory of the stages of the Buddhist path, pivotal to the attainment of the awakening knowledge itself. The fourth *dhyāna* represents a particular clear and open state of mind in which the awakening knowledge can arise. The suggestion that every being in *samsāra* in some sense already knows such a state introduces a theme that becomes particularly significant in certain strands of Indian Mahāyāna Buddhist thought, and which is especially emphasized in Japanese Zen. I am referring to the notion of *tathāgata-garbha* or the inherent ‘Buddha-nature’ of all beings, about which I shall say more in Chapter 9.

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 *duḥkha*, 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 *saṃsāra* has only thirty-one realms. What is missing is *nirvāṇa*. But then *nirvāṇa* is precisely not a state or condition that can be defined spatially or temporally; one cannot be reborn in *nirvāṇa*, nor can one come to *nirvāṇa* 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.¹⁷

The Buddhist cosmological account represents the complete description of the conditioned world—the whirling circle (*vaṭṭa*) of *saṃsāra*. This is *duḥkha* on the macrocosmic scale. One's personal day-to-day experiences, on the other hand, are *duḥkha* on the microcosmic scale. In short, what we experience from day to day is a microcosm of the cosmos at large. As we shall see in Chapter 6, 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/paṭicca-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), Yakṣas and Yakṣiṇīs, Rākṣasas (types of demon and nymph), Nāgas (mythical serpents), Garuḍas (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.

Each tradition preserves slightly different accounts of these beings; in each tradition they are adapted and reinterpreted, taking on slightly different characters and acquiring particular associations, while still retaining certain common features. 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.¹⁸

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. In this manner Buddhism has been able to accommodate and coexist with a considerable range of local and indigenous religious practice wherever it has established itself. Thus the Buddhists of Sri Lanka visit the shrines of various local and Hindu gods, the Buddhists of Burma have various rites associated with a class of being known as *nats*, while the Thais seek the assistance of the *phiis*; Japanese Buddhists worship at the Shintō

shrines of the *kami*; Tibetan Buddhists acknowledge the existence of various kinds of spirit and god, invoking the presence of some as 'protectors of Dharma' (*chos skyong*).¹⁹ 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.²⁰ 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 Yakṣas, 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 Yāma 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.²¹

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, Yakṣas and Yakṣiṇīs, 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.

In conclusion it is worth considering briefly Buddhist and Indian cosmology in relation to the cosmology of the West. Clearly the Buddhist conception of the spatial and temporal extent of the universe contrasts markedly with the traditional Judaeo-Christian conception of a single world beginning with its creation at a particular point—a point that has on occasion been defined very precisely: Archbishop Ussher (1581–1656) calculated it as 4004 BCE. Whereas from the Buddhist perspective there are

countless world-systems passing through vast cycles of expansion and contraction, in the Judaeo-Christian perspective there is one world whose 'history' begins at one point and moves towards one final doomsday, and is to be read, moreover, as the working out of God's purpose. There is a point of real contrast here that is not of purely theoretical interest; these two traditional cosmologies give rise to quite different cultural perspectives on matters of social and political progress. This is a complex subject, and I merely draw the reader's attention to it.

A number of writers over the last twenty years have suggested that there is a certain affinity between aspects of traditional Indian cosmology and the findings of modern astronomy and physics.²² Some caution is needed here. Quite clearly the conception of the *cakra-vāḍa* taken as a literal description of the geography of the world (which it clearly was and is by many) is as inaccurate from a scientific perspective as anything found in the biblical Judaeo-Christian cosmologies. Curiously though, the traditional conception of the *cakra-vāḍa* persisted in Indian thought even after the realization, early in the Christian era, that the world was in reality a globe.²³ The fact that these two quite different conceptions of the world continued to live side by side suggests that in part their functions are somewhat different. Nevertheless, the notion of Mount Meru can fare no better in the eyes of modern science than that of the Garden of Eden. Yet Buddhist cosmology's understanding of the age and size of the universe, its countless world-systems, the absence of a creator God, do perhaps sit more comfortably with certain of the notions of modern astronomy and physics than a Judaeo-Christian biblical cosmology. Yet it would be naïve to suggest that they somehow anticipate such modern scientific theories. The language of Buddhist cosmology is not the language of modern physics. If we wish to understand it, the Buddhist tradition itself suggests that we should look no further than our own minds, for in many respects the workings of the vast cosmos are nothing other than the workings of our minds writ large.