

A photograph of a Buddhist monk in orange robes sitting on a large rock in a rocky stream. In the background, a waterfall cascades over a rocky cliff. The scene is lush and natural, with moss and greenery visible on the rocks and surrounding vegetation.

The Role of Water in Religion

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Essays on Buddhist History & Culture

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May the water that flows down from the snow-clad mountains bring you happiness. May the water that courses in the rivers bring you happiness. May the swift flowing streams bring you happiness. May the water of the monsoon bring you happiness.

Atharva Veda, Kanda 19

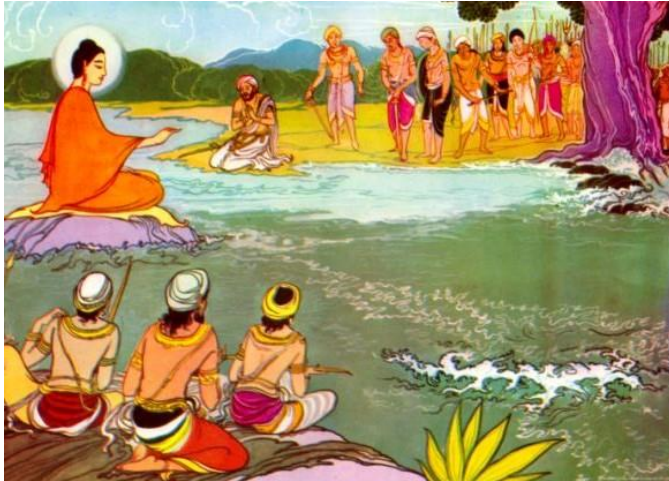
What is it about water that has captured our fascination from the time our earliest ancestors first dipped their hands in a flowing stream or felt drops of cooling rain on their skin? Our familiarity with water has made us dull to its amazing and mysterious nature. We bathe in it every day, drink it, cultivate our food with it, get food from it, and then cook that food in it. Water is transparent and yet we can observe our reflection in it or see the sparkle of the sun on its ripples. Despite its soft and yielding nature it can patiently wear pebbles smooth and shape rocky river-beds. When still it is silent but when it tumbles over cliffs or crashes onto sea shores its roar can be heard for miles. Responding to the environment around it, water can become clear solid ice, white powdery snow, opaque steam, grey thunder clouds, an azure ocean and even vapour invisible to the eye. Water washes away filth but then effortlessly returns to its pure state. Lifeless itself water gives life. It is not surprising therefore that humans have associated water not just with life but also with the origins of life.

In pre-modern thinking all existence was believed to be made up of the four great elements - earth, water, fire and air, sometimes nowadays rationalized as solidity, fluidity, calorificity and air. Water or fluidity, the second of these elements, has long been conceived and being present at the beginning of all things or even that

all things were made of it. According to Quran 21:30, Allah created everything from water: “We made from water every living thing. Will they not then believe?” And again: “It is He who has created man from water: then has He established relationships of lineage and marriage, for thy Lord has power [over all (Quran 25:54). According to the Bible account of creation: “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. And the earth was formless and void, and darkness was over the surface of the deep; and the Spirit of God was moving over the surface of the waters” (Genesis 1:1-2). On the second day, after he had created light: “God allowed a separation of the waters above from the waters below” (Genesis 1:6-7). The New Testament affirms that the stuff of divine creation was water, that “long ago by God’s word the heavens came into being and the earth was formed out of water and by water” (II Peter 3,5).

Several centuries earlier than the New Testament and far away in the forests of India, the Vedic rishis had very similar ideas. The Brhadaranyaka Upanisad says: “In the beginning this world was just water.” For the Vedic sages, water’s ability to take multiple forms - mist, snow, steam, etc. was analogous to the essence of Brahman. Thus the Mahanārāyaṇa Upaniṣad says: “Verily, all this is water. All the created beings are water. The vital breaths in the body are water. Quadrupeds are water. Edible crops are water. Ambrosia is water. *Samrāt* is water. *Virāt* is water. *Svarāt* is water. The metres are water. The luminaries are water. Vedic formulas are water. Truth is water. All deities are water. The three worlds denoted by *Bhūh*, *Bhuvah* and *Suvah*, are water. The source of all these is the supreme, denoted by the syllable Om” (29,1).

The Buddha did not feel the need to explain how, when, of what or why things came into existence and thus rendered the notion of a divine creator unnecessary. He saw the universe; its stars, cosmic dust and galaxies, as passing through an endless



cycle of expansion and contraction, of formation and disintegration, the process taking place “over a vast period of time” (Dīgha Nikāya III,84-5). Nonetheless, he saw water as crucial to the origins of life at the beginning of our present universe. When the previous universe

disintegrated, all beings were reborn in the *Ābhassara Brahmā* world and when the new universe began to form, these beings were attracted to the Earth and dwelled there:

“made of mind, feeding on delight, self-luminous, glorious and floating through the air. Now at that time there was just one mass of water and all was darkness, utter darkness. There was sun or moon, no stars or constellations, no night, day, fortnights, months, seasons or years, nor were there male and female, for beings were just beings. Then sooner or later, after a vast period of time, a nutritious scum spread over the waters looking like the skin that forms when boiled milk as it cools. It has had a color, smell and flavour something like fine ghee or butter and was as sweet as pure wild honey. Then one of those beings of a greedier nature thought: ‘What have we here?’ and it tasted the scum with its finger and a craving for more was born in it. Then the other beings did the same and craving was born in them and soon they were clamouring to consume more of the scum. As they ate the scum they lost their self-luminance and as they did their bodies became solid” (Dīgha Nikāya III,84-6).

This, according to the Buddha, this was how the first living beings came into existence, although it is unlikely that he was positing the story as fact. As he proceeded with it, it becomes clear that he was spinning a tale for the purpose of undermining the Brahmanical claim that the four castes were created by *Brahmā* from different parts of his body. Nonetheless, while it is just a tale, one part of it at least has recently found confirmation from modern science. Extremely ancient rocks were discovered in Western Australia which contained microscopic fossils likely to be about 3.4 billion years old, the oldest evidence of life ever found. Scientists have speculated that these primitive life forms, probably something like microbial mats made up of bacteria and archaea, floated on the surface of the water, were nourished by the chemicals there and turned sunlight into energy. (N. Noffke, C. Christian, et al. ‘Microbially induced Sedimentary Structures Recording an Ancient Ecosystem in the ca. 3.48 Billion-year-old Dresser Formation, Pilbra, Western Australia,’ *Astrobiology*,13 (12), Nov. 2013).

As mentioned above, water is associated in many religions with creation and in some is actually considered to be the stuff of creation. But it has also seen as a purifying agent, sometimes symbolically, sometimes actually. In Islam for example, purity both physical and moral, is fundamental. Muslims are asked to wash their face, their hands up to the elbows, to wipe their head and also their feet up to the ankles, before commencing prayer. As Islam started in a land where water was scarce, it has always emphasised the careful use of water. It was said that



the Prophet himself would use no more than three-fourths of a litre of water for his ablution and four litres for his bath. Inspired by this, historians believe that Muslims invented the nozzle with multiple tiny holes on water spouts so that water could be used more efficiently.

One of the central rites of Christianity is baptism. During this rite the candidate stands in water and water is tipped over their head and upper body. In some sects the candidate is immersed fully in the water. Jesus was baptized in the



Jesus washing the feet of his disciples,
1475

Jordan River, giving it a special status for Christians ever after (John 13:5-14). For many Christians, baptism is not just literally a cleansing but also a symbolic dying and rising again with Christ. It marks their entrance into the faith. Another important Christian rite involving water is foot washing, which is usually performed once a year on Maundy Thursday of Holy Week. Washing the feet before entering a house was a normal custom in the Palestine of Jesus' time. However, Jesus gave it a special significance. He washed his disciples before the Last Supper and then said to

them: "If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you should do as I have done to you. Most assuredly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master; nor is he who is sent greater than he who sent him. If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them" (John 13, 14-170). In imitation of this and true to

Jesus' exhortation Christians will wash each other's feet as a sign of humility and service to others.

With his emphasis on the psychological rather than the material, the Buddha gave little importance to the notion of purity, whether actual or symbolic. Nor did he make an association between physical purity and spiritual or moral purity.



Hindus bathing in the Ganges River

Thus he did not advocate washing, other than for ordinary reasons of cleanliness and hygiene. For him, to live with simplicity, integrity and kindness was the “inner washing” (*sināto antarena sinānena*, Majjhima Nikāya I,39) and to be “washed without water” (*sinānam anodakam*, Saṃyutta Nikāya I,43). Once the Buddha had a dialogue with a brahman who believed in purification by water (*udakasuddhika*). When asked by the Buddha why he did this the brahman replied: “Whatever evil I have done during the day I wash away at night, and whatever evil I do during the night I wash away in the morning.” To this the Buddha replied: “The Truth is a lake, virtue is its bathing place. Such a clear lake, praised by the good, is where the wise take their bath, and with clean limbs cross over to the other shore, to liberation” (Saṃyutta Nikāya I,183-4) Some of the ascetic of the Buddha's time likewise rejected notions of symbolic or ritual purity and even physical cleanliness and adhered to the exact opposite - the notion that neglect of the body was not only a sign of complete detachment from the world, but would actually lead to it. They practiced various forms of self-mortification including not washing, sometimes for

their entire lives. The Buddha considered this to be misguided and ineffective. “Not nakedness nor matted hair, not mud nor fasting, not lying on the ground, being unwashed or squatting on the heels will purify one who has not passed beyond doubt”(Dhammapada 141).

However, the Buddha did have something to say about washing and physical cleanliness in relation to hygiene. He said: “And how is the dirty body washed in the proper way? By means of a scraper, soap powder, water and having a good scrub” (Aṅguttara Nikāya I,207) He required his monks and nuns to keep their robes, eating utensils and living quarters clean and tidy. As in Palestine during Jesus’ time, it was the custom in ancient India to wash the feet before entering a building and the Buddha followed this practice. He required his monks to always have two pots of water always ready in their monasteries - one for washing the feet and the other to offer to any visitors so they could quench their thirst. Interestingly, there are references to the Buddha washing his own feet but none to him washing someone else’s feet or of them washing his.

If God is the most important presence in the universe and water is essential for life, it is only natural that humans have always seen a link between the two. One of God’s most crucial roles in his relationship with humankind is the gift of timely and regular rain. Without it crops wither and hunger stalks the land. With it abundance is assured. The Buddha said: “Abundant rain brings to perfection all crops for the good, the welfare and happiness of the many” (Aṅguttara Nikāya IV,244). In a similar vein, the Bhagavad Gīta says:

“Living beings are created and find their source in food, food is created by rainfall. Parjanya gives us the material blessings of rainfall and thus abundance in the material world by the creation of food and other crops” (Bhagavad Gīta 3,14)

Religious literature is full of praises for and thanksgiving to God, the gods or the rain spirits for delivering water in the form of rain. The psalmist in the Bible sings: “You visit the earth and water it, you greatly enrich it; the river of God is full of water; you provide the people with grain, for so you have prepared it” (Pslam 65, 9) The Quran has similar peons of praise:

“It is Allah who sends the winds, and they raise the clouds: then does He spread them in the sky as He wills, and break them into fragments, until thou seest raindrops issue from the midst thereof: then when He has made them reach such of His servants as He wills, behold, they do rejoice!” (Quran 30:48).

The Vedas preserves what is probably humankind’s oldest verses beseeching a god - in this case Parjanya, an alternative name for Indra, the god of thunder and storms - to send down the waters of heaven.

“Lift up the mighty vessel, pour down water, and let the liberated streams rush forward. Saturate both the earth and heaven with fatness, and for the cows let there be drink abundant. Thou hast poured down the rain-flood now withhold it. Thou hast made desert places fit for travel. Thou hast made herbs to grow for our enjoyment: yea, thou hast won thee praise from living creatures” (Rg Veda V,83)

The Atharva Veda says: “Water, lightening, thunder and rain. Let the liberal ones favour you. O Parjanya, sprinkle the Earth with thy milk that you pour out and let abundant rain come” (Atharva Veda IV. 15,9). For the Christian god at least, rain could have another, a less benign use – to punish or even destroy. According to the



A modern depiction of Noah's Ark

Bible, in the distant past humans had become so wicked that God regretted ever having created them and decided to destroy them all by making it rain for fourth days and nights. The only humans to survive were Noah and his family and two of every animal who were protected from the deluge in a

great boat. This is one of the few religious legends that credit a deity with using its rain-making powers for anything but a life-enhancing reason.

In the Buddhist scriptures, the Buddha is never called upon to bring rain or praised as a rain-maker. He was a human and is always depicted as such, not a divine being able to master the forces of nature. Indeed, he even forbade his monks from predicting good or bad rainfall, something that people in an agriculturally-based society might expect from their religious leaders and clergy (Dīgha Nikāya I,11). This notwithstanding, there is a charming legend in the commentaries where in which the Buddha is credited with compelling the gods to make it rain.

“In those days no rain fell in Kosala so that the crops withered and everywhere the ponds, reservoirs and lakes dried up. Even the bathing pool in the Jetavana near the gateway dried up and the fish and tortoises buried themselves in the mud. Then the crows and the hawks came and with their dagger-like beaks and busily picked out the wriggling, writhing fish and devoured them. The Lord noticed how these creatures were being destroyed and moved by compassion he said: ‘This day I must make it rain.’ As night gave way to day and after attending to his bodily needs, he waited for the right time and then accompanied by the monks, went into Sāvatti for alms. On the way back to

the Jetavana in the afternoon he stopped at the steps leading down to Jetavana's bathing pool and said to Venerable Ananda: 'Bring me my bathing cloth so I can bathe.' 'But Lord' replied Ananda, 'the water has all dried up and only mud remains.' The Lord said: 'Great is the power of a Buddha. Now go and get me my bathing cloth.' Ananda did as he was asked and the Lord put the cloth around his waist and over his upper body, stood on the steps leading down to the tank and said: 'Now I shall bathe.' At that very moment in heaven, Sakka's yellow-stone throne grew hot beneath him and understanding why he summonsed the Rain Cloud King saying to him: 'The Lord wishes to bathe. Make haste and pour down rain in one great torrent all over the kingdom of Kosala.' Obedient to Sakka's command, the Rain Cloud King draped himself in one cloud as if an under garment and another as if an outer garment and chanting the rain-song he sped towards the east. There he manifested himself as a cloud as big as a threshing floor which gradually grew to the size of a hundred thousand threshing floors, and he soaked Kosala with a torrent of rain. The downpour was continuous, quickly filling the Jetavana's bathing tank and easing off only when it was full right up to the top step... The monks at Jetavana gathered in the preaching hall they discussed the Lord's patience, loving-kindness and sympathy saying: 'When the crops were withering, when the pools were drying up, when all the fish and tortoises were suffering, did the Lord, out of compassion, emerge as their saviour'." (Jātaka I,329-30)