

## Themes of Yoga Philosophy

### 9. The ancient concept of the world

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#### The context

In the course of the detailing of miraculous powers, Patanjali refers to the development of an ability to understand the expanse of the world (III.26) and Vyaasa expounds the implications of this suutra in detail.

This ability is developed when the Yogin focuses on the Sun. In his commentary, Vyaasa gives a view of the ancient Indian concept of the universe/world.

#### Organisation of the world

This concept organises the world vertically, like a multi-storeyed building, into the following classes of planes. They together form an egg-shaped unit which, in the vast expanse of the *prakrti*, is like a firefly in the sky. This concept is said to anticipate the discovery of modern science that the universe is vast and immeasurable.

- (A) Seven hells, starting from *aviichi*, the lowermost, where sinners are condemned to suffering. Mythology details hells into 28 according to the nature of the sins of and the punishments imposed on the sinners. (Cf. Bhaagavata, Book 5, Ch 26.) Above them are
- (B) Seven *paataalas*, from *mahaatala* upwards ending with *paataala*, the topmost. Mythological tradition places *paataala* at the bottom and *atala* at the top, and describes them as the habitats of different categories of demons (*asura*-s, *daitya*-s, *daanava*-s) and serpents. (Bhaagavata V.24.) Above them are
- (C) Seven upper planes: (i) the *bhuu*, (ii) *bhuvar* (*antariksha*), (iii) *sva*, (iv) *maha*, (v) *jana*, (vi) *tapas*, (vii) *satya*, the topmost.

Of the seven planes of the class C, *bhuu*, the earth, at the centre of the world (excluding hells), is inhabited by humans and other forms of life. The *bhuvar* plane is the infinite space above the earth, crowded by stars, planets and constellations. From *sva* upwards, the planes are inhabited by different species of gods: six in *sva* or Maahendra ruled over by Indra, five in *maha* ruled over by Prajaapati, four in *jana*, two in *tapas*, four in *satya*. (Vyaasa records the names of all the 21 categories of gods, some of which seem to be taken from Buddhist sources.) The last three are said to be under the overall rule of Brahman, the creator, and hence called the Brahma-loka, the world of Brahman. In the topmost plane live gods who are at different stages of Yogic

object-supported meditation (*samprajnaata samaadhi*). They attain liberation at the end of the tenure of the creator, i.e. 100 years calculated on the basis of his one day equalling 864 crores (one crore = ten million) of human/solar years. Those who have reached the stage of objectless meditation (*a-samprajnaata samaadhi*) are not counted among these gods as they are virtually released from the worldly life, the *samsaara*.

### **The earth**

The golden Sumeru mountain, with peaks made of silver and precious stones/metals (lapis lazuli, crystal, gold), is said to be at the centre of the earth. Its southern side is characterised by Jambuu plants (rose-apple); and hence this central area is called Jambuu-dviipa. (*dviipa*: land surrounded by water.) To its north there are three continents (*varsha-s*), three to the east, and three to the south. Together with Jambuu, they make up the number ten. Above Sumeru, there is the Dhruva, the north star; they together form the centre of the circular movements of the stars, constellations and planets. Their movements in the enormous, revolving wheel of time is compared to the movements of an ant on a revolving wheel of the potter. (Cf. Bhaagavata V.21) Surrounding the Jambuu-dviipa is the salt-water sea. It is surrounded by seven lands (*Shaaka, Kusha, Kraunch, Shaalmala, Gomedha, Pushkara*), each characterised by a specific plant, intermitted by seven seas (made of cane juice, liquor, ghee, yogart, cream, milk, sweet water), together extending over fifty crores (50x100,000,00, i.e. 500 million) of *yojana-s* (x8 miles, approx.), and giving rise to the popular concept of the earth as constituted of seven divisions (*sapta-diipaa vasumatii*). It is finally surrounded by the mountain *Lokaaloka*, forming the boundary between the world (*loka*) and the non-world (*a-loka*). Every outer sea and land in this scheme is said to be twice the measurement of the inner one. All these figures lead to astronomical calculations.

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