

Water is the First Covering of the Universal Shell, Not Earth

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The following paper on the order of the seven layers of the universe is a somewhat minor point in comparison to the more fundamental errors that continue to be perpetrated in regards to Vedic Cosmology; however, it does serve to illustrate the sometimes unthinking nature that characterizes ISKCON's presentation of the Vedic cosmos as it is described in the Puranas. In all of the diagrams of the Vedic universe that I have seen so far, the layers of the universe are depicted as beginning with the element earth; however the *Srimad Bhagavatam* itself along with all of the other Puranas concur that the first layer surrounding the universe is water, not earth; indeed the earth element is not even included in the list of the seven surrounding layers. First, let's look at what the *Srimad Bhagavatam* itself says about the coverings of the universe:

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"This universal egg, or the universe in the shape of an egg, is called the manifestation of material energy. Its layers of water, air, fire, sky, ego and mahat-tattva increase in thickness one after another. Each layer is ten times bigger than the previous one, and the final outside layer is covered by pradhana. Within this egg is the universal form of Lord Hari, of whose body the fourteen planetary systems are parts." (SB 3.26.52)

Here the *Srimad Bhagavatam* describes that the elements surrounding the universe begin with water: *toya-adibhih*—by water and so on. *Toya* is one of the many Sanskrit names for water and is used through-out *Srimad Bhagavatam*. In the purport Srila Prabhupada goes on to describe water as the first element that surrounds the shell of the universe.

"This universe, or the universal sky which we can visualize with its innumerable planets, is shaped just like an egg. As an egg is covered by a shell, the universe is also covered by various layers. The first layer is water, the next is fire, then air, then sky, and the ultimate holding crust is pradhana. Within this egg-like universe is the universal form of the Lord as the virat-purusha... The dimensions of the universe are estimated here. **The outer covering is made of layers of water, air, fire, sky, ego, and mahat-tattva, and each layer is ten times greater than the one previous.** The space within the hollow of the universe cannot be measured by any human scientist or anyone else, and beyond the hollow there are seven coverings, each one ten times greater than the one preceding it. The layer of water is ten times greater than the diameter of the universe, and the layer of fire is ten times greater than that of water. Similarly, the layer of air is ten times greater than that of fire. These dimensions are all inconceivable to the tiny brain of a human being.

It is also stated that this description is of only one egg-like universe. There are innumerable universes besides this one, and some of them are many, many times greater." (*Purport SB 3.26.52*)

The Vedic universe is shaped like a completely round egg and has a diameter of *pancasat koti yojana* (4 billion miles). As described, the first covering that completely surrounds or encircles the universe is composed of water and this covering of water is 10 times the size of the universe itself. Thus the layer of water is 4 billion x 10 or 40 billion miles. The next layer of fire is 10 times the size of the preceding water element which would be 40 billion x ten or 400 billion miles. In this way, each layer surrounding the universe is ten times the size of the previous layer. The combined extent of all seven coverings is practically unfathomable.

In another purport Srila Prabhupada again states that water is the first layer or covering surrounding the universe:

"The gigantic universal form of the Personality of Godhead, within the body of the universal shell, which is covered by sevenfold material elements, is the subject for the *virat* conception. (SB 3.11.41)

Purport: Materialistic men can think, although very imperfectly, of the huge universal space, comprehending an innumerable number of planets as big as the sun. They can see only the circular sky overhead, without any information that this universe, as well as many other hundreds of thousands of universes, **are each covered by sevenfold material coverings of water, fire, air, sky, ego, noumenon, and material nature**, just like a huge football, pumped and covered, floating on the water of the Causal Ocean, wherein the Lord is lying as Maha-Vishnu."

The confusion regarding the list and order of the seven universal coverings may arise from the fact that throughout his purports, conversations, and lectures, Srila Prabhupada sometimes included earth as one of the seven layers of the universe. For example, in the following purport, Srila Prabhupada states that earth is the first covering of the universe:

"The layers or elements covering the universes are each ten times thicker than the one before, and all the universes clustered together appear like atoms in a huge combination. (SB 3.11.41)

PURPORT

The coverings of the universes are also constituted of the elements of earth, water, fire, air and ether, and each is ten times thicker than the one before. The first covering of the universe is earth, and it is ten times thicker than the universe itself. If the universe is four billion miles in size, then the size of the earthly covering of the universe is four billion times ten. The covering of water is ten times greater than the earthly covering, the covering of fire is ten times greater than the watery covering, the covering of air is ten times greater than that of the fire, the covering of ether is ten times greater still than that of air, and so on. The universe within the coverings of matter appears to be like an atom in comparison to the coverings, and the number of universes is unknown even to those who can estimate the coverings of the universes."

In the purport to SB 3.29.43, Srila Prabhupada makes the same statement that the 'first layer is of earth'. Likewise, in various conversations and lectures Srila Prabhupada generally includes earth as one of the layers surrounding the universe, (though in these various discussions, Srila Prabhupada does not refer to any particular verse that specifies the list of elements, or their order). To cite Srila Prabhupada's statements as a source of

authority is certainly the credible thing to do; but simply repeating certain statements without checking them with the *shastra* itself (as in SB 3.26.52), is to ignore Srila Prabhupada's own repeated instructions for his disciples and followers to 'study the details' of the fifth canto and make a working model of the universe:

""So now you all Ph.D.'s must carefully study the details of the 5th Canto and make a working model of the universe. If we can explain the passing seasons, eclipses, phases of the moon, passing of day and night, etc. then it will be very powerful propaganda. I am sending this letter to you, and you can make photocopies of it and send to our other Ph.D.'s and **begin serious research into the matter in detail.**" (*Auckland, 27 April, 1976*)

"Prem Yogi [Bhakti-prema dasa] showed Srila Prabhupada some illustrations from the Srimad-Bhagavatam, Fifth Canto, and explained them briefly. Prabhupada was impressed with his proper understanding. Prabhupada showed him the Mayapur model and explained what we intended to do there. Srila Prabhupada then expressed his concern: **"We must exactly follow the description of Bhagavatam.** As we are going to spend many crores of rupees, and there will be those who will try to find fault in our presentation, 'Caesar's wife must be above suspicion.' I have explained *whatever I could* already in my books. Now my brain is no longer able to work properly. **You young men can tax your brains to understand the Sanskrit and English descriptions and present them.**" (*Tamal Krishna dasa's Diary: Prabhupada's Final Days, May 30 1977*)

Let me repeat that last statement again: 'you young men can tax your brains to understand the Sanskrit and English descriptions'.

As we have seen, *Srimad Bhagavatam* beings the list with water, not earth: *toya-adibhih—* by water and so on (SB 3.26.52). The other Puranas all concur that water is the first of seven layers surrounding the universe, moreover, none of the Puranas actually included earth as one of the seven layers. The earth element appears to be represented by the universe itself which is then surrounded by seven layers of water, fire, air, ether, etc. The specific point about the universe being surrounded by a layer of earth is thus a detail that can be easily rectified by reference to the other Puranas. That the universe is surrounded by a layer of water, not a layer of Earth is confirmed in every Purana:

"The cosmic egg is externally enveloped by water ten times its magnitude. The water is externally enveloped by fire ten times its mass. The fire is externally enveloped by air ten times its mass. The air is externally enveloped by the ether ten times its magnitude. The ether is enveloped by ego the cause of sound. The ego is enveloped by intellect and intellect is enveloped by Pradhana. They say that the coverings of the cosmic egg are seven. There within is Brahma seated on the lotus. There are crores and crores of such eggs. (*Linga Purana, chapter 3.30-33*)

Again:

"The cosmic egg is enveloped externally by waters ten times its size. The waters are externally surrounded by fire ten times their size. Fire is externally enveloped by air ten times its size. The air is surrounded externally by ether ten times its size. The air is enveloped by the ether. The ether is en-circled by the cosmic Ego. The Ego is surrounded by Mahat (intellect) and Mahat (intellect) is surrounded by the unmanifest. The cosmic egg is thus surrounded by the seven coverings created by Prakrti. (*Vayu Purana, chapter 4, verse 75-77*)

Again:

"Dear Maitreya, I have narrated to you these seven lokas and also the seven nether worlds. This is the expanse of the Brahmanda. These fourteen worlds are enclosed by the shell of Brahmanda as the seeds of a kapittha fruit are enclosed by its shell. **This Brahmanda is encircled by a sheet of water which is ten times thicker than the shell of the Brahmanda.** This entire sheet of water is encircled by fire from outside. The fire is encircled by the wind, the wind by the sky, the sky by ahankara-tattva, and ahankara-tattva by mahat-tattva. These enclosures starting from that of water is ten times in thickness of each of the immediately enclosed. Mahat-tattva is enclosed by pradhana also called prakati. Prakati is infinite—thus there is no end to this as there is no number for the infinite. Prakati is the material cause for tens of millions of Brahmandas like this. It is the primordial cause." (*Vishnu Purana, Book 2, chapter seven, 20-26*)

Again:

"O brahmins, these seven upper worlds have been mentioned by me to you as also the seven nether worlds. This is the detailed description of the cosmic egg. This is enveloped by the cauldron of the egg (Andakatha) all around, at the sides and below like the seeds of an apple fruit. **The egg is enveloped by water ten times its size.** The encircling volume of water is enveloped by fire. O brahmins, the fire is enveloped by wind; and the wind is enveloped by ether. O excellent sages the ether is enveloped by mahat. These seven are such that the outer one is ten times the size of the inner one. The Pradhana stands enveloping the Mahat. It is infinite and endless. It has no reckoning since it cannot be measured by any unit, nor calculated by any figure. O brahmins it is the cause of the entire creation. It is the great Prakrti. There are thousands and thousands of such cosmic eggs. There are eggs like these, crores and hundreds of crores. (*Brahma Purana, 21.21-30*)

So if the universe is not surrounded by a layer of earth, why did Srila Prabhupada sometimes include the earth element as one of the seven coverings? A possible explanation is that Srila Prabhupada was so accustomed to citing the *Bhagavad-gita's* list of eight material elements (that begins with earth), he may have simply included earth as a matter of course when discussing the seven material coverings of the universe:

"Earth, water, fire, air, ether, mind, intelligence and false ego—all together these eight constitute My separated material energies." (*Bg 7.4*)

In the above statement Sri Krishna lists the five gross and three subtle elements that make up material nature; however, in the case of the seven material elements that surround the universe, the universe itself appears to be representative of the earth element which is then surrounded by a layer of water, and by successive layers of fire, air, ether, etc. Despite sometimes mentioning earth as the first covering of the universe, Srila Prabhupada would certainly wish us to follow the authority of the shastra in this regard. May we please request devotees to cease producing diagrams or giving discourses that repeat the erroneous idea that the first covering of the universe is a layer of earth when all the Puranas including *Srimad Bhagavatam* clearly describe the universe as being surrounded by a layer of water. The point may seem trivial, but I mention it as an example of how devotees sometimes unthinkingly repeat information without checking the facts of the matter. As followers of Srila Prabhupada let us follow his instruction to carefully study the details of the fifth canto and make a proper working model of the universe.

Janardana: I never see anywhere where it is mentioned that there's an earth covering. It's always water as the first. Water is the first layer that's given. So there are four of the elements.

Prabhupada: Then above water there is air.
(*Room Conversation, October 27, 1968, Montreal*)

SRILA PRABHUPADA'S PREACHING POINTS REGARDING THE SEVEN LAYERS SURROUNDING THE UNIVERSE

When discussing the seven coverings of the universe, Srila Prabhupada makes a number of preaching points: the first is that the universe has a definite form, taking the shape of a round *anda* (egg) which is encompassed by seven coverings each ten times bigger than the previous; secondly that the scientists don't know the nature of the universe; and thirdly that conditioned souls are incapable of penetrating through the unfathomable expanse of the coverings of the universe in order to come to the spiritual world. The process for penetrating the coverings of the universe is by bhakti-yoga, not by attempting to travel in some tin-can space ship:

"There are so many things to be learned. This universe we see just like a ball, and this ball is covered by layers of water, fire, air, earth, like that. Circling. And each layer is ten times bigger than the previous layer. In this way the universe is covered. And beyond that covering, there is another sky. We are prisoned here within this universe. We are thinking that we are very free to move in the sky with, what is called, sputniks. But you cannot go beyond your limitation. That is not possible." (*Lecture on Srimad Bhagavatam 1.1.1, London, August 6 1971*)

Again:

Prabhupada: Krishna went outside this universe, penetrating the sky. And Arjuna also accompanied Him. So it is Krishna's power, He took His friend also. For ordinary human being it is not possible. But because Krishna said that "All right, I'll take you." So He took him. This covering, universal covering, there are seven layers: earth, water, fire, air...Each layer is ten times bigger than the one layer. Then you go to the spiritual world.

Svarupa Damodara: Ten times bigger than each layer, it increases?

Prabhupada: That one layer, the other layer is ten times bigger than the first layer, and the third are ten times bigger than that, ten times. In this way the whole universe is covered. What your scientists know? (laughs)
(*Morning Walk, May 9 1973, Los Angeles*)

Again:

"This universe is covered by seven layers: earth, water, fire, air, like that. When we shall be going to the spiritual sky, we have to pass through the seven layers. And each layer is ten times bigger than the first. Suppose we pass the air layer; the next layer, the fire, is ten times bigger. Then water, ten times. In this way, we have to pass through. We are so much tightly packed up. It is not so easy that I take a sputnik and go anywhere. No. That requires sadhana-bhajana, practice, how to give up this engagement of seven layers and then completely pure spirit soul, you enter into the spiritual sky." (*Lecture on Srimad Bhagavatam 2.4.1, Los Angeles, June 24, 1972*)

WATER ABOVE AND BELOW THE EARTH

The Puranas describe Earth (Bhu-mandala) as a great circular disc that is situated above the waters of the Garbhodaka Ocean; and since water is the first covering that completely

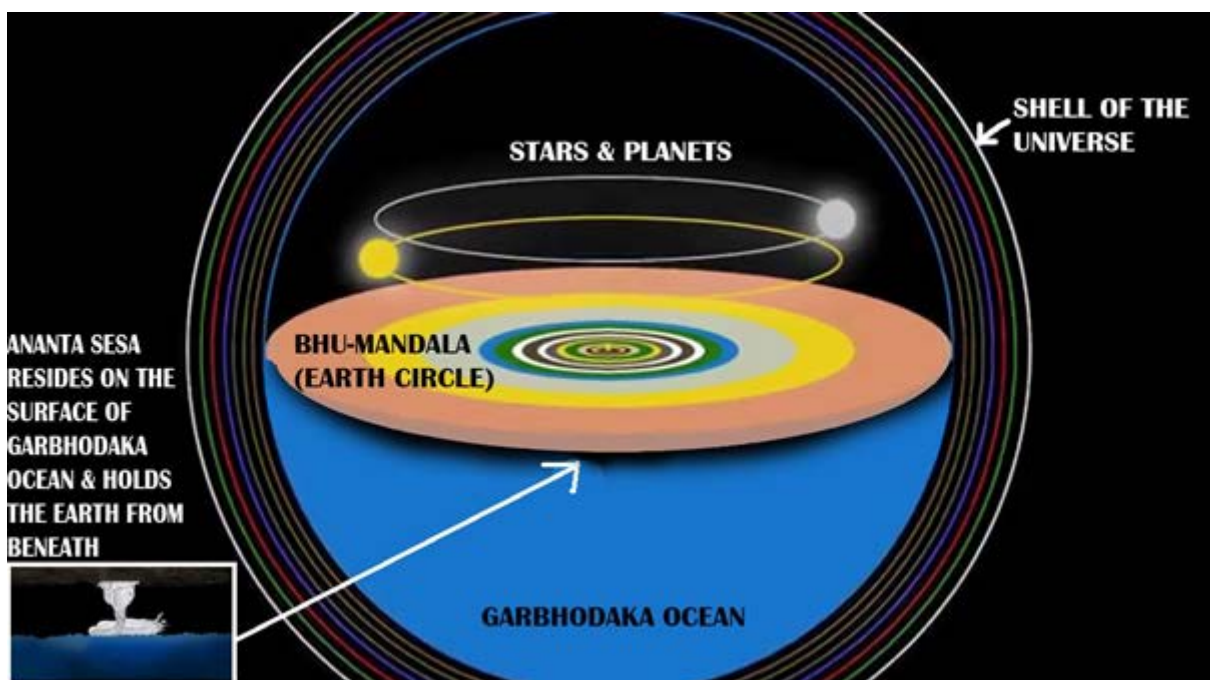
surrounds the universe, we can say that there is water both above and below the Earth. Beyond even the coverings of the universe there is even more water situated in the spiritual realm. The verse below describes water pouring in from the hole created by Vamanadeva at the top of the universe:

"Sukadeva Gosvami said: My dear King, Lord Vishnu, the enjoyer of all sacrifices, appeared as Vamanadeva in the sacrificial arena of Bali Maharaja. Then He extended His left foot to the end of the universe and pierced a hole in its covering with the nail of His big toe. Through the hole, the pure water of the Causal Ocean entered this universe as the Ganges River" (SB 5.17.1)."

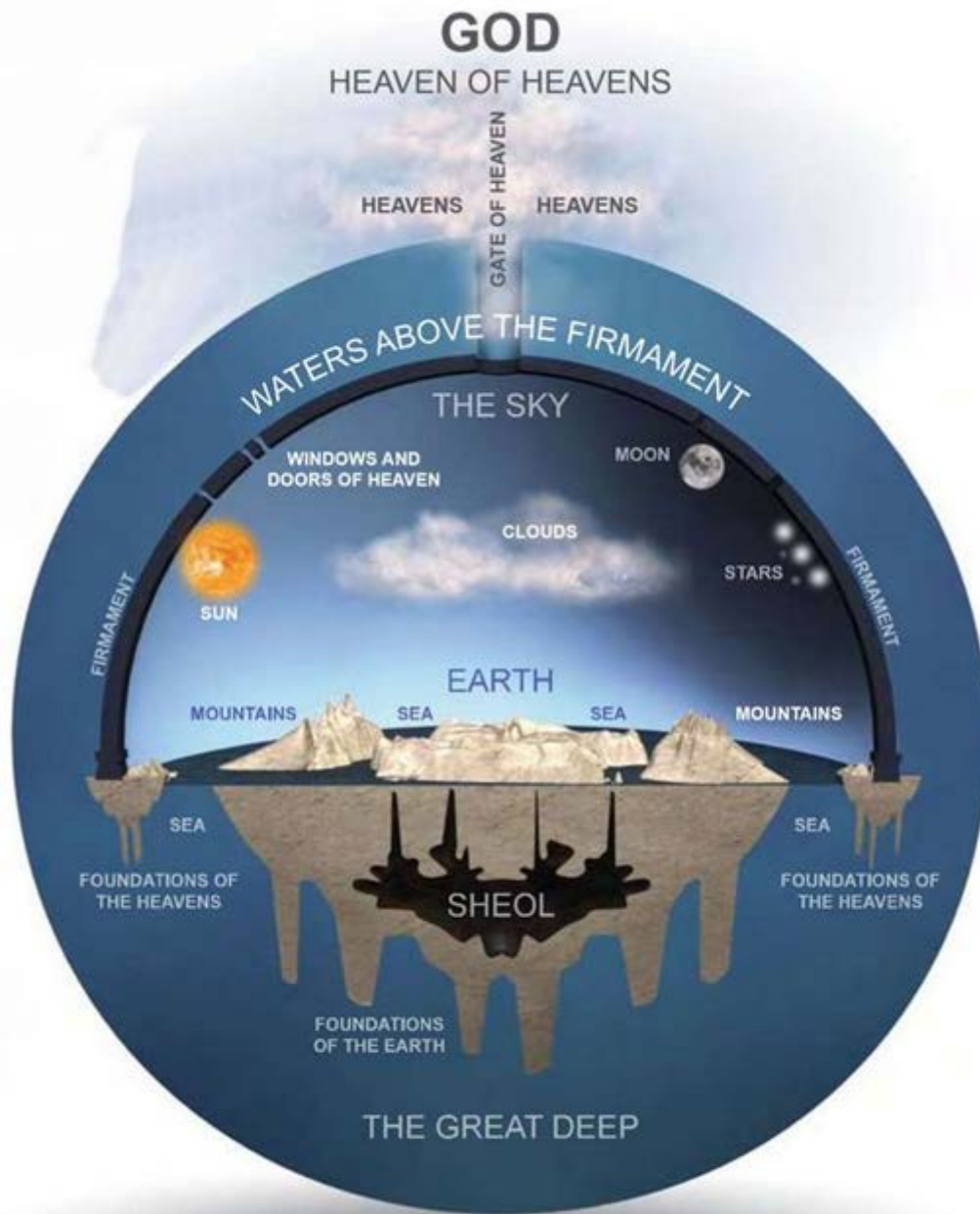
We can quickly note here the similarity with the Biblical conception of Earth which states that water is both above and below the Earth:

"In the beginning God created the heavens and the Earth. Now the Earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the spirit of God was hovering over the waters...Then God said, "Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters and let it divide the waters from the waters." Thus God made the firmament, and divided the waters which were under from the waters which were above the firmament and it was so. And God called the firmament heaven." (Genesis 1.1-7)

Taking the firmament here to mean the shell of the universe we can see the similarities in the two models of creation. The image below shows the Vedic egg-shaped universe surrounded with seven layers beginning with water. The colossal Earth circle stretches across the center of the universe and is situated above the waters of the Garbhodaka Ocean which fills the bottom half of the universe:



By comparison we can see the image below of the Biblical Earth which shows waters both above and below the Earth:



In the above image we can see the Biblical Earth concept which is situated on pillars above the great deep of waters. Notice that the Earth unlike the other planets (which move and float in the sky) is supported by pillars and thus stationary.

"For the pillars of the Earth are the Lord's and He has set the world upon them." (1 Samuel 2.8)

[In the Vedas we read that Ananta-sesha acts as the pillar or support of the great Earth].

The Biblical underground realms of the Earth are known as Sheol. Though the Bible generally associates these realms with gloom and suffering, the *Srimad Bhagavatam* explains that the vast underground realms of the Earth contain hells as well as underground heavens (*bila-svarga*). These underground realms are hundreds of thousands of miles deep. The underground heavens (*bila-svarga*) are described in chapter 24 of the fifth canto of *Srimad Bhagavatam*, and the hellish realms (*naraka*) are described in chapter 26 of the same canto. In any case, both the Puranas and the Bible speak of inhabited underground realms. The *bila-svarga* are situated within the core of the Bhu-mandala and are not separate planets floating in space (as may be inferred from Srila Prabhupada's naming of them as 'subterranean heavenly planets'). We have described the situation of the *bila-svarga* in a paper called [What's Below the Earth?](#)