

Significance of Water from a Buddhist Perspective

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Introduction

The Buddha is neither a physiologist nor a chemist. So we cannot expect a lengthy discussions on the significance of water in Buddhist teachings, but as a great religious teacher who presented practical and empirical teachings we can find out scattered in his Dhamma important factors on water and its significance. 'Prevention is better than cure' is a famous saying in the modern field of health science. The above idea, however, cannot be considered modern, because the Āyurveda, one of the earliest sciences of medicine, also has said so in some of its early texts. (*rogāpaharaṇācresthā proktam roganivāraṇam*). Prevention or prophylaxis (*nivāraṇa* in Sanskrit and Pāli) is one purpose of Āyurveda, and therapy (*cikitsā* in Sanskrit, *tikicchā* in Pāli) is the other. There are various guiding principles given in Āyurveda and Buddhism for prophylaxis or prevention of diseases. The present paper considers only the Buddhist concept of water in so far as it is related to the concept of hygiene or prevention of disease.

In brief, the Buddhist concept of water related to health can be discussed under two points. The first is teachings common with other religions, cultures and modern attitudes, and the second is particular Buddhist teachings. In the common sense, though Buddhism and its culture honor and respect water very much they do not hold that spiritual purification is possible by mere physical bathe as some religious teachers held. The ultimate goal of spiritual purification, *nibbāna* is a result of 'inner bathe'. Considering clouds as gods who make rain, using the term *deva* for rain, appreciating preparing water shade as meritorious deeds are some example of changed attitudes in Buddhism towards water. The Buddhist perspective *nibbāna* is mental well being. The physical wellbeing is always conducive for the purpose of mental well being.

Water can be discussed under six themes, namely, water as a basic requirement, purity of water, spiritual well being and water, life of water and mental health and water. The discussion will be concluded by with an explanation of pointing out why the Buddha considered water to be so important.

A key aspect of the religious and cultural behavior of the eastern world is to attribute a special significance to water. In the Indian context, water is a symbol of god Viṣṇu who sustains life. Hindus believe that ablution at intersections of holy rivers has a great religious significance for their spiritual purification. The river Ganges is personified as goddess and other rivers, lakes, ponds, springs are also associated with local pantheon of gods or goddesses. Hymns in the Vedas record how people requested water from gods.

Not only Theravada Buddhists but also the Mahayanists and Tantrayanists respect and symbolize water as holly symbol. Tibetan Buddhists utilize water in rituals to clear hands, feet; face and mouth and Zen Buddhists pour water at funerals to represent the oceans which symbolize infinity. Japanese Buddhists frequently use basins of water for people to wash their hands in, or to drink from, before entering a sacred space.

Similarly, the other world religions such as Christianity and Islam involve water in their religious performances. Christian churches use water baptism to mark the beginning of religious life. Before entering a mosque for prayer, it is customary for Muslims to be purified with water. For this purpose, water is provided inside or outside of mosques. In Islam Ritual purity, called *tahara*, is required before performing religious duties especially *salat* worship.

Water as a basic requirement

As reflected in early Buddhist texts there are two types of water depending on their usage, drinking (*pānīya*) and washing (*paribhojanīya*). Although beings are able to live a few days without food none will be able to live if there is no drinking water. Usually, water makes up 55% to 78% of the human body. Not only humans but every living thing needs water for survival. It has helped to form the Earth as we are aware, and it covers over 70% of the Earth.

Even where there is land, much of it is covered with ice, which is nothing but solidified water. According to the teachings of the Buddha the physical body of a person is made of the 'four primary elements', (*cattāro mahābhūtā*): solidity (*pṭhavi*), which includes water (*āpo*) along with temperature (*tejo*) and mobility (*vāyo*).

Once a certain deity inquired from the Buddha how do the creatures who dwell on the earth sustain their life? The Buddha explained to him that every living being sustains his life by rain [*The Collected Discourses of the Buddha*, p. 128; *Samyuttanikāya I*, 1998: p.81]. Although according to the vinaya monks usually are not allowed to use anything that was not offered to them, water is not included in this category. As referred to in the *Carakasamhitā* there are four key points associated with environmental pollution; air, water, country and time. [*Carakasamhitā* 1960: p.263]

Keeping drinking and washing water separately was the usual practice in the Indian Buddhist monasteries. The Āgantuka vatta points out that the guest monk should inquire about drinking and washing water when he stays at a monastery, and in the same way, that the resident monk should guide him regarding the proper use of water. [*The Vinayapiṭaka II*, 1995: P.p.208, 209] The Cullagosiṅga sutta says Arahants who lived in the forest named Gosinga brought water together with their requisites [*Majjhimanikāya I*, 2002: Pp.205-211]. Once the Buddha said 'There are few beings that are born on land and more numerous are born in water. [(*appakā te sattā ye thalajā bahutarā sattā ye udakajā*)] *samyuttanikāya v*, 1994: P.467, *The book of the kindred sayings V*, 2005: P.392].

Details about the recitation of the Pātimokkha twice a month are found in the second section of the *Mahāvaggapāli*. The monks and nuns who gathered to the *sīmā* (special place for vinaya activities) for *uposatha kamma* are required to perform certain preliminary functions, among which is preparing water for drinking and washing [*The Pātimokkha* 2001: p.3].

The Buddha has recommended a well (*udapāna*), well hall (*udapānasālā*), cover (*apidhāna*), boat of water (*udakadoni*), a tube of water (*udakakoṭṭhaka*) etc., are connected to water, for the use of monks [*Vinayapitaka I*, 1997: p.205].

The Buddha and his disciples had bath for cleanliness of the physical body and stayed in their cloths a few minutes in the sun inner cloth. Use of hot water was also referred to in the early Buddhist texts. For example, a co-resident (*saddhivihārika*) should get up early in the morning and should give his teacher tooth-wood, with some water to wash his face and mouth. When the preceptor likes to go for alms food *saddhivihārika* should give the bowl after having it washed. When he comes back washing water should be prepared for him to wash his feet. When he is having alms, drinking water should be offered. If the preceptor wishes to bathe, *saddhivihārika* should prepare cool or hot water according to his wish [*The Book of the Discipline V*, 2001: Pp.212-213]. In this same way *antevāsika* should also behave towards his ācariya. Once when a certain monk, was bathing hot water, sperm was released from his body. [*The Vinayayapiṭaka III*, p.116]. How it could have happened may be explained according to the *Carakasamhitā* which says that bathe makes sanitation, increases life span, destroys tiredness and sweating, gives power and increases *ojas* [*Carakasamhitā*, 1960: p. 33]. There were water buckets in front of monks living places and they were used by monks for washing their feet before entering the residence (*pāde pakkhāletvā*). When the Buddha was living at Nigrodhārāma

in Kapilavatthu Sākyans made a new santhāgāra and invited the Buddha to bless it by using it first. The Buddha entered into the santhāgāra with a group of monks only after washing his feet and the Sākyans of Kapilavatthu [*Samyuttanikāya IV*, 2001: Pp.182-185].

The vaccakuṭi vatta says that a certain monk, who had born a Brahmin, did not wash after calling for nature and a worm born in his rectum. The Buddha's recommendation was to wash after calling for nature and he has recommended separate slipper (*pādukā*) named *ācamanapādukā* (slipper of rinsing washing) for motivation of monks [*The Vinayapiṭaka (Cullavaggapāli) II*, 1995: p.222].

The reason for the debate between the Koliya and Sākya clans was nothing other than water. The struggle was started by laborers of the two clans who disparaged another referring to their low origins. Finally, when the problem reached kings it turned into a war. The Buddha explained to them that human lives are more valuable than the water. [*The Commentary on the Dhammapada III*, 1993: Pp. 254, 255] The contribution made by the Buddha in this context was very useful for the development of the social health.

Purity of water

Although purity of water is highly conducive for physical well being, it is, as we know today: water pollution has become a major global problem. "Human infectious diseases are among the most serious effects of water pollution, especially in developing countries, where sanitation may be inadequate or non-existent. Waterborne diseases occur when parasites or other disease-causing microorganisms are transmitted via contaminated water, particularly water contaminated by pathogens originating from excreta. ...Developed countries are not immune to the problem of infectious waterborne diseases. In 1993, high cryptosporidium levels in Milwaukee's drinking water supply sickened more than 400,000 residents. That was an unusually extreme case, but transmission of disease agents such as bacteria and cysts via contaminated but poorly treated municipal water is more common than it should be. Every year, an estimated seven million Americans are sickened by contaminated water. This is only partly due to drinking water." [<http://www.grinningplanet.com/2006/12-05/water-pollution-effects.htm>]

The Buddha was very much concerned with the purity of water. According to him, monks and nuns who are the members of the Sangha should observe the following vinaya rule. 'I will not ease myself or spit in water, is a training to be observed' [The Book of the Discipline III, 2004: p.425, The Vinayapiṭaka IV, 2001: p.350]. When the Buddha prohibited answering a question of nature and urinating into pure water in the 6th century B.C. it must have been a widespread habit among people. In the modern world people rarely do it. The recommendation of water strainer (filter) made by a piece of cloth and various other filters like *danaparissāvana* (strainer with a handle), *kaṭacchuparissāvana* (perforated ladle), *ottharaka* (a kind of strainer), *damakaraka* (water bottle with strainer) is very useful for overcoming diseases which arise due to polluted water. Monks are not to start a long journey without strainer and if the strainer is not with him he has to use the corner of his robe to strain water. According to the Theravada tradition, for entering into the order one needs 'eight instruments' (*aṭṭhaparikkhāra*) and the strainer is one of them.

The *senāsana vatta* lists where, the lodgings should not be beaten: one must not beat lodgings near the monks, near dwelling places, near drinking water or washing water. [*na pāniya sāmanta senāsanam papphotetabbam. Na paribhojaniya sāmanta senāsanam papphotetabbam. The Vinayapitaka II*, 1995: p. 218].

According to the section on *āgantuka vatta*, when monks wash their feet, they should pour water with one hand and wash their feet with the other. They should not both pour water and wash their feet with the same hand [*(pāde dhovantena ekena hatthena udakam āsiñcitabbam.*

Ekena hatthena dhovitabbam. Na teneva hatthena udakam āsiñcitabbam. N teneva hatthena pādam dhovitabbam.) *The Vinayaṭṭaka II*, 1995: P.p.208, 209].

An effective way to preserve the purity of water is to change the attitudes of people. Changing the attitudes of people is an effective strategy recommended in Buddhist texts to protect the purity of water. Explanation of merit is one of the common practices that were utilized by religious teachers for motivating followers of them. The Buddhist canonical texts and their commentaries report various events related to this matter. Once a certain god came to the Buddha and asked as to whose merit increases by day and by night. The reply was that the merit of those who set up a park or a grove, or construct a bridge or construct watering shades or give a residence so increases [*Ārāmaropā vanaropā ye janā setukārakā papañca udapānañca yedadanti upassayam tesam divā ca ratto c sadā puññam pavaddhati. Sanyuttanikaya I*, 1998: P.70; *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha I*, P.122]. Udaka Dāyaka Thera offered water to the Vipassi Buddha and was born first in heaven and next in the human world owing to that merit, and finally, he attained arahant hood at the time of the Gotama Buddha [*Apadānapāli I*, 1961: p.354].

Water and spiritual well-being

Rain is one of the key sources of water and it facilitates spreading water for suitable to places. In Buddhist perspective, there is a close relationship between rain and spiritual well-being. The Vassantarāya sutta in the Aṅguttaranikāya enumerates five reasons of disturbing rain that were not known by fortune tellers (nemittakas). They are:

1. When above in the sky the fiery element rages the pent up storm clouds part their ways.
2. When above in the sky the windy element rages the pent up storm clouds part their ways.
3. When Rahu, the asura king, gathers water with his hand and spills it into the mighty ocean.
4. When the rain-cloud devās are indolent. (vassavalāhakā devā pamattā honti)
5. When men are not Dhamma-doers. (manussā adhammikā honti) [*The Book of Gradual Sayings III*, 2001: Pp. 177, 178; *The Aṅguttaranikāya III*, 1994: P.243]

In this context, two points are very much relevant to our discussion. The first is that rain-clouds are considered as devās and the second is that misbehavior of living beings could disturb rain. Gods in Buddhist perspective are not mere divine beings. Frequently, they have been depicted as moral concepts (devadhamma: hiri, ottappa) and as personifying the environmental elements like rain-clouds. According to the Buddhist perspective, Pajjuṅha, (Parjanya in Sanskrit) is the god due to rain.

Life of water

As we know some Indian religious teachers totally refrained from taking cool water because they believed that there were forms of life in water. For example, Jain teachers classified life and universe as animate (jīva) and inanimate (ajīva) objects. The animate was divided into five groups as *ekendriya* or one-sensed jīvas who have only the sense of touch, the *dvindriya* or two-sensed jīvas who have the organs of taste and touch, the *trindriya* or three-sensed jīvas who have touch, taste and smell, *caturindriya* or four-sensed jīvas who have touch, taste, smell and sight, and *pañcendriya* or five-sensed jīvas who have touch, taste, smell, sight and hearing.

The first group is subdivided in to earth-bodies, water-bodies, fire-bodies and vegetative-bodies (Bhattachariya, 1999: p: 49). The sāmaññaphala sutta in the Dīghanikāya indicates that Nighaṅṅhanāputta is bound by a fourfold restraint. They are; curbed by all curbs (*sabbavāri vārito*), enclosed by all curbs (*sabbavāri yuto*), cleared by all curbs (*sabbavāri dhuto*), and claimed by all curbs (*sabbavāri phuto*) [Dīghanikāya I. p.57]. The usage of *sabbavāri vārito* has

been interpreted as cool water in its commentary, the *Sumaṅgalavilāsinī* (*vārita sabba udako paṭikkhitta sabba sītadakoṭi attho*). The rest are translated as evil or papa [Dīghanikāya Atthakathā 1918: p.117]. However there is no common agreement on this matter. “They do not represent the genuine Jain teaching but seem to be parody it in punning from. The Jains do have a rule of restraint in regard to water, and vari ‘water’ ‘restraint’ or possibly ‘sin’ and some of the verbal forms are equally dubious. The references to one free from bonds and yet bond by this restraint (whatever they are) is a deliberate paradox” [*The Long Discourse of the Buddha, A translation of the Dīghanikāya, 1995: p: 545*]. However, the Āyāranga sūtra, one of the Jain sūtras, points out that Mahāvīra himself renounced cold water for more than two years [Pande, 1995: p.366].

The Buddhist view of the life of water is discussed in the *Milindapañha*. The king Milinda asked from Nāgasena Thera whether water was animate or inanimate. There is no animate in water according the Buddhist perspective and it has been proved by using various examples by the Ven. Nāgasena [*Milinda’s Question II, 1999: Pp.71-75*].

Mental health and water

In the contemporary society of the Buddha people who followed religious practices believed in various paths of purification They are; purification comes about through food, purification comes about from the round of rebirth, purification comes about from some particular kind of rebirth, purification comes about from some particular adobe, purification comes about from sacrifice, purification comes about fir ship [*Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha, 2009: Pp. 175, 176*]. Although the belief, purification comes about through water is not mentioned in above list, it was very familiar in the 6th century B.C. in India. Even though the Buddha respected and motivated to protect and advocated protection of water and water resources he did not believe purification results from water.

The Brahmin Sundarika Bharadvāja took bathe in the river Bahukā for the sake of purification. Once when the Buddha was preaching the Dhamma to monks the above mentioned Brahmin was sitting not far from the Buddha. At the end of the discussion he said “Does master Gotama go to the Bahukā River to bathe”? Then the Buddha asked why he was you going to the Bahukā river. His reply was that the Bahukā River is held by many as capable of washing away sins and giving liberation, it is held by many to produce merit, and many wash away their evil actions in the Bahukā River. The Buddha’s explanation was as follows.

“Bahukā and Adhikakkā,
Gayā and Sundarikā too,
Payā and Sarassati,
And the stream Bahumati,
A fool may there forever bathe,
Yet will not purify dark deeds.

What can the Sundarikā bring to pass?
What the Payāga? What the Bahukā?
They cannot purify an evil-doer,
A man who has done cruel and brutal deeds.

One pure in heart has ever more,
The feast of spring, the Holy Day,
One fair in act, one pure in heart
Brings his virtue to perfection.

It is here, Brahmin, that you should bathe,
To make yourself a refuge for all beings.
And if you speak no falsehood
Nor work harm for living beings,
Nor take what is offered not,
With faith and free from avarice,
What need for you to go to Gayā?
For any well will be your Gayā.”

[*The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*, 2009: p. 121]

Mental health is a result of physical bathe. ‘Mental bathe’ should be taken as mentioned in the same discourse. “When he knows and sees thus, his mind is liberated from the taint of sensual desire, from the taint of being, and from the taint of ignorance. When it is liberated there comes the knowledge: ‘it is liberated he understands: ‘Birth is destroyed, the holy life has been lived, what had to be done has been done; there is no more coming’ to any state of being’. Bhikkhus, this bhikkhu is called one bathed with inner bathing. Ayam vuccati bhikkhave bhikkhu sināto antarena sinānenāti [*The Middle length Discourses of the Buddha*, 2009: p.120].

In the same way, once, having known the practice of Sangārava, the Buddha went to see him. Buddha asked “It is needed true, Brahmin, that thou art a water purifier, and believest in purification by water; and dost thou make it a religion and morning.” The Brahmin’s reply was positive and again the Buddha asked “Now what advantage, Brahmin art thou looking for, in that thou believest and actest on this wise?” The Brahmin replied “In this way master Gotama, the evil deeds that I do during the day, these bathing I course to be borne away the some evening; the evil deeds that I do at night, these bathing I course to be borne away the next morning. That is the advantage I look for, in that I believe and act on this wise.” [*The Book of the Kindred Sayings I*, 1999: Pp. 231, 232].

The Therīgāthā refers to the discussion, made by Puṇṇā (Puṇṇikā) with her former husband. He took bathe at river regularly in the hope of liberation and believed that whoever young or old, could be purified by doing so. The Therī’s rejoinder was the following: if it is so, beings, like fish, frogs, tortoise, turtles, crocodiles who are living in the water, definitely will go to the heaven. The second, butchers, thieves, executioners and other evil doers also can be purified by taking bathe. The third if cold water can be taken away evil of beings it should be merits too [*The Thera and Therīgāthā*, 1999: P.146- 147].

The forty meditation subject of the *samatha* can be categorized into seven groups as ten kasinas, ten foulness, ten recollections, four divine-abidings, one perception, one defining. The ten kasinas are earth kasina, water kasina, fir kasina, air kasina, blue kasina, yellow kasina, red kasina, white kasina, light kasina, and limited space kasina. It is clear that the water kasina is one of the meditation subjects of the ten kasinas. *Sesakasina niddesa* of the Visuddhimagga describes how the subject of āpokasina can be grasped. The venerable Cūlasīva thought to abandon gains and live a secluded life. Then he boarded a ship at Mahatittha and sailed to Jambudīpa. On his way to Jambudīpa, it is said that he took the ocean as the subject of his meditation named *āpo kasina* [*The Path of Purification* 1956: Pp.104, 177].

After the death of her husband, two children, brother, and parents, Patācārā was distracted and went to Sāvatti. She attained *sotāpanna* at the end of the Buddha’s first preaching and received ordination. One day when she was washing her feet she noticed how washed water trickled and reflecting following manner: sometimes water can go short distance, sometimes further, and sometimes furthermore. Likewise mortals die either in childhood (*pathamavaye*), in at middle age (*majjhimavaye*) or in old-age (*pacchimavaye*) [*Therīgāthā Aṭṭhakathā*, 1998:

p.109]. According to the Buddhist teachings water can be a subject of meditation but it does not have power to purify; mental development alone can do so. In other words, there is no liberation through physical bath.

Why the Buddha considered water to be very important.

It is very clear how the Buddha behaved toward water, and now the question is why the Buddha paid so much attention to water. According to Buddhism there are two types of diseases; physical and mental. The final goal of Buddhism, *nibbāna*, is the ultimate state of mental wellbeing. Both physical and mental wellbeing are mutually dependent and mutually supportive. Since physical well-being, without mental well-being is impossible, depends on water, the Buddha seems to have valued water so much.

Conclusion

When we pay attention to the above mentioned facts the Buddhist perspective on water can be divided into two. The first are the notions common to other religious cultures and akin to modern attitudes. The second are notions specific to Buddhist thought. It is the common knowledge that Buddhism and its culture honor and respect water very much. When some religious teachers were teaching purification through water by washing all evils, the Buddhist standpoint was that there is no spiritual purification through just physical bath. The ultimate goal in Buddhism, *nibbāna* is a result of inner bathe as mentioned in the *Vatthūpama sutta* of the *Majjhimanikāya*.

A serious problem in the present world is the pollution of water and its sources. Buddhism recommends various methods for the maintenance of the purity of drinking and washing water. The recommendation of water strainer and prohibiting urinating and spiting in to water are such methods. It is not only the care for health but also there is a right of water to survive with purity. What determined the Buddhist attitude was not merely the care for health but also the belief that water had to be kept clean as a part of nature. Considering clouds as gods who make rain, using the term *deva* for rain, appreciating preparing water shade as meritorious deeds are some of the ways Buddhism has adopted to change attitudes of people towards water.

Nibbāna is the ultimate form of mental well being according to Buddhism. Physical wellbeing always supports the purpose of mental well being. Therefore, the Buddha was neither a physiologist nor was a chemist, but he had done great contribution as a religious teacher.

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