

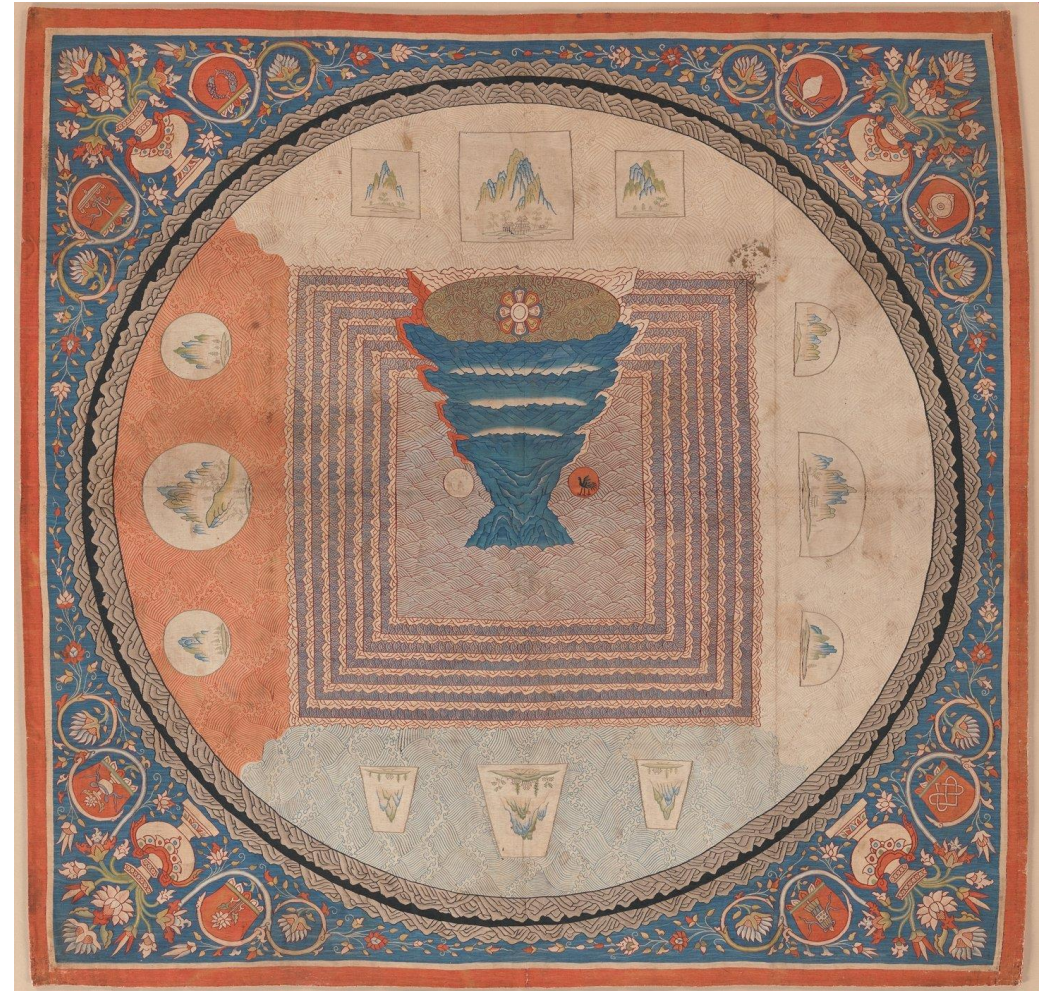
Abhidharmakośa as a Reflection of
Cosmology in Earlier Āgama and Nikāya Buddhism

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The Buddhist World

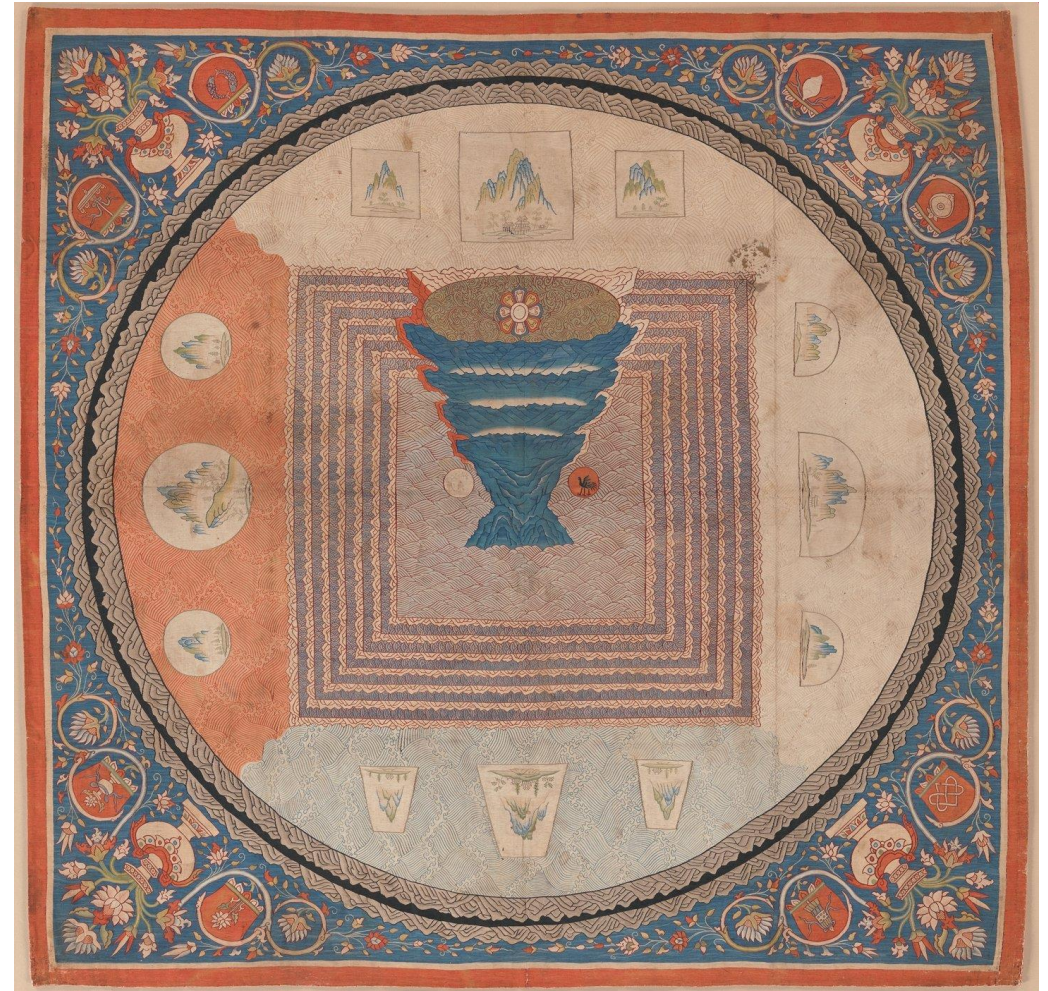
- The world of Mt. Sumeru and the Four Continents is the foundational worldview of the Buddhists in ancient India.
- Abhidharma inherited the cosmology of early Buddhism. **Why study cosmology?**



Cosmological Mandala with Mount Meru 14th century, NYC Met.

The Buddhist World

- Mount Sumeru at center (also called Mount Meru).
- Surrounded by sea and four continents:
Jambūdvīpa,
Pūrvavideha,
Avaragodānīya,
Uttarakuru.



Cosmological Mandala with Mount Meru 14th century, NYC Met.

The Buddhist World -- Jambūdvīpa

- We live on the southern continent of Jambūdvīpa.



Cosmological Mandala with Mount Meru 14th century, NYC Met.

The Buddhist World – The Sun and Moon

- The Sun and the Moon revolve around Mt. Sumeru.
- There is no mention of the other planets in early Buddhist literature.



Cosmological Mandala with Mount Meru 14th century, NYC Met.

The Buddhist World – The Sun and Moon

- This cosmology was understood as physically real and the setting and rising of the Sun and Moon were explained based on a flat-earth model.



Cosmological Mandala with Mount Meru 14th century, NYC Met.

The Buddhist World – The Gods

- Indra lives atop Mt. Sumeru. Brahma lives in a heaven above it. Asuras live below the mountain. Hells are below.
- Āgamas and Nikāyas explain this.



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The Buddhist World – The Gods

- The myth of a mountain dwelling of the gods stretches back to a Indo-European heritage.
- Mt. Asgard, Mt. Olympus, etc.



Cosmological Mandala with Mount Meru 14th century, NYC Met.

Dīrghāgama (*Chang Ahan jing* 長阿含經),
“Long Discourse Collection of Sermons”

- The Buddha explains the physical dimensions of the world in detail in early Buddhist literature.

Dīrghāgama (*Chang Ahan jing* 長阿含經)

- “This great earth has a depth of 168,000 yojanas; its bounds are limitless. The earth stops at water.”
- “The king of mountains, Sumeru, reaches into the waters for 84,000 yojanas, and it protrudes out of the sea, reaching a height of 84,000 yojanas.”

Dīrghāgama (*Chang Ahan jing* 長阿含經)

- The Sun and Moon are described as floating palaces full of gods, rather than being individual deities.

Dīrghāgama (*Chang Ahan jing* 長阿含經)

- “The central hall in which the solar god stays is constructed of pure gold. It is sixteen yojanas in height. The hall has four gates surrounded by railings.”

Dīrghāgama (*Chang Ahan jing* 長阿含經)

- “The light of the golden hall illuminates the solar palace. The light of the solar palace illuminates the whole of the world below in the four directions.”

Abhidharmakośa-bhāṣya

- *Abhidharmakośa-bhāṣya* has a chapter titled “The World” (Ch. *shijian pin* 世間品; Skt. *lokanirdeśaḥ*).
- This chapter presents the typical Buddhist worldview based upon the model of Mt. Sumeru and the four continents.

Cosmology in *Abhidharmakośa-bhāṣya*

- *Abhidharmakośa-bhāṣya* does not mention the other planets apart from the Sun and Moon.
- Vasubandhu apparently had not knowledge of the planets.
- He attempts to explain the orbit of the Sun and the Moon based upon a type of mechanistic theory, in which these bodies move around Mt. Sumeru, propelled by a “wind” (Ch. *feng* 風; Skt. *vāyu*) **which is brought about by the collective karma of beings**. This is the support lifting the Sun, Moon and stars

Cosmology in *Abhidharmakośa-bhāṣya*

- The physical world is brought about due to the collective karma of all beings (gods, humans, asuras, animals, etc.).
- Although there is a clear ordering and predictable structure to the world, it is not organized according to some plan or divine willpower.
- There is no Creator in the Buddhist worldview. Vasubandhu and Buddhist authors had to avoid this problem.

Cosmology in *Abhidharmakośa-bhāṣya*

- *Abhidharmakośa-bhāṣya* does not mention the other planets apart from the Sun and Moon.
- Vasubandhu apparently had no knowledge of the planets.
- Indian astronomy explained the motion of the planets, but Buddhists did not adopt this into their cosmology until much later.
- Buddhists never adopted a spherical-earth

Cosmology in *Abhidharmakośa-bhāṣya*

- *Abhidharmakośa-bhāṣya* explains the movement of the Sun and the Moon based upon a type of mechanistic theory.
- They are propelled by a “wind” (Ch. *feng* 風; Skt. *vāyu*) which is brought about by the collective karma of beings.

Cosmology in *Abhidharmakośa-bhāṣya*

- “The winds are in space and arise contingent upon the collective karma of sentient beings, circling around Mt. Sumeru like a whirlpool and supporting the Sun, Moon and stars.”

Cosmology in *Abhidharmakośa-bhāṣya*

- The physical composition of the Sun and Moon are also discussed. These concepts are from the **Āgamas**.

Cosmology in *Abhidharmakośa-bhāṣya*

- “The bottom surface of the solar disc is comprised of crystal (*sphaṭika*) stone. The whole is a fire-pearl. This stone warms and illuminates.”
- “The bottom surface of the lunar disc is comprised of the moon-beloved stone. The whole is a **water-pearl**. This stone cools and illuminates.”
- **Chinese vs Sanskrit vocabulary.**

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Cosmology in *Abhidharmakośa-bhāṣya*

- There was clearly an attempt to explain the apparent heating and cooling properties of the Sun and Moon with reference to physical processes.



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Summary

- The early Buddhist literature describes a world of Mt. Sumeru and the Four Continents atop a disc-shaped earth.
- This cosmology is attributed to the Buddha himself. It was conceived of as physical and not figurative or mythological.
- The *Abhidharmakośa-bhāṣya* takes up this worldview and elaborates on it, attempting to explain how and why it exists as it does. Vasubandhu shows no awareness of a spherical-earth or the planets.
- Still, Vasubandhu elaborates upon an earlier ancient model of Buddhist cosmology while remaining faithful to it.