

SIMILES FOR THE FOUR ELEMENTS  
FROM BUDDHIST LITERATURE

The similes and other figures of speech employed in Indian literature are very rich, and my experience with them so far is that they vary intriguingly in a way that seems to characterize the difference in spirit, say, of the *Atharva-veda*<sup>1</sup> from the Epic literature<sup>2</sup>. Even restricting the topic to Buddhist sources the materials are endless. However, the data is definitely manageable when one restricts oneself to such a topic as the four elements (earth, etc.), and to a subsection of Indian literature, as here, Buddhism. Even so, it is not possible to treat such a topic in isolation, and I do compare with some other literature.

It turns out that a treatment of the elements by passages that contain all four similes in one place is more useful than simply collecting instances of isolated element similes, although some of these are admittedly appealing. But, then, how translate the words for the four? We note that Mrs. Rhys Davids, introducing her valuable essay, « Similes in the Nikāyas »<sup>3</sup>, observed that there are many similes in Pāli literature for the four elements. She counted 32 for « air (with clouds and space) », but this is hardly right. One would not translate P. *vāta*, S. *vāyu*, as « air » if aware of the Indian symbol systems, because as Sharma explains under *vāyu*, « The wind primarily symbolizes speed »<sup>4</sup>. That is why I always render the set of four: fire, wind, water, earth. She wrongly included « clouds » which are generally placed in the « intermediate space » (*antarikṣa*). Besides her « space » is usually the Indian fifth element, S. *ākāśa*. Also, Mrs. Rhys David's count for fire (with such Pāli words as *aggi* and *pāvaka*) is set at 58 by including the sun (P.

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1. Cf. N. J. SHENDE, *Kavi and Kāvya in the Atharvaveda*, Poona, 1967.

2. Cf. RAM KARAN SHARMA, *Elements of Poetry in the Mahābhārata*, Berkeley, 1964.

3. « Journal of the Pali Text Society », 1906-7 (London, 1907), pp. 52-151.

4. SHARMA, *Elements*, p. 48.

*ādicca*), but this is not right either, because the Epic and other similes for fire take this element as brilliant but not illuminating, while the sun illumines. This observation is consistent with the Buddhist work *Mahāyāna-Sūtrālaṅkāra* which includes 22 similes for generating the mind of enlightenment, with separate similes of « fire » and « sun »<sup>5</sup>. Likewise, similes for « ocean » and « river » should be kept separate from « water ».

Of course, the standard word for « simile » is *upamā*. Mrs. Rhys Davids points out that the similes are usually introduced by the words *yathā* and *iva* (also Pāli *va*), and that there is such an introductory word for illustrative tale as *seyyathāpi* (« just as »). Besides, in Sanskrit among final members there is preeminently the adverb-forming suffix *-vat*. Quite frequent as final members are *sadṛśa* and *upama*. The word *ābhā* can be used as « like » in the sense of « resembling », and *sama* as « like » in the sense of « identical ». The word *udāharaṇa* is often used for the illustration member of the Indian syllogism. There are doubtless other ways (e.g. *prakāśa* and *saṃnibha*) of representing similes and similitude.

A passage showing that to be « like » is not to be identical, is found in the *Samyutta-nikāya*, vol. I, 42, which poses a riddle: « What is bathing where no waters be? » (*kiṃ sinānam anodakaṃ*), with the answer: « Austerity as well as the pure life is bathing where no waters be » (*taṇ ca brahmacariyaṃ ca, taṃ sinānam anodakaṃ*).

Now I shall pass to the sets of the four elements from contexts containing more data that permits further consideration. So far I have found four such sets: 1) in the *Aṅguttara-nikāya*, Book of Nines, of the Pāli canon; 2) in a Mahāyāna scripture called *Bodhisattvapiṭaka*; 3) in the *Ratnakūṭa-sūtra* of the Mahāyāna as cited in a Buddhist tantra commentary; 4) in a commentarial gloss on the Buddhist Tantra *Mañjuśrī-nāma-saṃgīti*. Of these four, I shall discuss the first two together, and the second two together. Therefore, I shall discuss the four as two pairs of possible consistency or inconsistency.

1) The passage in the *Aṅguttara-nikāya* (IV, 374-375), the *Sīhanāda-sutta*, relates that once Sāriputta had set off on a journey without asking pardon of a fellow in the pure life for an imagined offence. The Buddha, hearing the complaint sent messengers to Sāriputta for him to return. In the presence of the Buddha, Sāriputta explained:

Revered Sir! Just as (*seyyathāpi*) they cast upon the earth the clean as well as the unclean, cast dung as well as urine, cast spittle, rotten material and blood; and the earth thereby is not troubled, vexed, or disgusted; just so, revered sir, I abide with mind like earth (*pathaviśamena*), expanded, become great, boundless, without hostility, without sorrow. Indeed, revered sir, he in whom mind-

5. I studied these 22 similes in a paper, « The *samādhi* lists of the *Akṣaya-matinirdeśasūtra* and the *Mahāvīyutpatti* », forthcoming.

fulness of his body's happenings is not present, might start a journey without asking pardon of a fellow in the pure life whom he had offended.

The sequel turns to water, « Just as in water they wash the clean as well as the unclean » and so on as before, down to « with mind like water (*āposamena*) », and the remainder of the paragraph the same. Then, « Just as fire burns the clean », etc. as previously, to « with mind like fire (*tejosamena*) », and so on. Then, « Just as the wind blows upon the clean », etc. and « with mind like wind (*vāyosamena*), and so on. The same passage is in the *Majjhima-nikāya* (I, 423-4). The comparison seems to be that Sāriputta's mind is like earth and water in that it is not troubled, vexed, or disgusted by anything happening by virtue of outside agencies; and is like fire and wind in that it is not troubled, vexed, or disgusted by impingement upon others. And since the comparison extends to « with mind expanded », etc. this attribution of mind to the four elements is reminiscent of the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*, VII.6.1, including: « The earth as though contemplates » (*dhyāyatiṅva pṛthivī*) and « The waters as though contemplate (*dhyāyantīvāpoḥ*). And « Therefore, those in this world among men who attain greatness (*mahattvaṃ prāpnuvanti*) seem to have a portion of contemplation's reward ».

2) The second set, from the *Bodhisattvapiṭaka-sūtra*, runs as follows<sup>6</sup>: « This eye is without an owner (*\*niḥsvāmika*) like the earth. This eye is selfless (*nairātmya*) like water. This eye is non-sentient (*niḥsattva*) like fire. This eye is soulless (*nirjīva*) like wind ». The last three of these give standard terms for the well-known Buddhist position of « non-self ». Indeed, the Tibetan-Sanskrit Buddhist Dictionary *Mahāvvyutpatti* has these three in the given order as nos. 155, 156, and 157. Only the reconstructed term *\*niḥsvāmika* is absent from the standard list of non-self terms, but on that very account we may suppose there was a calculated decision to include it here. There is a Sanskrit term *bhū-svāmin*, meaning a « landlord » or « landholder ». Perhaps the unknown author or authors of that Buddhist *sūtra* had in mind the very attributions of the Sāriputta passage discussed above. May I be permitted an interpretation: forms impinge upon the eye without asking the permission of an owner (*svāmin*), comparable to the various things, clean and unclean that are cast upon the earth. Then this eye is selfless, since it is not independent of the visible forms, just as water is not independent (i.e. cannot be as it will) when clean and dirty things are washed in it<sup>7</sup>. This eye is non-sentient because the external real things

6. Taken from the Tibetan in the Japanese photo edition of the Peking Kanjur-Tanjur (PTT), Vol. 22, p. 246-5.

7. The teacher Asaṅga helped me out in this interpretation, because he glossed *anātman* as « non-independence » (*asvātantrya*) in his *Śrāvakabhūmi*. I treated his gloss in a paper, « The Sixteen Aspects of the four Noble Truths and their Opposites », delivered at Nalanda Mahavihara, Bihar, India, in January 1980.

do not exist in it, just as creatures clean or dirty cannot live in fire. This eye is soulless because it does not have a fixed center of life, i.e. the content is constantly changing, just as the wind which lacks a life at a fixed point because the wind is constantly shifting, blowing about the clean and the dirty, and so on. According to such considerations, these Buddhist terms of « non-self » and the others were applied to what man usually takes as his « self ». Sāriputta's mind had become great concomitant with being unaware of what is ordinarily taken as « self ». Thus, he was exemplifying the Buddhist practice of « non-self ». It does appear that the first two groups of four elements are mutually consistent.

3) The third set, cited from the *Ratnakūṭa-sūtra*, is as follows<sup>8</sup>: Mind is like earth, when carrying all burdens whether virtuous or sinful, and without increase or decrease. The mind is like water when it washes away dirt and uncleanness, fosters people, and dispels defilement and distress. The mind is like fire when it burns up defilements, while not illuminating anywhere with a great lamp's glow. Mind is like wind, when without location and without support it pervades the three times (= past, present, and future) with the perfume of morality and hearing. Mind is like space when eliminating views it is pure; and while pervading everything it does not follow the Māras (the tempters).

4) The fourth set is from Smṛtiñānakīrti's commentary on *Mañjuśrī-nāma-saṃgīti*, Chap. 10: « Inquiry-investigation » (*vitarka-vicāra*) is like fire. Unsteadiness is like wind. Pleasure-rapture (*sukha-prīti*) is like water. Firmness is like earth »<sup>9</sup>. The third set, from the *Ratnakūṭa*, emphasizes the benevolent, compassionate, and moral mind. The fourth set (Smṛti's) is based on Buddhist meditation theory.

Before assessing consistency of the pair, we must clarify Smṛti's technical remarks. Thus, « inquiry-investigation » is standard terminology for a feature of the First Dhyāna in what the Buddhist call « realm of form » (*rūpadhātu*) when the practitioner has succeeded in transcending the « realm of desire » (*kāmadhātu*). Unsteadiness refers to the meditative object in the First Dhyāna even though there is a « single-area of mind », required for *samādhi*. Pleasure-rapture also characterizes the First Dhyāna. Firmness might refer to what is called the first base of Mastery, prevalent in the First Dhyāna<sup>10</sup>.

Taking them individually, the mind that is like earth, carrying all burdens, without increase or decrease, seems consistent with the medi-

8. This was cited in Vajravarmaṇ's commentary on *Sarvadurgatipariśodhanatantra*, PTT, Vol. 76, p. 187-4-5.

9. This is the commentary *Mañjuśrī-nāmasaṃgīti-lakṣa-bhāṣya*, PTT, Vol. 75, p. 53-4-8: *rtog dpyod me dañ 'dra / yañ na gYo ba rluñ dañ 'dra / dga' bde chu / brtan pa sa.*

10. Cf. ALEX WAYMAN, *Aspects of Meditation in the Theravāda and Mahīśāsaka*, in « Studia Missionalia », Vol. 25, 1976, p. 14 and p. 25.

tative firmness of the First Dhyāna. It is somewhat far-fetched to take the sense of water as fostering people, eliminating their distress, to be at all consistent with the pleasure-rapture member. The simile of fire burning up defilements and glowing but not illuminating is consistent with the « inquiry-investigation » only if one knows more about Buddhist teaching of this member as equivalent to « insight » (*prajñā*) which is credited with eliminating defilements, especially when metaphorically called a fire<sup>11</sup>. This non-illumination character of the glowing fire is confirmed by another passage from the canon, *Dīgha-nikāya*, XXXI « The Sigāla Homily », as translated by the two Rhys Davids: « Whoso is virtuous and intelligent, shines like a fire that blazes [on a hill] », with commentarial gloss cited, « on a hill at night ». Again, there appears no obvious way to make the mind's like wind in pervading the three times, etc. consistent with the unsteadiness of the meditative object in the First Dhyāna. Therefore, two of the respective similes (for earth and fire) are apparently consistent, while two (for water and wind) are apparently inconsistent. The fifth element, space (*ākāśa*), is not my concern here<sup>12</sup>.

The Epic also, as cited in Sharma's work, speaks of the great all-pervading wind. It mentions also the mind's perturbation by way of the wind simile. The simile of water as eliminating distress is also in the Epic, as is the « fire of knowledge »<sup>13</sup>.

Now that the individual characters of the element similes in Buddhist texts have been somewhat defined with the help of those groups of four-element similes, it is well to show some other directions by individual similes.

A passage that takes earth and water in a somewhat adversative sense is in the *Samyutta-nikāya*, *Khandhavagga* (III, 55): « Monks, just as is the element of earth, so should be considered the four stations of perception (*viññānaṅgīhiti*)<sup>14</sup>. Monks, just as is the water element, so should be considered the lust for delights (*nandirāga*) ».

The wind has a few spirited comparisons. Thus, *Samyutta-nikāya*, *Salāyatanavagga* (IV, 218): « Monks, just as different kinds of winds

11. That is, the « inquiry » is a « coarse insight » and the « investigation » a « subtle insight » according to Asaṅga's *Viniścaya-saṃgrahaṇī*; cf. ALEX WAYMAN, *Calming the Mind and Discerning the Real*, New York, 1978, pp. 46-7; and for « insight » as a fire, WAYMAN, *Calming*, p. 405. Besides, in the theory of the Buddhist Dhyāna-s, the four elements as « totalities » (*P. kasīna*, *S. kṛtsna*) are assigned to the Second Dhyāna (Cf. WAYMAN, *Aspects of Meditation*, 5-8 and 25). Thus, Smṛti may have hinted at this « inquiry-investigation » member of the First Dhyāna as leading to the « element-totality » of fire in the Second Dhyāna.

12. Ancient buddhism ordinarily does not deal with a fifth element, the *ākāśa*, but in the Mahāyāna period, both in scriptures as here the *Ratnakūṭa* and in Buddhist Tantras the fifth one is frequently found in the relevant contexts.

13. SHARMA, *Elements*, pp. 50, 54, 31.

14. For the four stations, cf. A. WAYMAN, *Secret of the Heart Sutra*, in « Prajñā-pāramitā and Related Systems », L. Lancaster, ed. Berkeley, 1977, p. 143, where « perception » (*S. vijñāna*) is called « traveler at the crossroads ».

blow in space, eastern winds blow (and so the other directional winds), dusty winds blow (and also other kinds) — so also, monks, different kinds of feelings arise in the body, pleasurable feelings, painful feelings, and neutral feelings ». This is clearly related to Buddhist *karma* theory. So *Dharmasamuccaya*, Chap. XV, Pāpavarga, v. 53: « By reason of pleasure and pain, we wander in the ravine of phenomenal life, like waves of the ocean tossed about by the wind of *karma* » (*te vayan sukhaduḥkhabhyāṃ bhrāmyāmo bhavasamkaṭe / karmavāyusamud-bhrāntāḥ samudrasya yathormayaḥ*)<sup>15</sup>. The *Sutta-nipāta* has the simile, « Like wind not caught within a net » (P. *vāto 'va jālamhi asaḥjamāno*)<sup>16</sup>. The *Mahāvastu*, vol. III, has this simile four times, e.g. the Buddha proclaims: « Alone I the *muni* wander... like a lion not frightened among sounds, like the wind not caught in nets (*vātaṃ va jāleṣu asaḥjamānam*)<sup>17</sup>.

The fire comparisons involve some of the most famous passages of Buddhism. Probably best known is the third chapter of the *Saddharma-puṇḍarīkasūtra* (Scripture of the White Lotus of Illustrious Dharma), the *Upamā-parivarta*, containing the parable of the burning house, and emphasizing the expedient means (S. *upāya-kauśalya*) for enticing persons out of that house, which is of course the phenomenal world. That is a work of Mahāyāna Buddhism. Early Buddhism has the Fire Sermon, teaching that all constituents of the world are on fire, including: « All things, O monks, are on fire... The eye, O monks, is on fire... »<sup>18</sup>. A work intermediate between early Buddhism and Mahāyāna, the *Dharmasamuccaya*, Chapter VII, Kāmajugupsāvarga, has this (v. 134): « Just as someone through fear of fire uses that very fire, so also one confused by sense objects takes recourse to the sense objects » (*yathā vahni-bhayāt kaścīd vahnīm evopasevate / tathā viśayasammūḍho viśayān upasevate*)<sup>19</sup>. An earlier verse from the same work (*Dharmasamuccaya*, Chap. V, 200) has consistent sentiments: « For by this path have departed the gods, by the hundreds and by the thousands, burnt up by the fire of death, like the fuel which is the sense objects » (*anena hi pathā devāḥ*

15. *Dharma-Samuccaya*, 3<sup>e</sup> Partie, éd. et tr. par Lin Li-kouang, révision de A. BAREAU, J. W. de JONG, et P. DEMIÉVILLE (Paris, 1973), p. 114. The expression « wind of karma » also occurs in the embryological scripture of the *Ratnakūṭa* collection called *Āryāyusman-nandagarbhāvākṛāntinirdeśa-sūtra*, both smaller and larger versions, PTT, Vol. 23, p. 98 and p. 106.

16. From *Suttanipāta*, ed. by Bhikṣu Dharmaratna, Bānaras City, Khaggavisāṇa-suttaṃ, verse 37.

17. *Mahāvastu Avadāna*, Vol. III, ed. by R. BASAK, Calcutta, 1968, p. 169.

18. Cf. H. C. WARREN, *Buddhism in Translations*, Cambridge, Mass., 1947, pp. 351-53, tr. of « The Fire-Sermon » from the *Mahāvagga* of the Pāli Vinaya; and W. RAHULA, *What the Buddha taught*, Bedford, 1972 reprint, pp. 95-7, for the equivalent from the *Samyutta-nikāya*.

19. *Dharma-Samuccaya*, 2<sup>e</sup> partie (same editors as in n. 15, above), Paris, 1969, p. 168; in the same volume, Chap. X, v. 34, speaks of the « fire of sense objects » (*viśayānala*).

*śataśo 'tha sahasraśaḥ / gatāḥ kālāgninirdagdā viṣayendhanasaṃni-  
bhāḥ*)<sup>20</sup>.

Besides, there is the « hot seat » kind of fire. So in the *Mahāvastu*'s version of the *Dharmacakrapravartanasūtra* (Scripture Setting into Motion the Wheel of the Dharma), the « fortunate band of five » had made a resolution not to greet Gautama (who had recently become enlightened) as he approached. But: « As the Bhagavat was coming they did not rejoice in their respective seats. Just like birds on a nest or on the branch of a tree being scorched by a fire below would fly up, just so, as he was coming in the distance, finding no pleasure in their individual seats, the « fortunate band of five » got right up and went forward to greet the Bhagavat » (*Bhagavāṃ cāgacchati te ca svakasthāneṣu na ramanti. sayyathāpi nāma śakuntā nīdagatā vā vṛkṣaśākhaḡatā vā heṣṡato agninā saṃtāpiyamānā utpatetsuḥ, evam eva pañcakā bhadravargīyā dūrato evāgacchantasya svakasvakeṣv āsaneṣu ratim avindantā Bhagavantam pratyutthāyetsuḥ pratyudgametsuḥ*)<sup>21</sup>. This reminds us of Indra, who feels his seat getting « warm » if an ascetic by austerities is threatening to replace him on the seat.

The preceding — to use a hackneyed phrase — is but a « drop in the bucket », because the many Buddhist scriptures and commentarial literature could doubtless supply many more of relevant passages. Enough has been cited, I believe, to furnish an idea of how and why these similes are employed. It does seem that the similes do enable us to get the point, and perhaps that is why they appear capable of forming a bridge between one kind of literature and another.

20. *Dharma-Samuccaya*, 1<sup>re</sup> partie, éd. et tr. par Lin Li-kouang, Paris, 1946, p. 148; in the same volume, Chap. V, v. 151, speaks of the « fire of death » (*kālāgni*).

21. As presented in *Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit Reader*, ed. by Franklin Edgerton, New Haven, 1953, p. 17.