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# THE OPEN COURT

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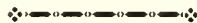
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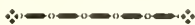


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BUDDHA WALKING ON THE WATER

*Frontispiece to The Open Court*

## WALKING ON THE WATER IN INDIAN LITERATURE

BY W. NORMAN BROWN

THE act of walking on water is in India to be regarded merely as one of several ways of crossing water magically, all of which are frequently illustrated in the literature. The other ways are to walk through water that has magically been reduced in depth, and to fly across the water (or, to disappear and suddenly reappear across the water). These three ways are not marked off from one another by hard and fast divisions, but sometime in variants of the same story are interchangeable. They come from a period of great antiquity, the earliest instances appearing in the Rigveda and being therefore not later than 800 B. C., and are again all securely founded on native Indian metaphysical doctrines. These doctrines provide four means of accomplishing the miracle: first, religious act; second, the magic power of truth, being a specialized variant of the first; third, the psychic power of levitation; and fourth, the magic aid of the Buddha—this last means having affinities to the first and third.

### A. RELIGIOUS ACT

The earliest example of crossing water magically appears in Rigveda 3.33, where it is accomplished by means of a religious act. The hymn is famous, celebrating the crossing of the rivers Vipāś and Sutudrī, the modern Beas and Sutlej in the Panjab, by a force of Aryans under Sudās. We need not press the hymn too closely for a historical basis, although it may well have one—a raid upon a neighboring Aryan tribe or upon non-Aryan Dasyus, or perhaps a definite step in the advance of the Aryans across northern India. The hymn is in the form of a dialogue between the rishi Viśvāmītra and the two Rivers.

1. (*Viśvāmītra*) Forth from the lap of the mountains,  
eager, unloosed, like a pair of mares in a race, like two bright  
mother cows licking (their young), the Vipāś and the Sutudrī

hasten (flowing) with milk.

2. Driven by Indra, seeking a free course, these two, as though yoked to a chariot, go toward the sea. Leaping over each other with your waves and swelling, each of you seeks the other, O bright ones.

3. I have come here to the most motherly of rivers; we have arrived at Vipāś, the broad, the lovely; licking each other, like mothers a calf, they flow on together to their common bed.

4. (*Rivers*) We two streams here, swelling with milk, flow on to our god-appointed bed. Not to be stopped is our flood in its full rush; what does the priest wish shouting to the rivers?

5. (*Viśvāmītra*) Stay for a moment, in your courses, you pious ones, at my call accompanied with *soma*. My mighty prayer is to the river; in need of help the son of Kuśika has shouted out.

6. (*Rivers*) Indra, who has a club for his arm, dug out a hole for us; he slew Vṛtra, who blocked the rivers; god Savitar, the fair-handed, led us; at his urging we go forth wide.

7. (*Viśvāmītra*) For ever must this hero deed of Indra be praised, that he cut to pieces the serpent: with his club he smote away the restraints; forth came the waters eager for their course.

8. (*Rivers*) This word, O singer, forget not, that future generations may make it resound of thee; in hymns, O bard, show us favor; humiliate us not among men. Reverence to thee!

9. (*Viśvāmītra*) Pray listen, Sisters, to the bard; he has come to you from afar with wagon and chariot: pray bow down yourselves; become easy to cross. O rivers, be lower than the axles with your streams.

10. (*Rivers*) We shall heed thy words, O bard; thou hast come from afar with wagon and chariot. Low shall I bow myself like a blooming young woman; like a maiden to her lover I shall yield to thee.

11. (*Viśvāmītra*) Just as soon as the Bharatas have crossed thee, an eager horde in search of booty, incited by Indra, the flood shall flow on in full rush—I ask the favor of you, the worshipful.

12. The Bharatas have crossed over seeking booty; the priest has won the favor of the rivers; you shall swell forth refreshing, bounteous; you shall fill up your beds, move on swiftly.

13. May your waves reach up as far as the hubs, but, O waters spare the reins; and let not the two innocent, faultless oxen come to harm.

It is clear from vs. 5 that Viśvāmītra's success is due to the

efficacy of his pious act; it operates as a charm or spell to make the waters subside and allow the hosts to pass over. Not merely does it influence the goddesses of the river; it also secures the rishi the aid of Indra; for the mention of his name in the hymn is by no means incidental or merely reminiscent of his great feat, so frequently celebrated in the Rigveda, of freeing the pent up waters from the envious clutch of the arch-demon Vṛtra. Rather, Indra has a definite part to play here as the master of the rivers, a phase of his wider connection with the waters, for he, like Varuṇa, is the regent of the heavenly and earthly waters,<sup>2</sup> and in post-Rigvedic times he becomes *par excellence* a rain god. The feat of crossing these streams is definitely ascribed to Indra's favor in RV 3.53.9, "The great rishi . . . stayed the billowy river; when Viśvāmitra led Sudās, Indra had pleasure in the Kuśikas." Twice again, the feat is mentioned as due to Indra's help, although the rishi making the prayer is not Viśvāmitra but his rival Vasiṣṭha: RV 7.18.5, "Yea, the wide spread floods Indra made into fords, easy to cross, for Sudās," and RV 7.33. Similar help in crossing rivers is given by Indra to Turvīti and Vayya in RV 2.13.12 and RV 4.19.6, to Turvīti alone in RV 1.61.11, to Turvaśa and Yadu in RV 1.174.9, and to a person unnamed in RV 2.15.5. The phenomenon is thus securely established in the tradition of the Rigveda; at the very dawn of Hindu literature we find it present, and we find for it likewise a clear solid basis in the theology—Indra as god of the waters miraculously renders them passable to his worshippers.

There is another point to be observed in connection with these legends. As far as the text gives us specific information the rivers became passable not because they ceased flowing and provided passage on dry land, as did the Jordan for the Hebrews, not because they became solid as we shall later see the Euphrates did for Alexander, not because the men obtained some magic power that enabled them to overcome the law of gravity and walk on the surface of the water, as did Jesus, Peter, and many Indian characters, but because their depth was lessened and they were made fordable. Of all the ways that rivers could be crossed magically, this is the simplest and the one most likely to be inspired in literature by some actual occurrence. A rationalizer of Rigvedic legend might well say that the forces of Sudās, waiting to cross the Beas and the Sutlej, were

<sup>2</sup>Cf. Griswold, *Religion of the Rigveda*, pp. 181 f., 187 ff., 202 ff.; Keith, *Religion and Philosophy of the Veda and the Upanishads*, p. 129

favored by an unexpected subsidence of the rivers, and that out of this happening grew the legend that Viśvāmītra or Vasiṣṭha accomplished a miracle by securing the aid of the god. We shall later find in Western Asia similar tales of crossing rivers when they suddenly grew shallow, to the amazement of observers, who ascribed the unusual occurrence to divine interposition. In the same way the Hebrew legend of passing through the Red Sea is explained as based on the rising of a mighty wind that blew back the waters, a possible historical incident to which later tradition added supernatural elements, with the result that we not only find one miracle of divided waters in the Old Testament, but others secondarily derived from it concerning the Jordan, which can have no such rational basis.

The remaining ancient legends in India that illustrate magical crossing of water are, as far as my observation extends, more narrowly based on one or the other of three specific metaphysical doctrines: either the efficacy of the power of truth; the levitational powers of the religious adept; or the magical aid of the Buddha.<sup>3</sup>

#### B. ACT OF TRUTH

In very early times in India the speaking of truth became invested with magic power. The notion seems based on ideas found in the Rigveda, although we have not, as far as I am aware, documentary evidence that it was recognized before the period of the Brāhmaṇas, but this in itself carries us back to a time prior to 600 B. C. The starting point seems to be the *satyam ṛtaṃ ca* of the Rigveda, "truth and cosmic order", which are subject to the god Varuṇa; but we must be careful not to read an ethical concept into this phrase, especially when it serves as the foundation of later sacrificial magic performances. In the Brāhmaṇas the truth that is so potent is the truth of exactitude in the sacrifice, a ritual or ceremonial accuracy. The idea is brought out by Keith, from whom I

<sup>3</sup>There is a reference in Mahābhārata 7.61.9 to the pious king Dilīpa, whose chariot did not sink in the water, but no story is given. The age of the passage is uncertain, for the text in which it appears may have been put in its present form any time between 400 B. C. and 400 A. D., although it is safe to say that the tradition itself is older than the text.

A story in which a river is induced to favor one in need is that in the Bhāgavata Purāṇa 10.3.50, where a river gives passage to the infant Krishna, whose father is fleeing with him from the evil Kāṇsa. The same legend appears in Bhāsa's drama Bālacarita: Vasudeva flees with the infant Krishna; the darkness is impenetrable, but a marvellous light comes from the child, and the Yamunā makes a dry path for him to cross (Keith, *The Sanskrit Drama*, p. 98).



quote an important passage: "The sense of the importance of exactitude in the rite is seen in the famous ritual of confession which is performed at the Varuṇapraghāsas, when the priest, the Pratiprasthātṛ, asks the wife of the sacrificer with whom she consorts, other than her husband. It is essential that she should confess, since else it will go badly with her kinsfolk, an interesting assertion of the solidarity of the kin. The speaking out of the sin diminishes it, but not, it appears, by anything else than that it brings exactitude again into the order of things: the wife commits an offense against Varuṇa, in that being the wife of one she consorts with another: the statement of the true fact removes the inexactitude, and repairs in so far the defect. It brings truth, i. e. reality, and order into the rite. The position of Varuṇa in this regard is of importance as it indicates in what degree the high conception of the Varuṇa of the Rīgveda has been degraded by the passage of time and the growing preference for the sacrifice. He is not regarded in the ritual, as it stands, as more than the power which resents the introduction of irregularity into the facts of the universe."<sup>4</sup>

This rite has a double interest for us. First, it illustrates the notion that the mere truth is able to render the sacrifice effective even though it be a truth that reveals a sin. It has a magical value that is uninfluenced by ethical considerations. Many other passages in Vedic literature indicate the magical power of truth, such as the famous passage of the ordeal with the heated axe in Chāndogya Upanishad 6.16,<sup>5</sup> but few show so clearly as this rite that it is truth for its own sake without reference to any ethical content. Secondly, the truth is used so effectively under the auspices of Varuṇa, who in the Rīgveda is the custodian of the *ṛta*, the cosmic order, universal and personal truth. Now Varuṇa is not only the guardian of the *ṛta*: he is also the god *par excellence* of the waters both heavenly and earthly.<sup>6</sup> Hence we see again in the Brāhmaṇas that oaths may be made *inter alia* "by waters, or Varuṇa, and the Indian to this day swears in some cases by Ganges water which he holds in his hand. The legal literature allows oaths for a Brahman by his truth . . ." <sup>7</sup> Is it accidental that oaths may be made by Varuṇa, who is the guardian of the truth, and by water, which

<sup>4</sup>Keith, *Religion and Philosophy of the Veda and Upanishads*, pp. 456, 471, 473, 478, quotation from p. 471.

<sup>5</sup>Discussed by Burlingame, *JRAS*, 1917, pp. 435 f.

<sup>6</sup>Cf., Griswold, *Religion of the Rīgveda*, pp. 136 ff.

<sup>7</sup>Quoted from Keith, *op. cit.*, p. 395, where appear some references.

is especially under his dominion, and by truth, which is under his protection?

From such ideas as these evolves the celebrated "Act of Truth", concerning which Burlingame has written a most illuminating article.<sup>8</sup> This act is a solemn, formal declaration of the truth by means of which miraculous deeds may be accomplished. There is a formulaic mode of expression, which is perhaps the last survival of the old ritualistic use of the truth I have mentioned above; for the later Act of Truth has no connection with the sacrifice. It is quite apparent that the truth is effective, merely because it is the truth, and not because of any ethical value attached to truthspeaking, just as in the Varuṇapraghāsa rites; an examination of many of Burlingame's stories shows this, but especially of that in the Milindapañha, by which the courtesan Bindumatī caused the river Ganges to flow back upstream. After she had performed the feat King Asoka said to her, "You possess the Power of Truth! You, a thief, a cheat, corrupt, cleft in twain, vicious, a wicked old sinner who have broken the bonds of morality and live on the plunder of fools". "It is true, your Majesty: I am what you say. But even I, wicked woman that I am, possess an Act of Truth by means of which, should I so desire, I could turn the world of men and the worlds of the gods upside down." Said the king, "But what is this Act of Truth? Pray enlighten me". "Your Majesty, whosoever gives me money, be he a Khattiya or a Brāhmaṇa or a Vessa or a Sudda or of any other caste soever, I treat them all exactly alike. If he be a Khattiya, I make no distinction in his favor. If he be a Sudda, I despise him not. Free alike from fawning and contempt, I serve the owner of the money. This, your Majesty, is the Act of Truth by which I caused the mighty Ganges to flow back upstream."<sup>9</sup>

The truth as a magic spell, often fairly well divorced from religious ceremony yet always sanctioned by religion and employed in a religious spirit, has been illustrated in literature from the time of the Mahābhārata and in one of the older portions of that work, the Nala episode. There it is thrice employed by Damayantī: first, to compel the gods, who had come to her Svayamvara disguised as her lover Nala, to assume their true appearance; secondly, when

<sup>8</sup>JRAS, 1917, pp. 429-467.

<sup>9</sup>The translation, with this version of the whole duty of a prostitute, is by Burlingame, *loc. cit.*, p. 440.

she was wandering alone in the forest after being deserted by Nala, to strike down an impious hunter who would have laid unchaste hands upon her; thirdly, when Nala after they were reunited doubted her constancy, to summon the Wind god to remove his doubts. It appears in other texts, but especially in those of the Buddhists (the Pali term is *saccakiriyā* "Truth Act", and the Sanskrit *satyādhiṣṭhāna* "Truth Command"; other terms occur), who use it to this very day.<sup>10</sup>

One other point. It is interesting to note that in Burlingame's long paper more illustrations of the Act of Truth concern miracles that deal with water than with anything else. Thus, it is used to roll back the ocean, to make a river flow backwards, to cross a river on dry foot, as a rain charm, and to obtain water to drink. And perhaps in this connection it might also be pertinent to mention that it is used to put out a forest fire, which "instantly went out, like a torch plunged in water," or, again, "so soon as the fire encountered his words, just as if it had reached a river, it immediately abated." Does this fact justify us in saying that it is Varuṇa as custodian of the waters and at the same time as guardian of the truth who makes the Act of Truth efficacious? Burlingame's fictional illustrations would not be calculated to make us draw this conclusion, but the facts I have mentioned concerning the Varuṇapraghāsa rites make it seem probable. Thus, while the point is not vital to the main theme of this paper, it seems worth noting that the Act of Truth is probably valid because it is the historical survival of an appeal to Varuṇa, the god of truth, and the typical illustrations of the Act are those that accomplish miracles connected with water, Varuṇa's peculiar element.

The legends showing walking on the water by means of an Act of Truth are not found in texts of any great antiquity, although one of them seems to be related to another legend of walking on the water that is of great age. It is, of course, pertinent to remark that the legends are older than the texts in which they appear, for time must have been required for them to gain recognition as authentic; but since we cannot say how much time must have been required, the remark is after all not of any large value.

The oldest text containing one of these tales is the *Milindapañha* 4.1.46, dating from somewhere near the beginning of the Christian

<sup>10</sup>Burlingame, *loc. cit.*, p. 467

era.<sup>11</sup> The story is not related to any other with which I am acquainted, whether in India or outside. The sage Nāgasena tells King Milinda: "Your Majesty, in the land of China there is a king who, once every four months, desiring to make offering to the great ocean, performs an Act of Truth, and then proceeds in his chariot of state a league's distance into the great ocean. Before the chariot of state the mighty mass of water rolls back, and, as he returns, it pours back again."<sup>12</sup>

Our next legend is from Buddhaghosa's commentary on the Aṅguttara Nikāya 193-195, a text of the fifth century A. D. King Kappina is on his way to enter the religious life under the Buddha. I quote from the translation by Burlingame in his *Buddhist Parables*, pp. 173 f.

Now the king, with his thousand ministers, reached the bank of the Ganges. But at this time the Ganges was full. When the king saw this, he said: "The Ganges here is full, and swarms with savage fish. Moreover we have with us no slaves or men to make boats or rafts for us. But of this Teacher the virtues extend from the Avici Hell beneath to the Peak of Existence above. If this Teacher be the Supremely Enlightened Buddha, may not the tips of the hoofs of these horses be wetted!"

They caused the horses to spring forward on the surface of the water. Of not a single horse was so much as the tip of the hoof wetted. On a king's highway proceeding, as it were, they went to the far shore. Farther on they reached another river. There, was needed no other Act of Truth. By the same Act of Truth, that river also, half a league in breadth, did they cross over. Then they reached the third river, the mighty river Candabhāgā. That river also, by the same Act of Truth, did they cross over.

Thus King Kappina with his retinue reached the Buddha, became established in Sainthood, and entered the Order. Later in the story his wife, Queen Anojā, also set out for the Buddha.

Queen Anojā, surrounded by a thousand chariots, reaching the bank of the Ganges and seeing no boat or raft brought for the King, by her own intuition concluded: "The King must have crossed by making an Act of Truth. But this Teacher was reborn not for them alone. If this Teacher be the Supremely Enlightened Buddha, may our chariots not

<sup>11</sup>See Winternitz, *Geschichte der Indischen Litteratur*, 2.1.140.

<sup>12</sup>Translation by Burlingame, *loc. cit.*, p. 439.

sink into the water!"<sup>13</sup>

She caused the chariots to spring forward on the surface of the water. Of the chariots not even so much as the outer rims of the wheels were wetted. The second river also, the third river also, she crossed by the same Act of Truth.

When they arrived the Buddha by magic power prevented them from seeing their husbands, who otherwise would have been plainly visible, for he knew that if they saw their husbands lust would spring up in their hearts and they would not attain the Path and the Fruits. After the conversion had been accomplished, he removed the magic invisibility, and they saw their husbands, but now no harm could result, for lust was dead.

A variant of this story is found in the commentary on the Dhammapada,<sup>14</sup> another text from the fifth century A. D., which claims, however, to be based on much older Sinhalese materials; and it also appears in the Theragāthā commentary 235. This wide diffusion of the legend in Buddhist hagiography argues a certain amount of antiquity for it, as does also the tradition of its lengthy existence in Sinhalese before being translated into Pali; but obviously it is impossible to say how great is that antiquity; the tradition hardly offers the basis even for a guess. In a faint way it recalls the legend of Rigveda 3.33 (see above), but the resemblance is after all so slight that no conclusion can be based upon it. More weighty is its clear connection with the story of Yasa's conversion, as found in the Vinaya Piṭaka, Mahāvagga 1. 7-10, and elsewhere, a legend to which we shall return later in this paper. The connection is twofold. First, in the Chinese version of Yasa's (or Yasada's) conversion the young man, by means of the Buddha's help, magically walks across the river Varāṇā (modern Barṇā) to reach the Buddha.<sup>15</sup> It became shallow so that he could wade over. This detail does not appear in the Mahāvagga, but it echoes so well the way in which the Aryans in Rigveda 3.33 crossed the Beas and the Sutlej that we may well regard it as of antiquity; certainly it is of definite Indian origin. Secondly, in the story of the conversion of Yasa, as in that of King Kappina and Queen Anojā, the Buddha by means of his magic power renders the first convert invisible to his relatives

<sup>13</sup>Cf., the allusion to King Dilīpa in Mahābhārata 7.61.9; his chariot did not sink in the water. See note 3 above.

<sup>14</sup>Translated by Burlingame, *Buddhist Legends*, 2.169 ff. In this version it is stated that the surface of the water was like a flat rock.

<sup>15</sup>See in Beal, *The Romantic Legend of Śākya Buddha*, p. 263.



who come inquiring. This is found in the Mahāvagga, and is therefore of great antiquity. The story is that after Yasa had gone to the Buddha at Sarnath and became converted, his mother began to grieve and induced the young man's father to go seek him. But when he reached the Buddha, the latter first made Yasa invisible; and when the father asked the Buddha if he had seen the young man, the Buddha answered evasively. Then he preached to the father, establishing him part way on the road to salvation. After that he made Yasa visible to his father, who then asked his son to return to his grief stricken mother. The Buddha accompanied Yasa to his home, where he converted both the mother and Yasa's wife, who became his first female lay disciples. The connection between this tale and the conversion of King Kappina and Queen Anojā is undeniable. What is more the story in the Mahāvagga is very old: Winternitz thinks it can hardly be later than 300 B. C.<sup>16</sup> Even if we do not accept so early a date, we cannot set it later than the first century B. C.,<sup>17</sup> and it is therefore pre-Christian; but the chances are that the Yasa legend is very old, for it seems to be the source of legends which afterwards were attached to the Buddha.

The Jains also know of crossing water by means of an Act of Truth. The story appears in Bhāvadevasūri's Pārśvanāthacaritra, a work of the fourteenth century A. D., based on older materials. The story is analyzed by Bloomfield, from whom I quote.<sup>18</sup>

A wise king heard that his brother Soma, a Sage, was sojourning in a park outside his city. He went to pay his respects, listened to the law from his mouth, and returned to the palace. The chief queen then made the following vow: "I shall in the morning salute this Sage, and not take food before he has feasted." Now, on the road between the city and the park, was a river. When she arrived there by night the river was in flood, too deep for crossing. In the morning she asked her husband how she might obtain her heart's desire. The king said: "Go cheerfully with your retinue, adore the River Goddess, and with pure mind recite, 'O Goddess River, if my husband has practiced chastity since the day on which he paid his devotions to my brother-in-law, then promptly give me passage.'" The queen reflected in surprise: "Why now does the king, the fifth Protector of the

<sup>16</sup>*Geschichte der Indischen Litteratur* 2.120.

<sup>17</sup>Cf., Keith, *Buddhist Philosophy*, pp. 20, 24.

<sup>18</sup>Bloomfield, *The Life and Stories of the Jaina Savior Pārśvanātha*, pp. 80 f.



World, say such an absurd thing? Since the day of his devotion to his brother, I have become pregnant by him with a son; that wifely state of mine he knows full well." Nevertheless out of wifely devotion, she went with her retinue to the bank of the river, honored the River Goddess, and made the Truth-Declaration (*satyaśrīvaṇā*), as told by her husband. At once the river banked its waters to the right and to the left, became shallow, and the queen crossed.

After revering and feasting the Sage she told him her story, and asked how her husband's inconceivable chastity could be valid. The sage replied: "When I took the vow, from that time on the king also became indifferent to earthly matters. But as there was no one to bear the burden of royalty he kept on performing his royal acts, in deed, but not in thought. The king's chastity is valid, because his mind is unspotted, even as a lotus that stands in the mud."

The queen then bade adieu to the Sage, and asked him how she was to recross the river. The Sage told: "You must say to the Goddess River, 'If that Sage, since taking the vow, has steadily lived in fast, then give me passage.'" The queen in renewed surprise went to the bank of the river, recited the words of the Sage, crossed, and arrived home. She narrated all to the king, and asked, "How could the Sage be in fast, since I myself entertained him with food?" The king replied, "You are simple, O queen, you do not grasp the spirit of religion: the lofty-minded Sage is indifferent to both eating and non-eating. Mind is the root, speech the crown, deed the branch-expansion of the tree of religion: from the firm *root* of that tree everything springs forth." Then the queen understood.

This story with its paradoxical refinements of the Act of Truth is obviously late not only in date but also in metaphysic; nevertheless some of its elements go back to the very oldest sphere of thought concerning magically crossing water. Just as in Rigveda 3.33, the River Goddess is addressed, while the miracle consists in the sudden and magical lowering of the water's depth.

(To be Continued)