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Unity of Spirit and Matter:
Qi and Science

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BUDDHIST VIEWS OF NATURE AND QI

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Qi plays a significant role in Chinese philosophy and other thoughts with Chinese influence as we have seen in the various papers presented in this conference. But when the study turns towards Buddhism, especially Theravada Buddhism, one finds the emphasis of Qi is strangely missing or given very limited place.

Therefore it is very difficult to write this paper as assigned that is to focus the importance of Qi within the context of Buddhist view of nature. To overcome this problem, I have actually presented the paper in two parts: part A. Buddhist View of Nature and B. The Place of Qi in Buddhism.

Whether or not there is any link between these 2 parts I shall leave it to the knowledgeable discussant and the participants to give their valuable suggestions and points to discuss.

A. Buddhist View of Nature

I. The Description of the Physical World.

The Buddha's teachings as contained in the Pali Canons speak volumes for the objectivity of the material world. The word used to denote the "world", "earth",

or "universe" is the world (loka). Traditionally the world is of three kinds, viz., (1) the world of formation (sankhara loka), (2) the world of beings (satta loka), and (3) the world in space (okasa loka).¹ This classification undoubtedly covers the whole universe and every created thing which we term "nature".

From the astronomical point of view, it is interesting to note that the vastness of space and the immensity of time are affirmed. It is pointed out that in the vastness of cosmic space are located an innumerable number of worlds. As it is stated in the Culani Sutta² in the following manner:

"As far as moon and sun move in their course and light up all quarters with their radiance, so far extends the thousand fold world-system. Therein are a thousand moons a thousand suns, a thousand Sinerus, lords of mountains: a thousand Jambudipas, a thousand Aparagoyanas, ... and a thousand Brahma worlds. This, Ananda, is called 'the system of the thousand lesser worlds'. A system of thousand fold the size of this is called 'the twice-a-thousand middling thousand fold world-system'. A system a thousand fold the size of this is called 'the thrice-a-thousand mighty thousand fold world system'."

There seems to be a twofold way of expressing and describing nature in the texts, namely, a true description and an analogy, both of which were somehow drawn from well known facts of life and surroundings of the time, in the northern districts of Jampudipa or India. The followings world districts of Jampudipa or India. The followings would, then help us

realize that early Buddhists were lovers of nature; and things interconnected are fully visualized.

The Sutta-Nipata³ one of the earlier scriptures, gives an interesting account of the variety of species that exists in plants and animals while men are only of one kind. Here the Buddha says:

"Know ye the grass and the trees, although they do not exhibit (it), the marks that constitute species are for them, and (their) species (are) manifold. Then know ye the worms, and the moths, and the different sort of ants, the marks that constitute species are for them, and (their) species are manifold.

Know ye also the four-footed (animals), small and great, the marks that constitute species are for them, and (their) species are manifold.

Know ye also the serpents, the long-backed snakes, the marks that constitute. Then know ye also the fish which range in water the marks that constitute species are for them, and (their) species are manifold.

Then know ye also the birds that are borne along on wings and move through the air, the marks that constitute species are for them, and (their) species are manifold.

As in these species the marks that constitute species are abundant, so in men the marks that constitute species are not abundant."

Again, regarding things on this planet seen and unseen (or even unknown), in this Jambudipa trifling in number are the pleasant parks, the pleasant grove, the pleasant grounds and lakes, while more numerous are the steep precipitous places, unfordable rivers, dense thickets of stakes and thorns, and inaccessible mountains- just so few in number are those beings that born on land; more numerous are the beings that are

born in water. Just so few in number are the beings that are reborn among men; more numerous are the beings that are born among others than men."⁴

To narrate the beauty of nature, the Jataka (Birth-Stories) fills with such an account, some of which are as follows:

"The foliage of the peper-tree in that fair spot
is seen,
No dust is ever blown aloft, the grass is
ever green.
The grass like a peacock's neck,
soft-cotton to the touch,
Grow never more than inches four,
but always just so much.
Kapittha, mango, rose-apple
and ripe figs dangling low,
All trees whose fruit is good to eat
in that fine forest grow.
There sweet and clean and fragrant streams
as blue as beryl flow.
Through which disporting up and down
the schools of fishes go.
A lake lies in a lovely spot,
with lilies blue and white,
Hard by, like that which is in heaven
in the Garden of Delight.
Three kins of lilies in that lake
present them to the sight,
With varied colours: some are blue,
some blood-red, others white." 5

On the eastern side of this same Himalaya, the king of mountains, are green-flowing streams, having their source in slight and gentle mountain slopes; blue, white, and the hundred-leafed, the white lily and the tree of paradise, in a region overrun and beautiful with all manner of trees and flowering shrubs and creepers, resounding with the cries of swans, ducks and geese, inha-

bited by troops of monks and ascetics..." 6

This is the report and the fame thereof; a region yielding from its soil all manner of herbs, overspread with many a tangle of flowers, ranged over by the elephant, gayal, buffalo, deer, yak, spotted antelope, rhinoceros, elk, lion, tiger, panther, bear, wolf, hyena, otter, kadali antelope, wild cat, long-eared hare..." 7

Those liberated person known as arahats were fully aware of the aesthetic aspect of nature. Thus, Kassapa, the great, expressed his appreciation of nature in this manner:

"Returned from alms-begging, climbing the
the rock, Kassapa, meditates, without
grasping, his task done, without asavas.
Spread with garlands of kareri, the regions
of the earth are delightful,
Resounding with elephants those lovely rocks
delight me.
Those rocks delight me, the colour of blue
clouds, beautiful, cool with water, having
pure streams, overed with Indagopaka
insects." 8

Nature-study again finally led the monks and nuns to the final victory of perfection::

"As trees and shrubs refreshed by rain
Bud forth and fragrance spread,
So I enjoying lonely gain,
Should virture show instead." 9

"As plant uprooted still lives a while,
So I continue in this life vile,
Of earthly rebirth the wheel I broke
When understanding in me awoke." 10

It is clear from the above study that early Buddhist communities lived very closely in nature, appre-

ciation for nature can be seen throughout the numerous texts. Man and nature is closely related in Buddhism.

II. The Explanations On Natural Phenomena.

As the idea of Creator-God is quite alien to Buddhism, all natural occurrences are accounted for in terms of the Laws of Dependent Origination (Paticca Samuppada) viz.,

1. When this, that is (=when A is, B is)
2. This arising, that arises (=A arising, B arises)
3. When this is not, that is not (=when A is not, B is not),
4. This ceasing, that ceases (= A ceasing, B ceases) ¹¹

Hence, in the case of the world, the Aggañña Sutta ¹² explains thus; "There comes a time, when, sooner or later, after the lapse of a long, long period, this world passes away. And when this happens, beings have mostly been reborn in the World of Radiance; and there they dwell, made of mind, feeding on rapture, self-luminous, traversing the air, continuing in glory; and thus they remain for a long, long period of time. There comes also a time, when sooner or later this world begins to re-evolve. When this happens, beings who had deceased from the World of Radiance, usually come to life as humans. And they become made of mind, feeding on rapture.... and remain thus for a long, long period of time."

After that, earth with its savor was spread out in the waters, and it became colourful and tasty. Beings were attracted to it and began to feast. In so doing,

their self-luminance faded away, and then upon the moon and the sun became manifest, and so did star-shape and constellations. Thereupon, night and day, months and years came to pass. Then their bodies became solid, some well favoured and some ill favoured. The Sutta continues in this manner, and finally the evolution of human society came into existence in toto.

Although a great earthquake always accompanies significant events in the life of the Buddha, yet one of the causes runs in this way;

"Since, Ananda, this great earth rests on water and the water on wind and the wind subsists in space; what time the great winds blow. They cause the water to quake, and the quaking of water causes the earth to quake." 13

Once a certain brahmin came to the Buddha and asked the cause of a human decrease. The Buddha's answer shows that when men are tainted with defilements nature acts irregularly:

"Again, brahmin, since folk are ablaze with unlawful lusts, overwhelmed by depraved longings, obsessed by wrong doctrines, on such as these the sky rains not down steadily. It is hard to get a meal. The crops are bad, afflicted with mildew and grown to mere stubs. Accordingly many come by their end." 14

That human conduct, moral or immoral, has significantly affected the courses of nature is fully warranted in the text. Here, the Buddha described the situation in a Paticcasamuppada fashion thus: "At such time, monks, as rajahs (kings) are unrighteous, the ministers of the kings also are unrighteous. When ministers are unrighteous, brahmins and householders are also unrighteous. Thus, townsfolk and villagers

are unrighteous. This being so, moon and sun go wrong in their courses. This being constellations and stars do likewise; days and nights, months and fortnights, seasons and years are out of joint; the winds blow wrong, out of season. Thus the devas (gods) are annoyed. This being so, the sky-deva bestows not sufficient rain. Rains not falling seasonably, the crops ripen in wrong season, men who live on such crops are short-lived, ill favoured, weak and sickly."¹⁵

On the contrary, when kings are righteous so are the ministers and the rest, moon and sun go right in their courses, and so do the others. Then, concludes the Buddha with the following stanza:

"When kine are crossing, if the bull go straight.
They all go straight because his course
is straight.
So among men, if he who's reckoned best
Lives righteously, the others do so too.
The whole realm dwells in happiness
if the rajah lives aright." 16

Then, there comes a time, in some age at the end of some vast period, when a second sun rises. This results in an end to all the streams and tarns. When a third sun appears, all the great rivers are no more. The situations unfold in this manner until a seventh sun comes up. Thereupon:

"This earth and Sineru, king of mountains,
burst into flames, blaze up and become a single
sheet of flame. And the fiery beam of the
blaze and the burn of the great earth and
of Mount Sineru, thrown up by the winds, reaches
even to Brahma's world. The peaks of Mount Si-
neru, measuring one, two, three, four and five
hundred leagues, as it blazes and burns, van-
quished and overwhelmed by the vatness of the
fiery mass, crumble away. Out of the blaze and
the burn of the great earth and Mount Sineru,
there is neither cinder nor ash to be found." 17

Therefore, it is quite clear that, from the Buddhist point of view, things are interdependent and thus conditional upon each other as the laws of Buddhist dialectic prevail, whereby When A is, B is, and so on. It shows that cause and effect, the sequences of events, play a significant role in nature. That is to say, all are natural phenomena or natural processes; nothing is arbitrary. This is quite important and practical because it means we can direct the situation at hand and work out what is desirable by creating a favourable cause and condition, and by avoiding what will produce a negative result.

B. The Place of Qi in Buddhism

In Theravada Buddhism, the term Qi is not known, instead prāṇa is used. Therefore prāṇa will be used throughout this paper. In Vedic Sanskrit "Prāṇa" is identical with "Brahman" as the metaphysical life-principle, and with breath as the physical life-principle. According to Saṅkara, prāṇa implies the vital current of air, associated with the nostrils and mouth, and connected with the heart and is applied to both the breathing in and out. It is "prāṇa" in the sense of "animating" and "supporting". In the Yoga philosophy prāṇa is both inspiration and expiration.¹⁸

In Buddhist context, prāṇa (Sanskrit) appears as pāna in Pali, meaning the life breath. When a person passed away it is said that he lost his prāṇa, therefore prāṇa is not ordinary breath but vital or animated breath. A person may stop breathing temporarily but still maintains prāṇa. However Theravāda Buddhism refers to prāṇa only in physical level and does not make any link with the cosmic vital force as in Chinese philosophy, or the metaphysical life-principle as appears in Vedic Sanskrit.

This may be due to the fact that Buddhism gives primary concern to the problems a man is facing in the immediate presence. Hence it provides the teaching on prāṇa in practical level. How a man can control the prāṇa to benefit him most, etc. Once he is well balanced from within, naturally it should be in agreement and in accord with the cosmic force. Instead of projecting outward and study the cosmic force Buddhism is at its best in searching for knowledge to understand form within in order to achieve spiritual enlightenment.

To be able to walk on the rough surface of the earth, one can cover the whole earth with innumerable pieces of soft leather or carpets, or one can simply wear leather shoes. Buddhism has taken the latter mean towards the understanding and utilizing the prāṇa. That is to work with the physical prāṇa within each individual in order to understand the truth of life and the world.

With this understanding, this paper will now proceed to explain the meaning and usage of prāṇa as appear in Buddhist texts.

Prāṇa or pāna is mentioned in connection with one particular method of meditation known as Ānāpānasati, "mindfulness in regard to breathing". ana is in-breathing, apana is out-breathing and sati is mindfulness. Hence Ānāpānasati meditation means "the concentration induced by, or based upon the mindfulness which apprehends both in-breathing and out-breathing".¹⁹ This meditation is praised by the Buddha and recommended it as a complete method for attaining Nirvāṇa,²⁰ also to destroy all the evil thoughts.²¹ The practice of this meditation will induce one-pointedness of mind to further spiritual advancement.

Visuddhimarga explains anapanasati meditation in great length. The Buddha again and again advised his followers to practice this meditation.

"Monks, this concentration on mindfulness of respiration, being cultivated and practiced, tends to the peaceful, the sublime, the sweet and happy: at once it causes every evil thought to disappear and tranquillizes the mind." 21

The Buddha himself practised this meditation as we find:

"Monks, I then used to spend most of my time in this practice of ānāpānasati meditation; and as I lived practising it, neither my body nor my eyes were fatigued; as the result of it my mind was free from the asavas." 23

Ānāpānasati meditation has been set forth in sixteen stages²⁴ and further divided into 4 parts, each contains four exercises. These stages will be discussed briefly so that one might have a glimpse of the process.

I. 1 He is aware of breathing- in long.

I/ 2 He is aware of breathing-out long.

These two stages are actually beginning of the practice concerning mindfulness of breathing. It recognises and distinguishes between the two activities involved in breathing, the comprehension of which makes the disciple mindful. Here the mind becomes diverted from the notion of long breathing, and is established in equanimity.

3. "Realizing the whole body, I shall breath in....out"

Thus he trains himself.

Through the mindfulness associated with the full knowledge of breathing, he develops higher concentration and wisdom, which necessarily presuppose the previous training in virtue.

4. "Calming the body element I shall breathe in ...out,"

Thus he trains himself.

In this exercise the disciple comes to the last stage of the meditation method, wherein he experiences complete tranquility of body and thereby attains complete meditation.

By the exercise of meditation his previously restless body and mind become tranquillized and the grossness of breathing gradually subsides. There in the first stage it assumes rhythm which induces physical repose and stirs the brain to calm and smooth functioning. The disciple therefore controls his breath in such a manner as not to fill the cavity of the of the nose with a deep and thick volume of air, but breathes in and out with view to restraining the violence and magnitude of his breaths, and then makes the effort to maintain rhythmical breathing until he attains the Jhana state.

II. This part explains a method of developing the ānāpāna-sati meditation to Vipassana (insight), a method which is known as Vedanānupassanā Satipaṭṭhāna and involves both meditation and insight.

5. "Experiencing the joy, I shall breathe in...out."

Thus he trains himself.

In this stage the disciple experiences joy, is full of joy, throughout the course of his meditation and all its stages such as contemplating, realizing, reflecting, possessing faith, energy, mindfulness, concentration, etc.

6. "Experiencing happiness I shall breathe in...out"

Thus he trains himself.

This exercise refers to the first 3 jhanas (contemplations) wherein the disciple experiences the happiness induced by the object of mindfulness of respiration and the clarity of his mental vision.

7. "Experiencing the thought elements I shall breathe in...out." Thus he trains himself.

In this exercise the disciple fully realizes the mental elements associated with all the jhana stages.

8. "Tranquillizing the thought elements I shall breathe in....out." Thus he trains himself.

In this stage the disciple trains himself with a view to tranquillizing and refining mental factors of a gross and low type. They are bound up with feeling and perception which are associated with zest and happiness. Zest and happiness, however, are the concomitants of feelings which may bind him to jhana state, and thus hinder him from further attainments. The disciple, therefore, contemplates the transitory nature of feeling and develops insight, and so out grows the ordinary delight experience in jhanas.

III. The thrice part deals with contemplation of mind.

9. "Realizing the mind I shall breathe in...out."

Thus he trains himself.

The disciple who has attained the jhana states contemplates the transitory nature of the mind in each jhana and realizes that it is changing from moment to moment.

10. "Gladdening the mind I shall breathe in...out."

Thus he trains himself.

In this stage of meditation the mind is gladdened first by the joy that is experienced then by rising from jhana he contemplates the transitory nature of the joy associated therewith.

11. "Concentrating the mind I shall breathe in...out."

Thus he trains himself.

In this stage the mind must be well focussed on the object by means of the first jhana, the second jhana and so on. On the arising of insight there is a momentary concentration of mind induced by the realization of the characteristics. By means of this he focusses the mind which he practises the breathings.

12. "Releasing the mind I shall breathe in...out."

Thus he trains himself.

In this stage, setting free the mind he practises the breathings. In the first jhana he releases the mind from the hindrances. By means of the second Jhana the mind is released from reasoning and investigation, by means of the third Jhana from zest, by means of the fourth jhana from happiness and pain. Entering into and then rising from those Jhanas he contemplates the mind associated with them and knows it as transient and impermanent.

iv. The last part of Anapanasati exercise deals with contemplation of mental objects.

13. "Contemplating transitoriness I shall breathe in...out."

Thus he trains himself.

In this stage he contemplates on the transitoriness that is inherent in the 5 aggregates, of which rising, falling and changing are the natural characteristics. Discern each of them as impermanent.

14. "Discerning freedom from passion, I shall breathe in....out." Thus he trains himself.

Here two kinds of freedom is explained: the freedom which is detached from compounded things, all of which are but fleeting and evanescent and Nirvāṇa, the absolute freedom. The former is the insight that is guided to the latter.

15. "Discerning cessation I shall breathe in ...out."

Thus he trains himself.

The cessation is of two kinds: the momentary and the absolute. The momentary cessation implies the gradual elimination of the asavas (mental bindings) at different stages of the practice. The absolute cessation is Nirvāṇa, the final goal.

16. "discerning renunciation I shall breathe in...out.

Thus he trains himself.

The term renunciation is applied to insight and also to the Path viewed as an "abandoning", that is abandoning in the sense of "giving up" and in that of "surpassing."

First, insight, in the course of its gradual development, causes the giving up or abandoning of mental impurities and with them the forces that cause the aggregates to combine. Secondly, insight, bringing a realization of the faults of conditioned things, leads the mind towards Nirvana, surpassing all lesser states and attachments that are by nature opposed to the attainment of that sublime goal.

This fourth part of the Ānāpānasati exercise is regarded as pure insight, while the preceding three are both meditation and insight. This meditation by itself tends to the attainment of all that is necessary by self-enlightenment; for according to this scheme of practice Anapanasati becomes the root from which springs the fulfilment of knowledge and emancipation.

We have seen clearly in the above meditation exercise, that in Buddhism prāṇa is treated as a mean to an end, namely enlightenment. The mindfulness on the breathing in and out is used as the most immediate tool for concentration of mind and finally for the realization which is the supreme goal of Buddhism. There are various meditation techniques, 40 of meditations and 6 of insights. So far the mindfulness of the breathing in and out is one of the most commonly practiced in both meditation level and insight level mainly because it has been found the most effective technique for spiritual practice throughout Thailand and also in other Buddhist countries.

FOOTNOTES

1. Phra Rajavaramuni, A Dictionary of Buddhism (Bangkok: Mahachula Buddhist University, 1965, pp.70-71)
2. F.L.Woodward (tr.) Anguttara-Nikāya, Vol.I, (London: The Pali Text Society, 1960), p.207
3. V.Fausboll (tr), The Sutta-Nipata, (Delhi: Motilal Barnasidass, 1968), p.111
4. F.L.Woodward (tr.), Op.cit., p.31
5. Prof.E.B.Cowell (ed.), The Jataka, Vol.VI, (London: The Pali Text Society, 1957), p.277
6. Ibid., Vol.V, p.227
7. Ibid., p.222
8. K.R.Norman (tr.), Theragāthā, (London: The Pali Text Society, 1969), pp.97-98
9. G.P.Malalasekera (Ed.), Encyclopaedia of Buddhism, Fascicle 4, (Colombo: The Government of Ceylon, 1965), p.525
10. Ibid.
11. M.II, p.32 and passim.
12. T.W.Rhys Davids (tr.) Digha-Nikāya, Vol.III, (London: The Pali Text Society, 1965), pp.81-82
13. E.H.Hare (tr.), Anguttara-Nikāya Vol.III, (London: The Pali Text Society, 1961), p.209
14. F.L.Woodward (tr.), Op.cit., p.142
15. Ibid., Vol.II, pp.84-85
16. Ibid., p.85
17. E.H.Hare (tr.), Op.cit., Vol.IV, p.67
18. Patañjali Yoga Sutra II, 29 as quoted in Buddhist Meditation, Vajirañāna Mahāthera, Colombo, 1962, p.232
19. Ibid., p.230
20. Ibid., p.227
21. Visuddhimarga (Thai translation) Bangkok. Mahamakut Press, B.E.2523, p.84.
22. M.iii.82; S.v.311, 321, 322; Vin.iii, 70 as quoted in Op.cit., p.235.
23. Ibid., 236.
24. For details please see Ibid., p.238-256.