

A Doctrinal Approach to Cosmology and Existential Destinies: A Study Based on Four Selected Discourses of the *Majjhima-nikāya*

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Abstract

The *Majjhima-nikāya*, widely regarded as an authoritative source of the Buddha's original teachings (*Buddha-vacana*), contains profound discourses primarily addressed to intellectually advanced audiences. This study examines the doctrinal interpretation of cosmology and the bourns (*gati*) of beings as represented in four selected discourses: the *Mahāsīhanāda*, *Kaṇṇakatthala*, *Sanḅārava*, and *Sāleyyaka suttas*. The objective is to identify how these *suttas* elucidate the principles governing rebirth and the moral causality underlying the destinations of beings after death. Employing a doctrinal and textual-analytical methodology based on the Pāli Canon, this research interprets canonical passages supported by commentarial and scholarly sources.

Specifically, the *Mahāsīhanāda-sutta* outlines the four modes of birth and

fivefold destinies; the *Kaṇṇakatthala* and *Sanḅārava suttas* explore the ontological and ethical status of devas within the cosmic hierarchy; and the *Sāleyyaka-sutta* reveals the moral foundations determining heavenly or infernal rebirths. Collectively, these discourses emphasize that rebirth is conditioned by volitional conduct (*kamma*) and mental cultivation, rather than divine intervention. This study contributes a novel interpretive layer to Buddhist studies by demonstrating that early Buddhist cosmology is not merely a mythological framework, but a structural manifestation of ethical causality. The study concludes that the *Majjhima-nikāya* presents a coherent doctrinal vision in which cosmological structures and ethical behavior are intrinsically interlinked, thereby affirming the Buddha's profound insight into the causal law of *kamma* and its manifestation in the cycle of existence (*saṃsāra*).

Keywords: Buddhist cosmology, ethical causation (*kamma*), existential destinations (*gati*), *kāma-loka* (sense-sphere), *Majjhima-nikāya*,

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Introduction

The *Majjhima-nikāya*, widely recognized as a reliable and foundational source (Bodhi, 1995, Preface) of the Buddha's pristine teachings (*Buddha-vacana*), occupies a distinctively intellectual position among the five primary collections (*nikāyas*) of the Pāli Canon. The majority of its 152 discourses present advanced doctrinal formulations, intentionally delivered to audiences possessing sophisticated intellectual capacities. This inherently analytical and intellectual character of the *Majjhima-nikāya* is intimately tied to its historical preservation. Following the First Buddhist Council, the responsibility for preserving this collection via oral tradition (*bhāṇaka*) was entrusted to the lineage of disciples descending from Venerable Sāriputta celebrated as the foremost in wisdom (*mahāpaṇṇā*) among the *Mahāsaṅgha*.

While these disciples did not constitute a separate schismatic school, historical accounts suggest they held an exceptionally profound allegiance to their ideal teacher, viewing themselves closely through the lens of Venerable Sāriputta's scholarly heritage alongside their broader identity as *Sakyaputtiyā* (see Note 1). What, then, was the core reason for assigning the oral preservation of the *Majjhima-nikāya* specifically to Venerable Sāriputta's lineage? It is highly probable that Venerable Sāriputta's singular status as the *Dhammasenādhīpati* (N. Thera, 2013) and his reputation for profound, sublime intellect (*mahāpaṇṇāvanto*) made his followers the most fitting

custodians for a text of such deep analytical gravity. By examining how this intellectually rigorous collection approaches cosmic frameworks, this study offers fresh insight into early Buddhist scholasticism. Specifically, this research aims to systematically extract and evaluate the doctrinal facts pertaining to cosmology and the existential destinations (*gati*) of beings as delineated across four critically selected discourses of the *Majjhima-nikāya*.

Literature Review

Previous studies on Buddhist cosmology have extensively addressed its philosophical, psychological, and symbolic implications, often treating the multi-tiered cosmic realms as externalizations of internal mental states. Pioneering works in the field have mapped out the vast structural topography of the *kāma-bhūmi* (sense-sphere realms), *rūpa-bhūmi* (fine-material realms), and *arūpa-bhūmi* (immaterial realms), emphasizing how early Buddhism adapted and modified Vedic cosmological models to serve an ethical, rather than a ritualistic, purpose. Furthermore, contemporary scholarship generally privileges the Pāli Canon as the definitive, most reliable recension for recovering the original teachings of the historical Buddha Gotama. Within this canonical framework, biographical and historical analyses have long celebrated Venerable Sāriputta's unparalleled role as the *Dhammasenādhīpati* and his subsequent mission in propagating the Dhamma.

However, a critical survey of the existing literature reveals a significant academic oversight. While monumental biographical studies, such as Nyanaponika Thera’s *The Life of Sāriputta*, compile and translate the comprehensive textual legacy of the Chief Disciple, they systematically omit the explicit contribution of his lineage of disciples to the oral preservation (*bhāṇaka*) system established during the First Buddhist Council (N. Thera, 2013). Consequently, mainstream scholarship has rarely investigated whether the textual collections preserved by specific *bhāṇaka* lineages such as the *Majjhima-nikāya* possess distinct thematic or intellectual orientations that mirror the unique spiritual character of their founding teacher. This research directly addresses this scholarly lacuna by offering a focused, deep-dive doctrinal analysis of cosmology across four specific discourses within the *Majjhima-nikāya*. Rather than treating Buddhist cosmology merely as a static, symbolic backdrop, this study bridges the gap in the literature by evaluating how these four selected *suttas* construct an intellectually rigorous, ethically driven cosmic hierarchy. By focusing on the structural interplay between *kamma* and existential destinations (*gati*), this paper provides fresh insights into how the *Majjhima-nikāya* uses cosmological frameworks as active pedagogical tools to reinforce moral causality among intellectually advanced audiences.

Research Problem

While Buddhist cosmology is frequently studied within contemporary

scholarship, it is often relegated to the realm of mere mythology, cultural borrowing, or symbolic externalizations of psychological states. This tendency creates a major scholarly dichotomy, decoupling the vast structural landscapes of early Buddhist cosmic realms from the core ethical and philosophical doctrines of the Pāli Canon. Furthermore, although mainstream research recognizes the *Majjhima-nikāya* as an intellectually rigorous collection preserved by the analytical lineage of Venerable Sāriputta, few studies have critically investigated how this specific text systematically utilizes cosmic frameworks to validate its philosophical claims.

Analysis Matrix	Common Academic Pitfall	This Study's Intervention
Cosmological Interpretation	Viewed as myth or mere cultural borrowing	Proved as a direct reflex of ethical causation (<i>kamma-niyāma</i>)
Pedagogical Function	Handled as an abstract theological backdrop	Investigated as a law-bound pedagogical tool for accountability

Consequently, a significant problem arises: without a targeted, textual-analytical examination of how specific discourses interlink cosmic structures with moral outcomes, our understanding of early Buddhist ontology remains incomplete. We risk viewing cosmic realms as abstract theological backdrops rather than active, law-bound pedagogical tools designed to enforce individual accountability. This study directly addresses this academic

problem by asking: *How does the Majjhima-nikāya structurally and dialogically align the cosmological realms with the psychological and moral mechanics of kamma?* By examining the distinct dimensions of rebirth and existential destinations (*gati*) across the *Mahāsīhanāda*, *Kaṇṇakatthala*, *Saṅgārava*, and *Sāleyyaka suttas*, this research resolves this problem. It demonstrates that early Buddhist cosmology is not an independent metaphysical architecture, but a direct, law-governed reflex of ethical causation (*kamma-niyāma*).

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, doctrinal, and textual-analytical research methodology rooted entirely in the primary literature of the Pāli Canon. Given the conceptual nature of Buddhist cosmology and ethics, a qualitative framework is chosen as the most fitting paradigm to interpret nuances of meaning, doctrinal coherence, and pedagogical intent. The primary data is drawn directly from standard textual recensions of four specific discourses within the *Majjhima-nikāya*: the *Mahāsīhanāda*, *Kaṇṇakatthala*, *Saṅgārava*, and *Sāleyyaka suttas*. The analytical process is executed in three distinct, methodical stages:

1. Textual Exegesis: A close, contextual reading of the canonical Pāli passages is conducted to isolate technical terminologies associated with cosmic realms and existential destinations (*gati*).

2. Commentarial Cross-Examination:

To ensure exegetical accuracy and maintain historical continuity, the primary findings are corroborated with authoritative Theravāda commentaries (*Aṭṭhakathā*) and sub-commentaries (*Ṭīkā*).

3. Doctrinal Synthesis: The isolated data is analyzed through a conceptual framework of moral causality (*kamma*). This step evaluates how early Buddhist texts strategically align a being's psychological and ethical choices with their corresponding destination in the cosmic hierarchy.

By prioritizing this rigorous internal textual criticism over secondary generalizations, the methodology ensures an objective, text-validated interpretation of the *Majjhima-nikāya*'s unique doctrinal vision.

Discussion

Mahāsīhanāda-sutta

The *Mahāsīhanāda-sutta*, translated as the Greater Discourse on the Lion's Roar (the 12th text of the *Mūlapaṇṇāsa-pāḷi*), fundamentally expounds the ten powers (*dasabala*) of a Tathāgata and other spiritual qualities of the Blessed One. These attributes were spoken by the Buddha to Venerable Sāriputta after Sunakkhatta, a son of the Licchavis, had recently left the dispensation (*sunakkhatto licchaviputto acirapakkanto hoti imasmā dhammavinayā*). In the middle portion of this discourse, the Buddha explains to Venerable Sāriputta that there are four distinct modes of birth (Bodhi,

1995, p. 168; Horner, 1954, p. 180). structures, are mapped below:
These modes, along with their thematic

Name of the Birth	Physical Form / Mechanism	Canonical Examples
Aṇḍaja (Egg-born)	Born by breaking through an eggshell	Birds, fish, or reptiles
Jalābuja (Womb-born)	Born by breaking out from the caul	Most mammals and humans
Saṃsedaja (Moisture-born)	Originating in rotten fish, corpses, dough, or a cesspit	Organisms with microscopic eggs (e.g., maggots)
Opapātika (Spontaneous)	Miraculous materialization without physical gestation	Devas, denizens of hell, and specific lower world beings

(Table 1: Four Ways of Births)

The subsequent passage of the sutta provides detailed accounts of the fivefold destinations or bourns (*gati*) available to these beings. These are classified as:

- Hellish (*nirayo*) behavior,
- Animal (*tiracchānayoni*) behavior,
- Ghostly (*pettivisayo*) behavior,
- Human (*manussā*) behavior,
- Godly (*deva*) behavior.

The text uniquely utilizes the feminine term *gati* (plural *gatiyo*) to denote a resting-place or abode. Lexically, *gati* indicates a journey, refuge, or future state of rebirth, encompassing both the psychological mode of existence and the final destination after death (Childers, 1976, p. 144). To clarify these existential trajectories, the Buddha introduces highly vivid,

Destination Bourn (gati)	Experiential Quality	Illustrative Canonical Simile
Hellish (<i>nirayo</i>)	Sharp, rough, deeply unpleasant feelings	A weary, heat-oppressed traveler following a single path that leads directly into a pit of burning embers.
Animal (<i>tiracchānayo</i>)	Sharp, rough, unpleasant feelings	A weary traveler walking a path that terminates in a deep cesspool filled with excrement up to a man's height.
Ghostly (<i>pettivisayo</i>)	Sharp, predominantly unpleasant feelings	A traveler following a path in an uneven area, arriving at a barren tree with sparse leaves and patchy shade.
Human (<i>manussā</i>)	Much pleasant and varied feelings	A traveler on an even stretch of land arriving at a robust, flourishing tree offering dense leaves and pleasant shade.
Godly (<i>deva</i>)	Only unalloyed, pleasant feelings	A traveler arriving at a magnificent, whitewashed gabled mansion equipped with protective windows, plush couches, and red cushions.

(Table 2: Different feelings of fivefold destiny of bourns with similes)

It is worth noting that a short discourse in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-vagga* of the *Āṅguttara-nikāya*, titled the *Gati-sutta* (*pañca*), similarly lists these five existential destinations (Hardy, 1900). However, its functional context diverges from that of the *Mahāsīhanāda-sutta*; the *Gati-sutta* explicitly outlines how these five destinies are to be systematically transcended and dispelled through the dedicated development of the four establishments of mindfulness (Hardy, 1900).

Kaṇṇakatthala-sutta

This discourse addresses complex issues surrounding the omniscience of the Buddha, the social caste system, and

metaphysical inquiries regarding gods and the Brahma realm raised by King Pasenadi Kosala and Prince Viḍḍabha. To align with our chosen research scope, this section evaluates the text's depiction of gods and Brahmas as they operate within the broader fivefold path of rebirth.

During the dialogue, King Pasenadi shifts from asking about the differences in the radiance and flame produced by burning different types of wood to a direct inquiry regarding the status of celestial beings. The exchange is structured as follows:

King Pasenadi: "Venerable Sir, how is it: are there gods?"

The Buddha: "Why do you ask that, great king?"

King Pasenadi: "I was asking whether those gods come back to this [human] state or whether they do not."

The Buddha: "Great king, those gods who are still subject to affliction come back to this [human] state, those gods who are no longer subject to affliction do not come back to this [human] state." (see Note 2)

When presented with the king's initial query (*'Kiṃ pana bhante, atthi devā ti?'*), the Buddha strategically deploys a counter-question: *"Why do you ask that, great king?"* (*'kiṃ pana tvaṃ maharaja, evaṃ vadesi?'*). This represents a rare canonical instance of a direct cross-examination regarding the absolute existence of gods. The text does not explicitly state why the Buddha chose not to answer with a simplistic confirmation. Commentator Venerable Buddhaghosa suggests that the king was merely verifying a universally accepted cultural axiom, since the contemporary populace took the existence of gods for granted. However, Marasinghe (1974, pp. 196–197) offers more critical interpretation:

However, an examination of the ensuing discussion shows that the position would not have been that simple and straightforward as our commentator took it to be. If the king knew that the gods were there and also had accepted it as a fact, first of all, we are entitled to ask why he raised the question at all even granting that the first question was wrongly put and that the king realized it

only when the Buddha put his counter question, then his second corrected question being answered satisfactorily, the matter should have ended there. But did it? (Marasinghe, 1974, pp. 196–197)

The king's query remains sharply focused on the functional mechanics of these beings rather than pure abstraction. In the canonical text, the query reads *'Kiṃ pana bhante, atthi devā ti?'*, which literally translates to *"Venerable sir, are there gods?"* It should be noted that some translations modify the locative aspect by adding "here" (Bodhi, 1995, p. 738), implying an inquiry into the immediate presence of devas rather than their generic cosmic existence elsewhere.

Unable to get an unconditioned answer, the king links his initial question with a secondary, more specific theological problem: *"Kiṃ pana bhante, atthi devāti? Yadi vā te bhante, devā āgantāro itthattaṃ, yadi vā anāgantāro itthattanti?"* The Buddha's comprehensive response elegantly addresses both layers simultaneously: *"Ye te maharaja, devā sabyāpajjhā te devā āgantāro itthattaṃ; ye te devā abyāpajjhā, te devā anāgantāro itthattaṃ ti"*. The structural progression of this dialectic can be mapped as follows:

Interlocutor	Proposition / Question	Target Audience	Doctrinal Outcome
King Pasenadi	Q1: Direct inquiry into the presence of gods	The Buddha	Met with a counter-question to clarify intent
The Buddha	Counter-Question: Challenging the premise	King Pasenadi	Forces the king to reframe the query ethically
King Pasenadi	Q2: Re-asks Q1 combined with return-mechanics	The Buddha	Fully answered based on affliction status

(Table 3: Discussion between King Pasenadi and the Buddha)

This progression shows that the Buddha was not merely being silent or evasive; instead, he used a pedagogical counter-question to shift the dialogue away from speculative theology. By resolving the king's underlying confusion through the lens of *sabyāpajjhā* (subject to affliction) and *abyāpajjhā* (free from affliction), the text demonstrates that the *Majjhima-nikāya* values cosmological entities not as objects of worship, but as law-governed beings subject to rebirth based on their ethical status.

Saṅgārava-sutta

The *Saṅgārava-sutta* (*Majjhima-nikāya* II, p. 130) contains an inquiry regarding the existence of gods that mirrors the discussion in the *Kaṇṇakatthala-sutta*. However, this text approaches the topic from an entirely different dialogical angle. The core of the discourse is a long conversation between the Buddha and a young Brahmin student named Saṅgārava regarding the intense physical strivings the Buddha undertook prior to his enlightenment. The question

regarding devas surfaces unexpectedly at the conclusion of their conversation:

Saṅgārava: "Master Gotama, are there gods?"

The Buddha: "It is known to me to be the case, Bhāradvāja, that there are gods."

Saṅgārava: "How is this, Master, that when you are asked, 'Are there gods?' you say: 'It is known to me to be the case, Bhāradvāja, that there are gods'? If that is so, isn't what you say empty and false?"

The Buddha: "Bhāradvāja, when one is asked; 'Are there gods?' whether one answers, 'There are gods,' or 'It is known to me to be the case [that there are gods],' a wise man can draw the definite conclusion that there are gods."

Saṅgārava: "But why didn't Master Gotama answer me in the first way?"

The Buddha: "It is widely accepted in the world, Bhāradvāja, that there are

gods." (Majjhima Nikāya, II, p. 130; see also Horner, 1957, p. 312) leaves him delighted, demonstrating a unique method of instruction. Unlike This dynamic surprises Saṅgārava and

Interlocutor	Query	Response Format	Epistemological Mode
Saṅgārava	Direct question on existence of gods	Prompted by sudden curiosity	Relies on traditional Brahmin assumptions
The Buddha	"It is known to me to be the case..."	Experiential validation	Shifts from belief to direct realization

(Table 4: Discussion between Saṅgārava and the Buddha)

King Pasenadi, who approached the Buddha with political and defensive concerns, Saṅgārava drops his question suddenly while the Buddha is recounting his early days as an unenlightened Bodhisatta (see Note 3). The Buddha's replies are deeply epistemological; he avoids an unmediated dogmatic declaration and instead frames his confirmation around experiential, realized knowledge (see Note 4).

Ultimately, when Saṅgārava asks why this reality was not declared in a simpler format earlier in the exchange, the Buddha notes that the existence of devas is already a foundational assumption within worldly conventions (*Majjhima Nikāya*, II, p. 130). This highlights how the text handles cosmological realities: they are treated as empirical facts verified by spiritual cultivation rather than speculative items requiring dogmatic debate.

Sāleyyaka-sutta

The *Sāleyyaka-sutta*, a discourse delivered to the Brahmin householders

of Sālā, functions as a definitive canonical statement on how specific behavioral patterns dictate human trajectories into either heavenly (*sagga*) or infernal (*niraya*) states. The text groups human actions under two clear moral frameworks:

- Unrighteous actions (*adhamma-cariyā*)
- Righteous actions (*dhamma-cariyā*)

The sutta details how specific expressions of wholesome and unwholesome *kamma* serve as the structural cause for descent into the purgatories or ascent into the realms of the devas. At the outset of the text, the Buddha is introduced through traditional honorific formulas as the teacher of gods and humans, fully awakened and blessed (*satthā devamanussānaṃ buddho bhagavā*). It states:

"He declares this world with its gods, its Māras, and its Brahmās, this generation with its recluses and Brahmins, its

Structural Typology of Being	Conditions Driving Rebirth	Conditions Halting Rebirth
1. Sense-sphere Being	Shrouded completely in ignorance (<i>avijjā</i>)	The gradual fading away and destruction of ignorance
2. Fine-material Being	Deeply bound to latent craving (<i>taṇhā</i>)	The arising of true, liberating knowledge (<i>vijjā</i>)
3. Immaterial Being	Bound by fine-material attachments	The absolute cessation of craving (<i>taṇhā-nirodha</i>)

(Table 5: Kinds of being: *Mahāvedalla-sutta*)

princes and its people, which he has himself realized with direct knowledge." (Bodhi, 1995, p. 379)

This explicit capacity shows that the Buddha's cosmic mappings are based on total cognitive clarity regarding the universe and its inhabitants. The discourse systematically names twenty-six distinct celestial spheres that beings inherit after enjoying or suffering the fruits of their past volitional deeds (Bodhi, 1995, p. 384). The ethical law underpinning this system is summarized in a concise canonical query: "*Taṃ kissa hetu? Authoritative text explains: Because he observes conduct in accordance with the Dhamma, righteous conduct*" (Bodhi, 1995, p. 386).

The text links this ethical focus directly to structural classifications found in related texts like the *Mahāvedalla-*

sutta (a major series of questions and answers between Venerable Mahā Koṭṭhita and Venerable Sāriputta) and the *Cūḷavedalla-sutta* (an exchange between the bhikkhunī Dhammānā and the lay disciple Visākhā). The *Mahāvedalla-sutta* divides the existential landscape into three major levels of becoming (Bodhi, 1995, pp. 387–396):

- The sense-sphere (*kāma-bhava*)
- The fine-material sphere (*rūpa-bhava*)
- The immaterial sphere (*arūpa-bhava*)

The functional dynamics governing how these states of being are generated or brought to an end can be summarized in the following table (Bodhi, 1995, pp. 396–405):

Findings

The systematic textual analysis of the four selected discourses from the *Majjhima-nikāya* yields critical data regarding how early Buddhism

structures cosmic existence and its intersection with ethical causality. Rather than presenting cosmology as an abstract mythological geography,

the findings reveal that the *Majjhima-nikāya* utilizes cosmic realms as a direct, empirical validation of the moral efficacy of *kamma*. The specific insights extracted from the primary texts are categorized and analyzed under the following thematic frameworks:

1. Typologies of Existence and Existential Destinies (*Mahāsīhanāda-sutta*)

While the mechanics of birth and destiny are summarized broadly across the canon, the *Mahāsīhanāda-sutta* provides a highly structured, analytical taxonomy. The text classifies the biological entry points into *saṃsāra* via four distinct modes of birth (*catusso yoni*): egg-born (*aṇḍaja*), womb-born (*jalābuja*), moisture-born (*saṃsedaja*), and spontaneous rebirth (*opapātika*). Crucially, the discourse links these biological typologies to a fivefold psychological and existential trajectory of destinies (*pañca gati*): the hell realms (*niraya*), the animal kingdom (*tiracchānayani*), the ghost realm (*pettivisaya*), the human world (*manussa*), and the heavenly spheres (*deva*). The unique doctrinal contribution of this *sutta* lies in its vivid use of behavioral similes, wherein the Buddha illustrates that a practitioner with developed spiritual insight can observe a being's current volitional disposition and accurately predict their future *gati*, much like tracking a traveler walking down a path toward a charcoal pit, a cesspool, or a magnificent palace.

2. Ontological Hierarchy and the Status of Celestial Beings (*Kaṇṇakatthala* and *Saṅgārava suttas*)

The comparative study of the *Kaṇṇakatthala* and *Saṅgārava suttas* illustrates the Buddha's strategic dialogical approach, demonstrating how he actively engaged with contemporary theological assumptions to reframe cosmic structures. Rather than delivering passive, dogmatic proclamations about the divine world, the Buddha utilizes targeted dialectics with his interlocutors such as King Pasenadi Kosala in the *Kaṇṇakatthala-sutta* and the young Brahmin Saṅgārava in the *Saṅgārava-sutta* to systematically evaluate the true ontological and ethical status of celestial beings (*devas* and *brahmās*).

In the *Kaṇṇakatthala-sutta*, the dialogue addresses the problem of supreme authority and cosmic omniscience. Through a careful line of questioning, the Buddha clarifies that no singular deity possesses absolute, unconditioned control over the cosmos. Instead, the discourse reveals that even the highest Brahma deities are bound by their own past *kamma* and are ultimately subject to the laws of impermanence (*anicca*) and cosmic displacement. This critique is structurally complemented by the *Saṅgārava-sutta*, where the Buddha is questioned regarding the very existence of the gods. Here, the Buddha's dialogical genius shifts from theological speculation to empirical and experiential validation. He posits that the existence of *devas* is a matter of direct, experiential realization accessible through mental cultivation

(*bhāvanā*), rather than a matter of blind, ritualistic faith.

By juxtaposing these two discourses, this study uncovers a crucial doctrinal insight: the *Majjhima-nikāya* intentionally subverts the traditional Vedic cosmic hierarchy. By evaluating celestial beings through an ethical lens rather than a ritualistic or birth-bound framework, the *Majjhima-nikāya* strips the pantheon of independent, absolute power. Ultimately, this comparative analysis demonstrates that the Buddha's dialogical methodology serves an urgent pedagogical purpose: it redirects human focus away from appease-based worship of external deities and firmly places accountability back onto individual, volitional conduct.

3. The Moral Foundations of Rebirth Causality (*Sāleyyaka-sutta*)

The *Sāleyyaka-sutta* completes this cosmological vision by providing the precise ethical mechanics that govern a being's ascent or descent within the universe. The findings demonstrate that entry into the twenty-six celestial realms detailed in the text is not determined by ritual performance, sacrifices, or divine favor, but is legally dictated by the ten wholesome courses of action (*kusala kamma-patha*). Conversely, descent into the low status of the purgatories is shown to be a direct consequence of the ten unwholesome courses of action (*akusala kamma-patha*). By tying structural destinations to specific choices in thought, speech, and bodily action, the text shows that early Buddhist cosmology operates as a direct

macrocosmic reflection of a being's inner moral choices.

Concluding Remarks

These four selected suttas from the *Majjhima-nikāya* demonstrate the doctrinal perspective embodied in the Buddha's own words. From the standpoint of these discourses, the doctrine elucidates the process of rebirth and determines the appropriate realms or destinations (*gati*) to which beings are reborn after death. The textual and doctrinal analysis of the *Majjhima-nikāya* a collection intellectually preserved and transmitted by the lineage of Venerable Sāriputta reveals a deeply sophisticated and unified cosmic vision. Rather than presenting cosmology as a detached, mythological framework or a mere literal geography, these discourses demonstrate that early Buddhist cosmology operates as a structural manifestation of moral causality (*kamma*). Each realm of existence within the cosmic hierarchy serves as an empirical, law-bound destination directly reflecting the ethical quality of a being's volitional choices.

This systematic integration is clearly illustrated across the four selected discourses. The *Mahāsīhanāda-sutta* provides the vital taxonomic foundation for this vision by mapping out the four modes of birth (*catusso yoni*) and the fivefold trajectory of existential destinies (*pañca gati*), utilizing psychological similes to show how a being's behavioral disposition legally dictates their future realm of rebirth. This framework is expanded upon in the

Kaṇṇakatthala and *Saṅgārava suttas*, where the Buddha uses a dynamic dialogical approach to deconstruct traditional, birth-bound theological hierarchies. By demonstrating that even the highest celestial deities (*devas* and *brahmās*) are impermanent, finite, and fundamentally bound by their own past *kamma*, these texts strip the cosmos of independent divine intervention and firmly re-establish individual accountability.

Finally, the *Sāleyyaka-sutta* provides the concrete ethical mechanics of this system, delineating how specific sets of ten unwholesome or wholesome actions inevitably bear fruit in either infernal or heavenly rebirths. Ultimately, this study contributes a vital insight to the field of Buddhist studies by showcasing that in early Buddhism, ontology is inseparable from ethics. Cosmic realms do not exist independently of the mind; rather, they are the macroscopic environments generated by microscopic volitional deeds. In presenting this highly structured, causal universe, the *Majjhima-nikāya* shifts the human religious impulse away from external propitiation and toward internal mental cultivation. Collectively, these four selected *suttas* demonstrate that the Buddha's cosmology integrates ethical conduct with spiritual insight.

Notes

The historical designation *Sakyaputtiyā* was used broadly to distinguish the monks of the Buddha's Order as true followers of Śākyamuni (see

Malalasekera, 1937, II, p. 969).

For an alternate reading of this specific exchange regarding locative presence, see Bodhi (1995, p. 738).

The specific textual context captures the Buddha reflecting on his own thoughts prior to full awakening: "Here, Bhāradvāja, before my enlightenment, while I was still only an unenlightened Bodhisatta, I considered thus..." (Bodhi, 1995, p. 820).

Commentarial analysis via the *Majjhima-nikāya Aṭṭhakathā* (MA) asserts that Saṅgārava harbored suspicions that the Buddha spoke without direct realization, essentially accusing him of false speech. Scholars note that the sequence of ideas in this passage can be complex, suggesting potential historical text corruption (see Bodhi, 1995, p. 1301).

These technical linkages are reinforced throughout the collection by conventional formulas expressing explicit faith in the Buddha's enlightened qualities. Key comparative examples include the *Vatthūpama-sutta* (M. I, p. 37); *Mahāsīhanāda-sutta* (M. I, p. 69); *Sekha-sutta* (M. I, p. 356); *Cullahatthipadopama-sutta* (M. I, p. 267); *Mahācattārīsaka-sutta* (M. III, p. 77); *Devadaha-sutta* (M. II, p. 214); *Mahānāma-sutta* (A. V, p. 332); *Dhammadāyāda-sutta* (M. I, p. 12 ff.); *Sāmaññaphala-sutta* (D. I, p. 47); *Saṅgārava-sutta* (A. p. 168); *Pāṭhika-sutta* (D. I, p. 1 ff.); *Vitthata-sutta* (A. III, p. 3 f.; A. II, p. 149 f.; A. III, p. 10 f.); *Paṭhama Mahānāma-sutta* (S. V, p.

369); and the *Bahujaṇahita-sutta* (It. p. 078), which commonly introduce the *Itipi so bhagavā...* formula.

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