

In the context of Buddhist cosmology described in the *Abhidharmakośa*, the "Black Mountains" (Sanskrit: *Kālaparvata*) refer to a specific geographic and symbolic boundary within the world system (*cakravāḍa*). *Cakravāḍa* literally means "The Circular Wall" or "The Circular Fence", the outermost perimeter of the universe. In terms of composition, it is called the iron Mountain - Lohaparvata - and in terms of appearance, it is called the Black Mountain - Kālaparvata

## The Structural Hierarchy

After the initial Wind Mandala (*Vāyumandala*) stabilizes, followed by the layers of water and gold, the physical world begins to take shape. The cosmology describes a series of concentric rings of mountains and seas surrounding the central axis, Mount Meru.

- **The Inner Rings:** There are seven rings of golden mountains (such as *Yugaṃdhara*) separated by seven "freshwater" seas.
- **The Outer Rim:** Beyond the seventh golden mountain lies the vast salt ocean, which contains the four main continents (including *Jambudvīpa*, where humans live).
- **The Black Mountains:** These form the **Cakravāḍa**—the "Iron Ring" or "Iron Wall" that encircles the entire universe.

## Why "Black"?

The term "Black Mountains" is often used interchangeably with the Iron Mountains. They are called "black" for two primary reasons:

1. **Material Composition:** Unlike the inner mountains, which are composed of gold or precious gems, the outermost rim is made of iron (*loha*), which possesses a dark, opaque quality.
2. **Lack of Illumination:** They mark the absolute limit of the sun and moon's light. Because they sit at the extreme periphery of the world system, they represent the "outer darkness" or the boundary beyond which the light of a single Buddha-field does not reach.

## Symbolic Meaning

In the *Abhidharma* system, the Black Mountains serve as the container for the universe. Without this rigid perimeter, the waters of the world system would disperse into the void. They define the "Circle" (*Cakravāḍa*) that separates one world system from the infinite vacuum of space and the neighboring world systems.

## The Inter-Cosmic Voids

In later commentaries, the space between the Black Mountains of three adjacent world systems is described as a "triangular" void. These areas are said to be perpetually dark and are often identified as the location of the Lokayantarika (inter-world) hells, where the light of the sun and moon can never penetrate.

In summary, the Black Mountain is the iron-clad boundary of our known universe, acting as the final physical barrier between the structured world of the four continents and the outer cosmic void.

this description of the universe's evolution (*bhājanaloka-nirdeśa*) is found in Chapter 3 (Lokanirdeśa).

## Relevant Verses in the Abhidharmakośa

In Chapter 3, Vasubandhu details the formation of the world system starting from the Wind Mandala (*Vāyumandala*). Here are the specific locations for the "Black Mountain" concept:

- **Verses 45–46:** Describe the initial formation from the Wind Mandala, followed by the Water and Gold Mandalas.
- **Verses 48–56:** Detail the structure of the mountains.
  - **Kālaparvata (The Black Mountain):** In verse 50, the text identifies the nine great mountains. The first seven are golden (*kañcana*), the eighth is **Sumeru**, and the ninth is the **Cakravāḍa**, which is explicitly identified as the **Kālaparvata** (Black Mountain).
  - **Sanskrit terminology:** The text refers to it as *Lohamaya* (made of iron) or *Kālamaya* (made of blackness/iron).

## Why the Abhidharmakośabhāṣyam?

While other Abhidharma texts (like the Theravada *Dhammasaṅgaṇī* or the earlier *Prakaraṇapāda*) touch on elements of reality, Vasubandhu's Abhidharmakośabhāṣyam is considered the definitive "encyclopedia" for the Sarvāstivāda and early Mahāyāna views on cosmology.

Other texts that contain this information:

1. **The Mahāvibhāṣā Śāstra:** This is the massive compendium of the Sarvāstivāda school that Vasubandhu drew upon. It contains even more exhaustive details on the dimensions of the Black Mountains but is far less systematic.
2. **The Dirgha Agama (Dīgha Nikāya):** In the *Aggañña Sutta* or the *Cakkavatti-Sīhanāda Sutta*, early descriptions of world-cycles appear, but the specific technical architecture of the concentric mountain rings (and the "Black Mountain" name for the rim) is most precisely defined in the later **Abhidharma** systematizations.

## Summary of the Source Data

1. **Mount Sumeru (Meru):** The massive central pillar, often shown as an hourglass shape, narrowing in the middle and widening at the top and bottom.
2. **The Seven Golden Mountain Ranges:** These are the seven rings immediately surrounding Sumeru. In the *Abhidharmakośa*, these are listed as:
  - *Yugaṃdhara* (the innermost ring)
  - *Īśādhara*
  - *Khadiraka*
  - *Sudarśana*
  - *Aśvakarṇa*
  - *Vinataka*
  - *Nimindhara* (the outermost golden ring)
3. **The Seven Seas:** Between each of these golden ranges lies a sea of "fresh" water (the *Sītā* rivers).

4. **The Great Salt Ocean:** This is the vast space between the last golden mountain (*Nimindhara*) and the outer rim. This is where the four great continents—including *Jambudvīpa*—are located.

5. **The Cakravāḍa (The Black Mountain):** In diagrams, this is the very outermost circle that encloses the entire system. It acts as a physical wall, holding in the waters of the salt ocean.

Visually, the Black Mountain is often drawn as a dark or jagged circular border, contrasting with the golden mountains which are typically depicted in bright yellow or gold leaf. If the diagram is side-on (a cross-section), you will see it as the two pillars at the far left and far right ends of the world-disk.



In this diagram, you can see the Cakravāḍa (the Iron Mountain or Black Mountain) represented as the outermost circular wall that contains the entire world-system. While the inner seven ranges are golden, this final ring is made of iron, serving as the physical boundary that prevents the waters of the great salt ocean from flowing into the void of space.

#### Key features:

- The Center:** Mount Sumeru, surrounded by the seven concentric rings of golden mountains.
- The Salt Ocean:** The vast area between the seventh golden mountain (*Nimindhara*) and the outer rim.
- The Four Continents:** These are located in the salt ocean. *Jambudvīpa* (the human world) is typically positioned to the south.
- The Cakravāḍa/Black Mountain:** The high, dark perimeter wall that encircles everything. In Sanskrit descriptions, it is often called the *Kālaparvata* because it sits in the shadow where the light of the sun and moon cannot reach beyond its heights.

This structure is a physical representation of the universe's limits as detailed in Chapter 3 of the *Abhidharmakośabhāṣyam*. In many

traditional Thangka paintings or architectural mandalas, this iron wall is often depicted in a dark blue or black hue to denote its composition and its position at the edge of light.

If the universe builds from the center outward, what stops the "water mandala" from simply pouring off the edges of the "gold mandala" before the walls are built?

According to the Abhidharmakośabhāṣyam (Chapter 3, Verses 45–46), the "construction" of the universe is not a sequential placement of parts like building a house; rather, it is a process of simultaneous precipitation and solidification.

## 1. The Power of "Primal Wind" (*Vāyu*)

The contradiction is resolved by the nature of the Wind Mandala. In Buddhist cosmology, this isn't just a breeze; it is a massive, incredibly dense disk of energy created by the collective karma of sentient beings.

- **The Container of Force:** Before any physical "mountains" exist, the Wind Mandala itself acts as the primary container. It is described as being so tough that a diamond cannot break it.
- **The Cloud Formation:** A massive cloud forms over this wind disk and pours down rain. This rain doesn't "leak" because the force of the wind mandala holds it in place, much like a high-speed centrifuge might hold liquid.

## 2. The Process of Churning (*Manthāna*)

The mountains (including the Black Mountains) are formed through a process often compared to churning milk into butter.

As the wind stirs the waters, the "essences" of the elements begin to separate and solidify.

- **The Gold Mandala:** First, a layer of gold solidifies on top of the water.
- **The Mountains:** Then, the collective karma causes the remaining water to be "churned" by winds. This churning causes the most refined parts to rise and solidify into **Mount Sumeru** and the **Seven Golden Mountains**.
- **The Perimeter:** The "dregs" or the coarsest material move to the very edge.

## 3. Simultaneous Solidification

To address your point about the "escape" of the contents: The Abhidharma explains that the solidification of the central Sumeru and the outermost Black Mountains (Cakravāḍa) happens as part of the same cosmic event.

The inner contents do not "leak" because:

1. **Viscosity:** The elements are transitioning from a fluid state to a solid state simultaneously across the entire disk.
2. **Karmic Pressure:** The same "Air" (*Vāyu*) that is churning the center is also pushing against the outer boundary. By the time the water is liquid enough to "run," the outer perimeter has already begun to crystallize into the Iron/Black Mountain.

## The "Iron Ring" as the Final Seal

While they are part of the same formation process, the Black Mountains are indeed the "final" structural element in the sense that they define the finished limit. They are the boundary of solidification. In the Abhidharma view, the universe doesn't leak because the "Wind" acts as a bowl until the "Iron" can act as a wall. The energy of the wind mandala is the invisible scaffold that holds the structure together until the physical mountains "freeze" into place.

In the Abhidharmakośabhāṣyam, Vasubandhu describes this wind as being so incredibly dense that it is "unbreakable" (*abheda*). This explains why the subsequent "Rain of the Clouds" doesn't just dissipate into the void. The wind creates a pressurized bowl, and only after the celestial "churning" occurs do the sediments settle into the concentric rings you see in the diagrams.

It essentially functions like a cosmic centrifuge:

- The **most refined** elements coalesce at the center to form **Mount Sumeru**.
- The **pure** elements form the **Seven Golden Mountains**.
- The **coarsest, heaviest** elements are flung to the far periphery to form the **Iron/Black Mountains**.

Because this process is driven by the collective karma of all sentient beings, the "container" and the "contents" are perfectly synchronized.