Tau Neutrinos Favored over Sterile Neutrinos in Atmospheric Muon Neutrino Oscillations

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The Super-Kamiokande Collaboration

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ABSTRACT

The previously published atmospheric neutrino data did not distinguish whether muon neutrinos were oscillating into tau neutrinos or sterile neutrinos, as both hypotheses fit the data. Using data recorded in 1100 live-days of the Super-Kamiokande detector, we use three complementary data samples to study the difference in zenith angle distribution due to neutral currents and matter effects. We find no evidence favoring sterile neutrinos, and reject the hypothesis at the 99% confidence level. On the other hand, we find that oscillation between muon and tau neutrinos suffices to explain all the results in hand.

I. INTRODUCTION

In previous papers [1–3] Super-Kamiokande reported evidence for the oscillation of muon neutrinos produced in cosmic-ray induced showers in the atmosphere. This evidence rests largely upon a strong zenith angle dependent deficit in the muon data, which does not appear in the electron data, and hence limits the amount of oscillation into electron neutrinos. In fact, the results only demonstrate that muon neutrinos are disappearing, depending on the energy and flight distance. The most plausible scenario is that muon neutrinos oscillate to tau neutrinos, most of which are below the 3.4 GeV neutrino energy threshold for charged current tau production. The few charged current tau events created (we expect approximately 65 in our current sample) typically fail our cuts that identify a single electron or muon; indeed, due to the high energy of the interaction and the multiple decay modes of the tau, it is difficult to isolate any set of events that can be uniquely identified as due to charged current $\nu_\tau$ interactions.

An alternative scenario that can explain muon neutrino disappearance is oscillation with a sterile neutrino ($\nu_s$), so named because it has neither charged current (CC) nor neutral current (NC) interactions. Neutrino oscillation has also been employed to explain two other experimental anomalies: the long-standing deficit of solar neutrinos [4], and the appearance of electron antineutrinos in the LSND experiment [5]. The three oscillation signatures, LSND, atmospheric, and solar, are manifested by three widely separated values of the mass-squared difference, $\Delta m^2 = m^2_i - m^2_j$. Because $\Delta m^2$, must equal $\Delta m^2_{12} + \Delta m^2_{23}$, all three signatures cannot be accommodated with three neutrino states. Any additional light neutrino must be sterile to satisfy the well-known bound of three neutrino flavors that couple to the $Z^0$.

In this letter, we use more than 1000 days exposure of atmospheric neutrino data collected by the Super-Kamiokande detector to distinguish the behavior of $\nu_\mu \leftrightarrow \nu_\tau$ oscillation from $\nu_\mu \leftrightarrow \nu_s$ oscillation. First, for $\nu_\mu \leftrightarrow \nu_s$ oscillation, one should observe fewer neutral current events than for $\nu_\mu \leftrightarrow \nu_\tau$ oscillation; in the latter case the neutral current event rate is unchanged by oscillations.

Second, the interaction of the neutrinos with matter [7] leads to a difference in the oscillation probability. The coherent forward scattering of $\nu_\tau$ and $\nu_\mu$ are identical, therefore the presence of matter in the neutrino path does not modify the oscillation probability for a neutrino of energy $E_\nu$ that travels a distance $L$ in vacuum:

$$P_{\nu_\mu \rightarrow \nu_\tau} = \sin^2 2\theta_v \sin^2(\pi \frac{L}{l}),$$

(1)

where $\sin^2 2\theta_v$ is the mixing angle between the two neutrino states, and $l$ in vacuum is given by $l = 4\pi E_\nu/\Delta m^2$. In contrast, $\nu_s$ does not interact with matter by definition, whereas $\nu_\mu$ does interact with matter via the neutral current. This introduces an effective potential which modifies the mixing angle and oscillation length [7]:

$$\sin^2 2\theta_m = \frac{\sin^2 2\theta_v}{(\zeta - \cos 2\theta_v)^2 + \sin^2 2\theta_v},$$

(2)

$$l_m = \frac{l_\nu}{\sqrt{(\zeta - \cos 2\theta_v)^2 + \sin^2 2\theta_v}}.$$
The parameter $\zeta$ is given by $\mp\sqrt{2}E_\nu G_F N_n/\Delta m^2$, where $N_n$ is the neutron density in the matter traversed by the neutrino, the minus sign is for neutrinos, and the plus sign is for antineutrinos. For the density of matter in the earth, $\zeta$ reaches unity for $E_\nu$ of $5 \text{ GeV} \times \Delta m^2/(10^{-3}\text{eV}^2)$. The Super-Kamiokande data indicates a likely value for $\Delta m^2$ of $3 \times 10^{-3}\text{eV}^2$, which means that neutrinos with energy greater than approximately 15 GeV will have the oscillation probability suppressed by matter effects if the oscillation is $\nu_\mu \leftrightarrow \nu_s$. Neutrinos of lower energy will have approximately the same oscillation probability in matter as in vacuum, even if the oscillation is $\nu_\mu \leftrightarrow \nu_s$.

II. THE DATA SETS

Super-Kamiokande is a 50 kilotons water Cherenkov detector employing 11,146 photomultiplier tubes (PMTs) to monitor an internal detector (ID) fiducial volume of 22.5 kilotons. Incoming and outgoing charged particles are identified by 1885 PMTs in an optically isolated outer volume (OD). Details of the detector, calibrations, and data reduction can be found in Refs. [1–3]. Super-Kamiokande has collected 9178 fully-contained (FC) events and 665 partially-contained (PC) events in a 70.5 kiloton-year (1144 days) exposure, starting in April 1996. FC events deposit all of their Cherenkov light in the ID while PC events have exiting tracks which deposit some Cherenkov light in the OD. The vertex position is reconstructed and the number of Cherenkov rings are counted using PMT pulse height and timing information. The directions and momenta are reconstructed and the particle types are identified as “$e$-like” or “$\mu$-like” for each Cherenkov ring. In the current FC sample, there are 3107 single-ring $e$-like events, 2988 single-ring $\mu$-like events and 3083 multi-ring events.

This detector has also collected 1269 upward through-going muon (UTM) events during 1138 live days. Muons which leave both entrance and exit signal clusters in the OD are regarded as through-going muon events; those that are upward going are produced by atmospheric neutrino interactions in the surrounding rock. We required a minimum track length of 7 meters in the inner detector (corresponding to a minimum muon energy of 1.6 GeV) and a zenith angle $\cos \Theta < 0$ (cos $\Theta = -1$ means vertically upward-going events). Because of finite fitter resolution and multiple Coulomb scattering of muons in the nearby rock, some down-going cosmic-ray muons appear to be coming from $\cos \Theta < 0$. This background was estimated to be $9.1 \pm 0.3$ events [3], which was subtracted from the most horizontal bin.

III. ANALYSIS

A. Fully Contained Single-Ring Data

First, utilizing only the FC single-ring events, we have examined the hypotheses of two-flavor $\nu_\mu \leftrightarrow \nu_\tau$ and $\nu_\mu \leftrightarrow \nu_s$ oscillation models using a $\chi^2$ comparison of our data and Monte Carlo (MC), allowing all important MC parameters to vary, weighted by their expected uncertainties. For $\nu_\mu \leftrightarrow \nu_s$, the effects of matter on neutrino propagation through the earth were taken into account by a numerical evolution where the density of the earth was divided into 94 discrete steps in radius based on Ref. [8]. Furthermore, matter effects are different with positive or negative $\Delta m^2$ except for full mixing case. Therefore, we evaluate three models of oscillation, (a) $\nu_\mu \leftrightarrow \nu_\tau$, (b) $\nu_\mu \leftrightarrow \nu_s(\Delta m^2 > 0)$, and (c) $\nu_\mu \leftrightarrow \nu_s(\Delta m^2 < 0)$. The data were binned by particle type, momentum, and cos $\Theta$. A $\chi^2$ is defined as:

$$\chi^2_{FC} = \sum_{\cos \Theta, \mu} \left(\frac{N_{data} - N_{MC}(\sin^2 2\theta, \Delta m^2, \epsilon_j)}{\sigma}\right)^2 + \sum_j \left(\frac{\epsilon_j}{\sigma_j}\right)^2,$$

where the sum is over five bins equally spaced in $\cos \Theta$ and seven (six) momentum bins for $e$-like ($\mu$-like) events. $N_{data}$ is the measured number of events in each bin, $\sigma$ is the statistical error, and $N_{MC}$ is the weighted sum of MC events. The definition of $\chi^2$, and the treatment of systematic uncertainties, $\epsilon_j$,
is identical to that in Ref. [1], except we exclude the PC events (which we employ later in the present report).

The best-fit values of oscillation parameters are summarized in Table I. With the best fit parameters for $\nu_\mu \leftrightarrow \nu_\tau$, we expect only 16 single-ring events from $\nu_\tau$ charged current interactions in the current sample. Moreover, matter induced modifications to oscillations do not produce significant effects due to the relatively small energy ($\sim 1$ GeV) of the parent neutrinos for the FC events. Therefore these three hypotheses for oscillations are indistinguishable by this data sample alone.

**TABLE I.** Best fit oscillation parameters for fully contained sample.

| Mode            | $\Delta m^2$(eV$^2$) | $\sin^2 2\theta$ | $\chi^2_{min}$/d.o.f |
|-----------------|-----------------------|-------------------|-----------------------|
| $\nu_\mu \leftrightarrow \nu_\tau$ | $3.2 \times 10^{-3}$ | 1.000             | 61.33/62              |
| $\nu_\mu \leftrightarrow \nu_\mu (\Delta m^2 > 0)$ | $4.0 \times 10^{-3}$ | 0.995             | 62.56/62              |
| $\nu_\mu \leftrightarrow \nu_\mu (\Delta m^2 < 0)$ | $3.2 \times 10^{-3}$ | 1.000             | 62.62/62              |
B. Multi-Ring Sample

Next we employ a neutral current (NC) enriched sample of events selected from multi-ring (MR) data. By definition a sterile neutrino does not interact with matter even through the neutral current channel, while a tau neutrino continues to experience the same neutral current interactions as did the original muon neutrino. We measure the zenith angle distribution of NC events to distinguish between $\nu_\mu \leftrightarrow \nu_\tau$ and $\nu_\mu \leftrightarrow \nu_s$: if pure $\nu_\mu \leftrightarrow \nu_\tau$ oscillations are operating, then the up/down ratio should be nearly unity; if $\nu_\mu \leftrightarrow \nu_s$ oscillations dominate, the up/down ratio will be measurably smaller.

In order to obtain a sample with an enhanced with NC events, we applied the following selection criteria: (1) vertex within the fiducial volume and no exiting track; (2) multiple Cherenkov rings; (3) particle identification of the brightest ring is $e^{-}$-like; (4) visible energy greater than 400 MeV.

The first criterion provides a contained event sample, the second and third criteria serve to enrich the NC event fraction. The fourth criterion helps to obtain good angular correlation between the incident neutrino and the reconstructed direction, defined as the charge weighted sum of the ring directions. The mean angle difference between the parent neutrino and reconstructed directions is estimated to be 33°.

According to our MC study, for no oscillations (and $\nu_\mu \leftrightarrow \nu_\tau$ oscillations at best fit parameters), the resultant fraction of NC events is 29% (30%), $\nu_e\text{CC}$ is 46% (48%) and $\nu_\mu\text{CC}$ is 25% (19%) (and $\nu_s\text{CC}$ is 3%). In contrast the FC single ring sample contains only ~6% NC events. In the current exposure, 1531 events satisfy the above criteria. Figure 1(a) shows the zenith angle distribution of these events with predictions from the MC.

We utilize an up-to-down ratio as the discriminant, which cancels some systematic uncertainties (otherwise dominated by the large uncertainty in absolute rates). In this context we define “upward” as a cosine of zenith angle less than $-0.4$, and “downward” as greater than +0.4. There are 387 upward events and 404 downward events. Figure 1(b) shows the $\Delta m^2$ dependence of the expected up/down ratio in the case of full mixing ($\sin^2 2\theta = 1$). For $\Delta m^2$ of $3.2 \times 10^{-3}$ eV$^2$, the data are consistent with $\nu_\mu \leftrightarrow \nu_\tau$, while the data differ from the prediction for $\nu_\mu \leftrightarrow \nu_s$ oscillation by 2.4 standard deviations.

We estimated the total uncertainty in the up/down ratio of the data and MC to be $\pm 2.9\%$, dominated by the 2.6% uncertainty in the neutrino flux caused by the absorption of muons in the mountain above the detector. All other sources of systematic uncertainty such as background contamination, the up/down response of the detector, the uncertainty of the NC cross sections, and the difference between the up/down ratio of two independent flux calculations [9,10] are less than 1%.

C. Partially Contained Sample

Next we report on the search for matter effects by using high energy partially contained events. As discussed above, matter effects impact only $\nu_\mu \leftrightarrow \nu_s$ oscillations, where at high energies the matter effect suppresses oscillations. Partially contained events in Super-Kamiokande are estimated to be 97% pure $\nu_\mu$ charged current, with a mean neutrino energy of 10 GeV. In order to select higher energy $\nu_\mu$ events, which are more sensitive to matter effects, we additionally require visible energy greater than 5 GeV. We estimate the typical energy of the parent atmospheric neutrino is 20 GeV. After cuts are made upon the current data sample we find 267 events. Figure 1(c) shows the zenith angle distribution of these events with predictions from MC, as before. Again we employ an up/down ratio to cancels systematic uncertainties, with the same angular definition as used for the multi-ring sample. There are 43 “upward” events and 84 “downward” events. Figure 1(d) shows the $\Delta m^2$ dependence of expected up/down ratio in the case of full mixing. For $\Delta m^2$ of $3.2 \times 10^{-3}$ eV$^2$, the data are consistent with $\nu_\mu \leftrightarrow \nu_\tau$ oscillation, whereas it differs from $\nu_\mu \leftrightarrow \nu_s$ oscillation by 2.3 standard deviations.

We estimated the total systematic uncertainty in the up/down ratio to be $\pm 4.1\%$, dominated by the 3.4% uncertainty caused by the mountain above the detector and the 2.0% uncertainty caused by possible background contamination by cosmic-ray muons. All other sources of uncertainty were less than 1%.
D. Upward Through-going Muon Sample

Next we report on the search for possible matter effects by using upward through-going muon events. The approach of this analysis is similar to that for the PC events. Because the typical energy of the UTM parent neutrino is approximately 100 GeV, matter effect suppression should appear most prominently in this data set. In the current sample, we have 1259.9 events after background subtraction. Figure (e) shows the zenith angle distribution of these events with predictions. Again we utilize a ratio as the test parameter, dividing “vertical” and “horizontal” at cosine of zenith angle $\cos \Theta = -0.4$. Figure (f) shows the $\Delta m^2$ dependence of the expected vertical/horizontal ratio in the case of full mixing. At the point of $3.2 \times 10^{-3} \text{ eV}^2$, the data are consistent with $\nu_\mu \leftrightarrow \nu_\tau$ oscillation, while $\nu_\mu \leftrightarrow \nu_s$ oscillation differs from the data by 2.9 standard deviations.

We estimated the total systematic uncertainty in the horizontal/vertical flux ratio to be $\pm 3.3\%$, dominated by the 3% uncertainty in the $\pi/K$ production ratio in the cosmic-ray interaction in the atmosphere. All other sources of systematic uncertainty, including the background contamination in the most horizontal bin $[3]$, the spectral index of the neutrino flux, and the difference between two independent flux calculations $[9,10]$ were 1% or less.

E. Combined Analysis

Finally, we performed a combined statistical analysis of the multi-ring, high energy partially contained, and upward-going muon data sets. For each sample ($i = \text{MR,PC,UTM}$) we construct a one degree of freedom $\chi_i^2$ defined by:

$$
\chi_i^2 = \frac{(N^A_{\text{data}} - \alpha_i N^A_{\text{MC}}(1 + \frac{2}{\Delta m^2}))^2}{(\sigma^A_{\text{stat}})^2} + \frac{(N^B_{\text{data}} - \alpha_i N^B_{\text{MC}}(1 - \frac{2}{\Delta m^2}))^2}{(\sigma^B_{\text{stat}})^2} + \frac{\epsilon_i^2}{\sigma^i_{\text{sys}}} \tag{4}
$$

where $A$ is respectively either up-going or vertical and $B$ is down-going or horizontal. For the UTM sample, the calculated flux is used in place of the number of events. The parameter denoting normalization is $\alpha_i$, and for each ratio we introduce a systematic uncertainty parameter $\epsilon_i$, weighted by the estimated size of the uncertainty, $\sigma_{i,\text{sys}}$.

The three $\chi_i^2$ are summed to form a total $\chi^2_{\text{tot}}$ with three degrees of freedom. The value of $\chi^2_{\text{tot}}$ is used as a hypothesis test for the cases of $\nu_\mu \leftrightarrow \nu_\tau$ and $\nu_\mu \leftrightarrow \nu_s$ oscillation. We exclude regions in the $\sin^2 2\theta - \Delta m^2$ plane at the 90(99)% C.L. if the value of $\chi^2$ is greater than 6.3(11.3) for $\chi^2$ of three degrees of freedom. Figure 2 shows separately the excluded regions for these three alternative oscillation modes, along with the allowed region from FC single ring event analysis $[9]$. One sees that the parameters allowed by the FC data in the $\sin^2 2\theta - \Delta m^2$ plane are excluded at the 99% confidence level by the independent tests for both positive and negative $\Delta m^2$ sterile neutrino oscillations.

IV. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

In summary, we have presented three independent data samples that discriminate between the oscillations to either tau neutrinos or sterile neutrinos in the region of mixing angle and $\Delta m^2$ preferred by

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*Although stopping upward-going muons and PC events have similar parent neutrino energies, the limited zenith range of $-1 < \cos \Theta < 0$ with a relatively large uncertainty at the horizon limits their usefulness and they are not considered.

†The two cases of $\Delta m^2 > 0$ and $\Delta m^2 < 0$ are treated continuously using the minimum $\chi^2$ for the $\nu_s$ fit which was slightly lower for the case of $\Delta m^2 > 0$, and this was used to draw the contours for both cases.
the majority of the Super-Kamiokande data. Two-flavor oscillation between muon neutrinos and sterile neutrinos fit the low energy charged current data, but do not fit the neutral current or high energy data. We cannot exclude more complicated scenarios in which both $\nu_\mu \leftrightarrow \nu_\tau$ and $\nu_\mu \leftrightarrow \nu_s$ oscillations co-exist with small mixing to sterile neutrinos, or with much smaller mass difference for sterile neutrinos; yet there is nothing in this data to encourage one about the existence of sterile neutrinos. Pure $\nu_\mu \leftrightarrow \nu_\tau$ neutrino oscillations fit all of the data samples presented, without any inconsistency.

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FIG. 1. (a,c,e) Zenith angle distributions of atmospheric neutrino events satisfying cuts described in the text: (a) multi-ring sample, (c) partially contained sample, and (e) upward through-going muon sample. The black dots indicate the data and statistical errors. The solid line indicates the prediction for $\nu_\mu \leftrightarrow \nu_\tau$, and the dashed for $\nu_\mu \leftrightarrow \nu_s$, with $(\Delta m^2, \sin^2 2\theta)=(3.2 \times 10^{-3} \text{ eV}^2, 1)$. The two predictions are normalized by a common factor so that the number of the observed events and the predicted number of events for $\nu_\mu \leftrightarrow \nu_\tau$ are identical. (b,d,f) Expected value of the corresponding test ratio as a function of $\Delta m^2$. The solid horizontal lines indicates the measured value from the Super-Kamiokande data with statistical uncertainty indicated by dashed lines. Black dots indicate the prediction for $\nu_\mu \leftrightarrow \nu_\tau$, and empty squares for $\nu_\mu \leftrightarrow \nu_s$, in both cases for maximal mixing.
FIG. 2. Excluded regions for three oscillation modes. (a) $\nu_\mu \leftrightarrow \nu_\tau$, $\nu_\mu \leftrightarrow \nu_s$ with (b) $\Delta m^2 > 0$ and (c) $\Delta m^2 < 0$, the light(dark) gray region is excluded at 90(99)% C.L., Thin dotted(solid) line indicates the 90(99)% C.L. allowed regions from the analysis of FC single-ring events.