

# A Study on Arūpā Brahma in Theravāda Buddhism

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## Abstract:

While writing this topic of ‘A Study on Arūpā Brahma in Theravāda Buddhism’, about seven articles written on this type of Brahmas, some Samahta papers and Ahidhamma books were reviewed, studied and analyzed. Digha Nikaya Sutta translation (III), Parhtika web was also studied and reviewed. This paper points out that there are very few papers written on this topic and we can only get some kind of knowledge on *Arūpā Brahma* only from “DIALOGUES OF THE BUDDHA” articles and some papers written by our famous Buddhist Sayadaws. However, after reading this paper, one will hope to become believed in that : there are Arūpā Brahma realms in this Universe which we cannot see with our human naked eyes and these Arūpā Brahma realms are unsuitable places for beings to be reborn because these realms are included in the eight untimely, unseasonable intervals for life in a religious order.

## 1. Concept of Brahman in Western Countries

Brahman, connotes the highest Universal Principle, the Ultimate Reality in the universe. In major schools of Hindu Philosophy, it is the material, efficient, formal and final cause of all that exists. It is the pervasive, infinite, eternal truth and bliss which does not change, yet is the cause of all changes<sup>1</sup> (Wikipedia 5-1-2021)

Brahman is a metaphysical concept of Hinduism referring to the ultimate unchanging reality, that states Doniger, is uncreated, eternal, transcendent, the cause, the foundation, the source and the goal of all existence. It is envisioned as either the cause or that which transforms itself into everything that exists in the universe as well as all beings, that which existed before the present universe and time, which exists as current universe and time, and that which will absorb and exist after the present universe and time ends.

The abstract Brahman concept is predominant in the Vedic texts, particularly the Upanishads, while the deity Brahma finds minor mention in the Vedas and the Upanishads, In the Puranic and the Epics literature, deity Brahma appears more often, but inconsistently. Some texts suggest that God Vishnu created Brahma (Vaishnavism), others suggest God Shiva created Brahma (Shaivism), yet others suggest goddess Devi created Brahma (Shaktism), and these texts then go on to state that Brahma is a secondary creator of the world working respectively on their behalf.

Further, the medieval era texts of these major theistic traditions of Hinduism assert that the saguna Brahman is Vishnu, is Shiva, or is Devi respectively. There are different names or aspects of the Brahman, and that the Atman (soul, self) within every living being is same or part of this ultimate, eternal Brahman.

## 2. Concept of Brahman in Buddhism

### (31) Planes of individuals

There are 31 planes of living creatures in our Universe staying mainly on our Earth and its orbit. These include 1 plane of human beings, 4 planes of Misery, 6 planes of god/deity living in abode of celestial beings, 10 planes of Rūpa Brahma, 1 plane of Asaññatta Brahma, 5 planes of Suddhāvāsa Brahma and 4 planes of Arūpā Brahma. Out of these 31 planes, Arūpā Brahma planes is situated at the upper most layer of these living beings, probably in the outer space (or) orbit of our Earth. In some Buddhism books of Visuddhimagga, it was explained that all these 31 planes were located at the different levels of Myintmo mountain, which was invisible to our human eye. Among these 31 planes of existence, we can see only two planes with our naked eye: ie. Human plane and animal plane. The other planes are beyond our eye site, but we can visualize them if we have Jhāna power by practicing samatha meditation.

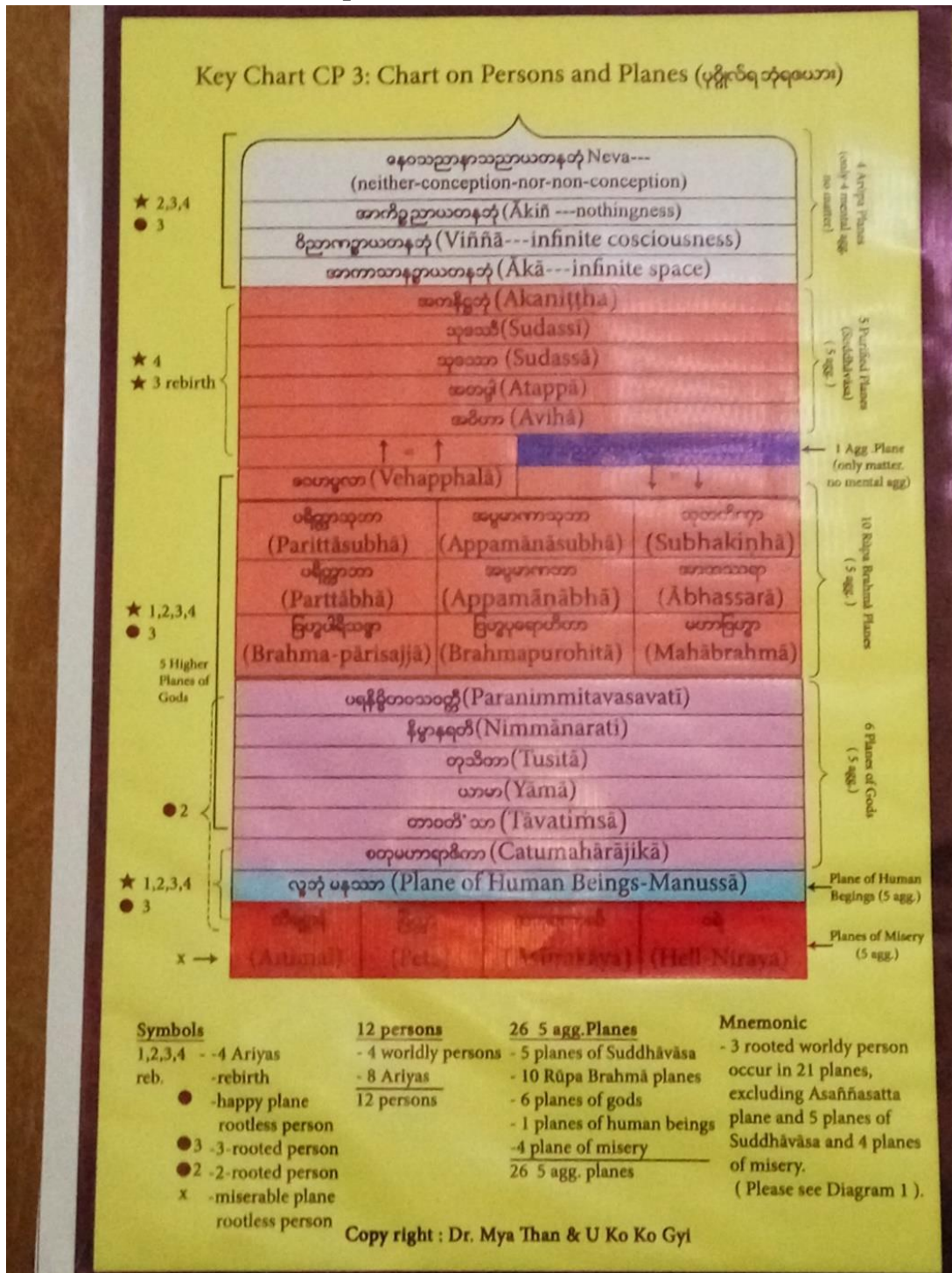
Brahma plane or realm is situated above the six deity planes or Deva realm. These individuals are the ones who practice samatha meditation and gain some Jhāna power in their human life. After they pass away, they become Brahma in these Brahma planes/realm. Brahma, all are male in nature and live in these 20 planes. Those who have first Jhāna power in the past life, they are born as Brahma in the first Jhāna Brahma planes/realms. Those who have second Jhāna power in the past life, they are born as Brahma in the second Jhāna Brahma planes/realms. Those who have third Jhāna power in the past life, they are born as Brahma in the third Jhāna Brahma planes/realms. So, there are 16 Rūpāvacare realms:

The first three are called first Jhāna realms.

- The second three are called second Jhāna realms.
- The third three are called third Jhāna realms.
- Vehapphala, Asañña-satta and the five Suddhāvāsa planes are called the fourth Jhāna realm. Only Rūpa or marble stone like aggregates(bodies) are found in Asañña-satta plane. Vehapphala and Asañña-satta are on the same plane. Five Suddhāvāsa planes are above them and there are also Anāgami individuals and Arahants, born in these realms. The first Suddhāvāsa realm is named Aviha and each Pure Abode is located one above the other.

At the uppermost part of these planes, we can find 4 planes of Arūpā Brahma, who have attained some Arūpā Jhana power in their past life of human existence.

Site / location of Brahma realm in 31 planes



3. Arūpāvacara Realms

In these Arūpāvacara realms/planes, we can find Arūpā Brahmas who are beings, devoid of matter, beings without matter and mind only beings:

- The first one is Ākāsānañcāyatana realm/plane – a plane where the effect of Jhāna that is based on infinite space, exists,

- The second one is Viññāṇañcāyatana realm/plane – a plane where the effect of Jhāna that is based on the first arūpa-viññāṇa, exists.
- The third one is Ākiñcaññāyatana realm/plane - a plane where the effect of Jhāna that is based on the nothingness of the first arūpa-viññāṇa, exists.
- The fourth one is Nevasaññānāsaññāyatana realm/plane – a plane where the effect of Jhāna that is based on the third arūpa-viññāṇa, exists (it is so subtle, as it is with neither – perception – nor – non-perception).

There is no matter, no physical body, only mind, only four aggregates of Citta and Cetasikas arising and disappearing in these four realms. Although there are Citta and Cetasikas in these beings, they need some kind of location and therefore these Arūpāvacara realms have to appear for them. That is why they are situated high above that Suddhāvāsa realm.

#### 4. Individuals and Realms of Brahma

In the first Jhāna Brahma three - Brahmāpārisajja, Brahmāpurohita and Mahābrahmā, no Dvīhetuka and Ahetuka individuals can be found. Only Tīhetuka individuals are born there, so there are nine individuals and nine multiplied by three becomes 27 individuals there.

In the second Jhāna three – ne individuals. Then in Vehapphala, there are also nine individuals. First, second, third Jhāna planes and Vehapphala have the same number of individuals.

In Asañña-satta plane, there is only one individual and that is Sugati Ahetuka. We are finding Ahetuka persons among Brahmās because it is just Rūpa and there are no Hetus. Not only Hetus are absent, but also Cittas and Cetasikas are absent. These individuals fall under Sugati Ahetuka because they are Sugati and there are no Hetus. Therefore, they are called Sugati Ahetuka. This one kind of Brahma is called Ahetuka person.

Then, in the Suddhāvāsa five realms, only three individuals can be found there. They are Anāgāmī-phalaṭṭha, Arahatta-maggaṭṭha and Arahatta-phalaṭṭha. There is no Anāgāmī-maggaṭṭha because one must first become an Anāgāmī to be reborn there. If one has already become an Anāgāmī and pass away, he will be reborn in Suddhāvāsa realm and will change to an Arahatta by practicing meditation there. At the moment of Arahatta Magga, he is an Arahatta-maggaṭṭha person and from the moment of his first Arahatta Phala, he is an Arahatta-phalaṭṭha person. He is an Arahatta since then. So when we say, there can be three individuals in Suddhāvāsa realm, we do not mean they can be reborn because an Arahatta is not reborn anywhere.

In the four Arūpāvacara realms, there are no Duggati Ahetukas, no Sugati Ahetukas, no Dvīhetukas and only Tīhetukas are born here. But one is missing – Sotāpatti magga. There can be no Sotāpatti-maggaṭṭha in Arūpāvacara realm. This is because, as he has on Rūpa, he has no eyes, no ears and no sense organs when he is born there. He must hear some instruction from a Buddha or from a dhamma teacher, so that he can practice meditation to become enlightened. After becoming a Sotāpanna, he can be born there and attain the higher stages of enlightenment. There is no Sotāpatti magga at that realm, so there are

seven Noble Persons and one Tihetuka Puthujjana – there are altogether eight persons; eight multiplied by four is 32 persons.

Actually, we multiply the individuals that can be in the same realms by the number of realms. Not all twelve individuals can be in any one of these states and any one of these realms. The highest number is eleven in the human realm and in the Cātummahārājikā realm. In those realms, there can be eleven individuals but in others, there are ten (or) nine (or) one (or), some three and some eight etc.

## 5. Factors leading to Arūpā Brahmas

For human beings, who want to be borne as Arūpā Brahmas in Arūpā realms/ planes have to practice Samahta to attain Arūpā Jhānas. There are four Arūpā Jhānas namely – Ākāsānañcāyatana Jhāna, Viññānañcāyatana Jhāna, Ākiñcaññāyatana Jhāna and Nevasaññānāsaññāyatana Jhāna.

### 5.1 Ākāsānañcāyatana Jhāna

In order to practice Arūpā Jhānas, the yogi must first enter upon the fourth Rūpāvacara Jhāna in any one of the nine kasiṇas beginning with the earth kasiṇa and omitting the limited-space kasiṇa, that is, ākāsa kasiṇa.

Now, although the yogi has already surmounted gross physical matter by means of the fourth Jhāna of the fine-material sphere, nevertheless he still wants also to surmount the kasiṇa materiality, that is, the counter sign of kasiṇa, since it is the counterpart of the gross physical matter of kasiṇa.

So, when the yogi has become disgusted with the kasiṇa materiality and wants to get away from it, he must achieve mastery in five ways with respect to the fourth Rūpāvacara Jhāna.

Then, on emerging from the now familiar fourth Jhāna, the yogi sees the danger in it in this way: “This Jhāna has as its object the materiality with which I have become disgusted, and it has bliss (somanassa) as its near enemy. This Jhāna is grosser than Arūpāvacara Jhāna which is known as peaceful liberation”.

When the yogi sees the disadvantages in the fourth Rūpāvacara Jhāna as described earlier, he cuts of his attachment to it. He gives his attention to the sphere of infinite space as calm and infinite. He extends the counter sign to the limits of the world-system as much as he desires, and removes the sign by giving his attention to the space touched by the counter sign as “space, space, infinite space”.

When the yogi is removing the counter sign, he neither folds it up like a mat nor withdraws it like a cake from a tin. It is simply that he does not advert his mind to it or give attention to it or review it, but gives his attention exclusively to the space touched by the sign as “space, space, infinite space”. This is conceptualized as the mere space left by the removal of the kasiṇa nimitta. When his mind attachment to the counter sign disappears, the nimitta also disappears unfolding infinite space.

The yogi adverts again and again to the sign of space left by the removal of the kasiṇa nimitta as “space, space” and strikes it with applied thought and special thought. As he strives so again and again, the hindrances are suppressed, mindfulness is established, and his mind becomes concentrated in access.

The yogi cultivates that sign of space again and again, develops and repeatedly practices it. As he again and again adverts to it and gives attention to it in this way, Ākāsānañcāyatana kusala citta (kiriya citta for Arahants) arises in absorption with the infinite space as its object.

## 5.2 Viññāṇañcāyatana Jhāna

If the yogi wants to develop the second arūpāvacara kusala citta called Viññāṇañcāyatana kusala Jhāna, he must achieve mastery in five ways with respect to Ākāsānañcāyatana kusala Jhāna. Then he should see the danger in this Jhāna thus: “This Ākāsānañcāyatana Jhāna attainment has rūpāvacara Jhāna as its near enemy and it is not as peaceful as Viññāṇañcāyatana Jhāna”.

So, the yogi cuts off his attachment to Ākāsānañcāyatana Jhāna and gives his attention to Viññāṇañcāyatana Jhāna as peaceful. He then adverts again and again to the consciousness (Ākāsānañcāyatana kusala citta) that occurred pervading the infinite space as its object. He gives his attention to it and reflects upon it as “viññāṇañ, viññāṇañ” or “consciousness, consciousness”. He should strike at it repeatedly with applied thought, sustained thought and special thought. He should not, however, give attention as ‘anantaṃ, anantaṃ’ or ‘infinite, infinite’.

As he directs his mind again and again onto that sign of Ākāsānañcāyatana kusala citta in this way, the hindrances are suppressed, mindfulness is established and his mind becomes concentrated in access.

He cultivates that sign of viññāṇa again and again, develops it and repeatedly practices it. As he again and again adverts to it and gives attention to it in this way, Viññāṇañcāyatana kusala citta arises in absorption with the past consciousness that pervaded the space as its object.

## 5.3 Ākiñcaññāyatana Jhāna

If the yogi wants to develop the third arūpāvacara kusala citta called Ākiñcaññāyatana kusala Jhāna, he must first achieve mastery in five ways with respect to Viññāṇañcāyatana kusala Jhāna. He should next see the danger in this Jhāna thus: “This Viññāṇañcāyatana Jhāna attainment has Ākāsānañcāyatana Jhāna as its near enemy and it is not as peaceful as Ākiñcaññāyatana Jhāna”.

Having seen the fault thus, he cuts off his attachment to Viññāṇañcāyatana Jhāna and gives his attention to Ākiñcaññāyatana Jhāna. Without giving attention to past consciousness (Ākāsānañcāyatana kusala citta), he should now advert again and again to ‘nothingness’ in this way: “There is nothing, there is nothing” or “void, void” or “secluded, secluded”. The yogi attends to it, reflects on it and strikes it with applied thought and special thought.

As he directs his mind to that sign thus, the hindrances are suppressed, mindfulness is established, and his mind becomes concentrated in access. The yogi cultivates that sign of ‘nothingness’ again and again, develops it, and repeatedly practices it. As he does so, Ākiñcaññāyatana kusala citta arises in absorption, making its object the void, secluded, non-existent state of Ākāsānañcāyatana kusala citta which occurred in pervading infinite space.

#### 5.4 Nevasaññānāsaññāyatana Jhāna

If the yogi wants to develop the fourth arūpāvacara kusala citta called Nevasaññānāsaññāyatana kusala Jhāna, he must first achieve mastery in five ways with respect to Ākiñcaññāyatana kusala Jhāna. He should next see the danger in this Jhāna thus: “This Ākiñcaññāyatana Jhāna attainment has Viññāṇañcāyatana Jhāna as its near enemy and it is not as peaceful as Nevasaññānāsaññāyatana Jhāna”.

Having seen the fault thus, he cuts off his attachment to Ākiñcaññāyatana Jhāna and gives his attention to Nevasaññānāsaññāyatana Jhāna. He should advert again and again to the attainment of Ākiñcaññāyatana Jhāna that has occurred making the perception of ‘nothingness’ as its object, adverting to it as “peaceful, peaceful”. He should give his attention to it, reflect on it, and strike it with the applied thought and special thought.

As he directs his mind again and again to that sign of the past Ākiñcaññāyatana kusala citta in this way, the hindrances are suppressed, mindfulness is established, and his mind becomes concentrated in access. The yogi cultivates that sign again and again, develops it, and repeatedly practices it. As he does so, Nevasaññānāsaññāyatana kusala citta arises in absorption, making its object the four mental aggregates of Ākiñcaññāyatana kusala Jhāna. He practices on to achieve mastery in five ways with respect to this Nevasaññānāsaññāyatana kusala Jhāna.

The fourth immaterial attainment has reached a state of extreme subtlety. The word meaning here is this: that Jhāna with its associated states neither has perception nor has no perception because of the absence of gross perception and presence of subtle perception, thus it is “neither-perception-nor-non-perception (Nevasaññānāsaññām)”.

#### 6. Life Span of Rūpā Brahmas

There is no fixed life span for Niraya, animal kingdom, Petas and also for human beings because human beings’ life span is changing from thousands and thousands of years (or) they may live for only ten years. The lowest life span of humans is ten years and the longest life span is incalculable. That means that human beings may live for thousands of years. The present human life span is now to be one hundred years more or less. For four woeful states and human beings there is no age limit. We cannot say that the life span of human being is just this or that, because it varies with time condition of human mindset and their behavior.

From Cātummahārājikā onwards, there is a fixed life span. The life span in Devas is measured in celestial years or human years. The life span for Brahma is measured in Kappa. It is a Pāli word which means one Kappa is one world cycle. World means duration.

For the Brahmāparisajja the life span is 1/3 Kappa. For Brahmāpurohita the life span is 1/2 Kappa. For Mahābrahmā the life span is one Kappa, one world cycle.

Then for Parittābhā Brahma, it is two Kappas, for Appamāṇābhā the life span is four Kappas and for Ābhassara it is eight Kappas, so it is twice as much for the higher realm as it is for the lower one.

For Parittasubha the life span is sixteen Kappas, for Appamāṇasubha it is 32 Kappas and for Subhakiṇḥa it is 64 Kappas. But for Vehapphala and also for Asañña-satta the life span is 500 Kappas.

Then, for Aviha, the first of the Suddhāvāsa realm, the life span is 1000 Kappas, Atappā – 2000 Kappas, Sudassā – 4000 Kappas, Sudassī – 8000 Kappas, Akaniṭṭha -16,000 Kappas (world cycles). The above mentioned are the life span of Rūpā Brahmas.

## 7. Life Span of Arūpā Brahmas

For Ākāsañācāyatana Brahmas, the life span is 20,000 Kappas, for Viññāṇañcāyatana Brahmas, the life span is 40,000 Kappas, for Ākiñcaññāyatana, it is 60,000 Kappas and for Nevasaññānāsaññāyatana, it is 84,000 Kappas, so if we are reborn there, we will not get out of Saṃsāra for a long, long time due to its world cycle life spans.

Although the word ‘Kappa’ is used with regard to all of the time periods, it does not always mean the same amount of time. Actually there are three kinds of Kappa – Maha Kappa, Asaṅkheyya Kappa and Antara Kappa. In order to understand this, we have to understand how the world is destroyed and how the world comes to destruction.

The world comes to destruction by three causes:

- By fire
- By water
- By wind

When the world is destroyed by fire, it destroys everything up to and including the first three – first Jhāna realms. When the world is destroyed by water, an additional three – second Jhāna realms are destroyed. When the world is destroyed by wind or air, an additional three – third Jhāna realms are destroyed.

Now let us consider how the world come to destruction. There are four periods in the life of one world.

- Disintegrating period
- Destroyed period
- Evolving period
- Static period

Let’s say the world comes to destruction. For a long time the world is being destroyed. It does not become destroyed in just one day or one month. Then after that it stays in that condition of destruction for another period of time. Then, a new world comes to be formed. That formation period is also one period of many, many years. The last period is when beings arise. So, these are the four periods of life in one world cycle.

It is said that when the world is destroyed by fire, up through the first three Brahma realms are destroyed. That means, these three Brahma realms do not last for one whole Kappa. There are four



segments in one whole Kappa. After the end of one segment, the world is destroyed. So, the first three Brahma realms do not last for the whole Kappa and for the whole segment. Kappas for Brahmāpārisajja and so on cannot be the same as the **Mahā Kappa**. There are smaller or shorter Kappas. The short Kappas are called **Asaṅkheyya Kappa**, incalculable Kappas, incalculable world cycles.

The third Kappa is called **Antara Kappa** which means **Interim Kappa**. To explain this, let's say, human beings live for ten years. Then, from ten years, the life span will increase until it reaches – incalculable years. From there, it comes down again to ten years. That period from ten years to an almost infinite amount of years and then the regression back to ten years for human life span is called Antara Kappa. One up and down period is called Antara Kappa. That may be a very long time. 64 of these Antara Kappas make one Asaṅkheyya Kappa, one incalculable Kappa. Then, four incalculable Kappas make one Mahā Kappa.

Now the world is destroyed and formed again during the period of an Asaṅkheyya Kappa. So the first three Brahma realms do not last, cannot last for the whole Mahā Kappa.

The life span of Brahmāpārisajja is  $\frac{1}{3}$  Asaṅkheyya Kappa,  $\frac{1}{3}$  incalculable Kappa. The life span of Brahmāpurohita is  $\frac{1}{2}$  of an incalculable Kappa. The life span of Mahābrahmā is one incalculable Kappa. With Parittābhā Brahma, they can exit for the whole Mahā Kappa. From the fourth Brahma realm and above that realm, the lives of beings are measured in Mahā Kappas.

When the world is destroyed by fire, it includes these three Brahma realms, so they cannot last for the whole duration of a Mahā Kappa. For the first three Brahma realms, Kappa means Asaṅkheyya Kappa. For the Parittābhā Brahma realm and up through Nevasaṅṅānāsaṅṅāyatana realm, Kappa means Mahā Kappa.

It is said that the world is destroyed by fire for seven times. Then the world is destroyed by water. Then it is destroyed by fire for another seven times and the 16<sup>th</sup> time by water and so on. When it reaches the 64<sup>th</sup> time, it is destroyed by air.

After destroyed period, then comes the third evolving period and the fourth static period, when the world exists as formed. It is the only period when beings can be in this world. During the period of destruction, all beings die and are reborn in some other Brahma realms which are not affected by the destruction. During that time there are no beings. When the world is destroyed, there are no beings. When the world is forming, there are no beings. So for only one quarter of one Mahā Kappa, it is a time for beings to arise or exist.

## 8. Paṭisandhi of Arūpā Brahmas

It is called Rebirth- linking in the Immaterial Sphere, Arūpāvacare Paṭisandhi. This Paṭisandhi is very easy. They are classified according to their realms/planes respectively. There are four Arūpāvacare Vipāka Cittas:

- Ākāsaṅcāyatana Vipāka Citta,

- Viññāṇañcāyatana Vipāka Citta,
- Ākiñcaññāyatana Vipāka Citta,
- Nevasaññānāsaññāyatana Vipāka Citta.

For those who are reborn in Ākāsānañcāyatana realm, which is Arūpāvacare realm, Ākāsānañcāyatana Vipāka serves as Paṭisandhi Citta and then Bhavaṅga and also Cuti. For those who are reborn in the second Arūpāvacare realm, second Arūpāvacare Vipāka Citta serves as Paṭisandhi, Bhavaṅga and Cuti. For those who are reborn in the third Arūpāvacare realm, third Arūpāvacare Vipāka Citta serves as Paṭisandhi, Bhavaṅga and Cuti. The fourth arūpa vipāka is the paṭisandhi of those who are born in the Nevasaññānāsaññāyatana realm/plane.

That means a person who gets Arūpāvacare Jhāna as a human being or as a Deva, so when he is reborn, he is reborn in one of the four Arūpāvacare realms. When he is reborn there, the Arūpāvacare Vipāka arises due to the Jhāna he attained in the previous life.

The same is true, when a person gets first, second, third, fourth or fifth Jhāna as a human being, as a Deva or as a Brahma, he will be born in the world of Brahmas according to the highest Jhāna he attained. If a person gets first Arūpāvacare Jhāna here, then after his death he will be reborn in the first Arūpāvacare realm. Then their life spans may be 20,000 world cycles, 40,000 world cycles, 60,000 world cycles, 84,000 world cycles.

In a given life Paṭisandhi, Bhavaṅga and Cuti are the same. They have the same or identical object. Paṭisandhi Cittas take Kamma or Kamma-nimitta(sign of Kamma), or Gati-nimitta(sign of destiny) as object, If the object of Paṭisandhi Citta is Kamma all throughout life, the object of Bhavaṅga Citta will be Kamma and the object of Cuti Citta will also be Kamma. The same is true if the Paṭisandhi takes Kamma-nimitta, or Gati-nimitta as object. Similarly, the Bhavaṅga and Cuti Cittas will take Kamma-nimitta, or Gati-nimitta.

The types of rebirths are 10 for Kāmāvacara, 6 for Rūpāvacara and 4 for Arūpāvacara, so they are altogether twenty.

## 9. Conclusion

Arūpā Brahmas, who are beings, devoid of matter, beings without matter and mind only beings. There is no matter, no physical body, only mind, only four aggregates of Citta and Cetasikas arising and disappearing in these four Arūpā Brahma realms. No one can see these Arūpā Brahmas except for those individuals who have some Jhāna power such as *Dibba-cakkhu*, the divine eye.

These Arūpā Brahma realms are unsuitable places for beings to be reborn in this world because these realms are included in the eight untimely, unseasonable intervals for life in a religious order.

Thus, the meditators (Yogis) should practice Samahta only up to the fourth level to attain fourth Rūpā Jhānas so as to prevent to be reborn in these four Arūpā Brahma realms. But, for the Anāgāmī – Non returner individuals and Arahants, who want to attain Nirodha – samāpatti (or) ‘Mental cessation’ should

practice these four Arūpā Jhānas because, without these Jhāna powers, they cannot do the procedure for the attainment of Mental cessation.

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