THROUGH FIRE AND WATER

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Abstract

The secret connection of the four elements, air, earth, fire and water, to the stages of our lives, the bodily humours, temperaments, internal organs, the four cardinal points, the four times of the year and of the day, numbers, male and feminine principles has been a fascinating subject for the human mind since the beginnings of our cultural history. These mysterious (real or imaginary) links have left an unmistakable imprint both in our way of thinking and in its linguistic expression: idioms.

Keywords: element, myth, symbol, idiom, language

In the cosmologies of many peoples the four elements are the fundamental principles that structure the world; various basic phenomena from other realms of being are often associated with them. Classical elements refer to ancient beliefs inspired by natural observation of the phases of matter.

The Chinese elements come early, and their development in Chinese philosophy cannot be followed clearly. This doctrine of the elements arose as early as the second millennium B.C. and includes *water, fire, wood, metal* and *earth*. These are understood as different types of energy in constant interaction, however, rather than different kinds of material as in the Western conception. The system of 5 elements and classifying things by fives is already evident in the earliest classics. Later such classifications are expanded almost without limit.

The Buddhist elements that were imported into China were never combined with the Chinese elements, the result was two systems of five elements with three in common: *fire, water*, and *earth*. To these the Chinese added *metal* and *wood*; the Buddhists *air* and *aether* (void).

In the earliest Indian view of elements there are three: *fire, water,* and *earth*. These emanate in sequence from each other and are the three forces of nature and the causes of everything that happens. Later other elements are added. *Fire* itself comes to be seen as emanating from *air*, which is later considered to emanate from '*aether'*. These elements are similar enough to the Greek ones, and their introduction occurs late enough, that the Greek influence cannot be discounted.

In Buddhism, the fifth element could be interpreted differently from Hinduism. The Sanskrit word used for 'aether' could also mean *sky* or *clear space*. This could be the equivalent of *emptiness* in Buddhism, often given as *space* or the *void*.

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Like the Greeks (beginning with Thales of Milet and Empedocles), most other cultures distinguish four elements: *air, earth, fire and water*. The concept of these originates from Babylonian mythology, where the five cosmic elements are sea, sky, earth, fire and wind.

The four stages of a person's life, bodily fluids and organs, and the four times of the day and of the year (as already recognised in China) were often associated with the four elements. Sometimes thought of as the immaterial "fifth element" since the time of Aristotle, *aether* = ether, radiating brightly above the layer of air close to the earth, also corresponds to *fire* and *air*. It was called the *quintessence*, or *quinta essentia* = the fifth essence, of which the heavens were made and that permeated everything. Aristotle saw the elements as combinations of two sets of opposite qualities: *fire* hot and dry; *air* hot and wet; *water* cold and wet; *earth* cold and dry. Based on a theory of the four elements, by the Middle Ages health was thought to depend on a balance of four fluids, or humours, in the human body: *fire* corresponded to blood, *air* to yellow bile; *water* to phlegm; and *earth* to black bile. Similarly, the doctrine of temperaments associated the four elements with the four types of personality: *water* with the phlegmatic, *earth* with the melancholic, *fire* with the choleric, and *air* with the sanguine. We still say that people can be in a 'good humour' or 'bad humour', and names derived from the Greek or Latin names of the humours are still sometimes used to describe moods, attitudes, or character.

ELEMENT is a word from Old French, ultimately from the Latin *elementum*, a first principle. In English and in several other languages you are *in your element* when you are in your natural surroundings, within your ordinary range of activity, or enjoying yourself thoroughly. The allusion is to the natural abode of any animal, as the air to birds, water to fish. H.C. Beeching, English clergyman, author and poet from the second half of the 19th century wrote in his poem, *A Hymn*:

God who created me / Nimble and light of limb, /
In three elements free / To run, to ride, to swim.

On the other hand, one has to *brave the elements* when venturing out into the weather to defy adverse conditions. The elements here are the atmospheric powers; the winds, storms, etc. These are obviously linked to one of the four elements: air.

AIR was held by Anaxagoras (c. 500 –c. 428 BC) to be the primary form of matter. Like fire, it is thought to be lively, active and masculine. Air is closely related symbolically to breath and wind; it was often thought to be the fine material intermediary realm between the earthly and the spiritual. It can also appear as a symbol of the spirit which, although invisible to the eye, will manifest itself in its effects.

People can be *as free as air* or *the wind*, persons or things would sometimes appear *out of thin air* or *vanish into thin air*, where 'thin' emphasises the idea of 'nothing'. You would probably get very angry and *go up in the air* when you get nothing but *hot air*, bombastic empty talk from somebody, but you can always make a situation less tense if you *clear the air*, and then feel so happy again as if you were *walking / treading on thin air*.

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Air is closely related to BREATH, which is a symbol for cosmic, animating forces, also occasionally of the spirits present at the beginning of the world. This significance is clearly present when we either revive a person who has stopped breathing temporarily or give new impetus to something like a project or a party and make it more lively: we *breathe (new) life into* them – an obvious allusion to the scene from the Book of Genesis where God awakens with His breath the man He has created.

A refreshing change from what one is used to, something different that makes people feel happier is *a breath of fresh air*. When you are very anxious or worried about the possible outcome of something, you will *hold your breath* or wait *with bated breath*, while a nasty surprise or a sudden fright can cause you to *catch your breath*, just as an overwhelmingly pleasant or wonderful surprise can *take your breath away*. If your interlocutor considers that you should refrain from useless talk, you are advised not to *waste your breath*, or rather, to *save your breath to cool your porridge*.

The movement of the air results in WIND. Although you can feel it, you cannot touch it, and since it will so often change direction abruptly and unpredictably, it has become a symbol of nothingness, fleetingness and instability. Also winds, like angels, are sometimes regarded as messengers of the gods.

Whenever *there's something in the wind*, the signs show that things are about to happen, but *it is an ill wind that blows nobody any good*, since somebody would always profit by any loss or misfortune. You *take the wind out of someone's sails* when you frustrate or embarrass them by unexpectedly anticipating an action or remark; when you cramp somebody's style, put a sudden end to their pride or self-confidence, especially by doing something that places them at a disadvantage. The expression alludes to a ship or boat sailing so close to another on the windward side (sometimes deliberately, e.g. in a race) that the latter is deprived of wind and lacks the power to move. Another idiom of nautical origin describes serious inebriation – *three sheets in/to the wind*. The 'sheet' is the rope attached to the clew of a sail and is used for trimming that sail. If the 'sheet' is quite free, leaving the sail to flap without restrain, it is said to be "in the wind", and 'a sheet in the wind' was originally a colloquial phrase used in the navy for being tipsy. With three sheets in the same sorry state, you must be very drunk indeed.

As the wind gets up, STORMS brew, unavoidably accompanied by CLOUDS. The storm can be a symbol of divine powers or human passions. To confront a crisis, a situation of great disorder or violence, you have to *ride the storm* or *the whirlwind*; when you have an instant rapid success you *take* your audience *by storm*. Occasionally, there is great anger or violent agitation and excitement about a trivial matter, but that's just *a storm in a teacup* (or *a tempest in a teapot* Am. E.). Whenever a person does something wrong or violent, the results of which are even worse, especially for whoever took the action in the first place, they are said to *sow the wind and reap the whirlwind*. The phrase is originally from the Bible: "For they [Israel] have sown the wind and they shall reap the whirlwind." (Hosea 8:7)

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Bad or unpleasant things can *cast a cloud over* something or you yourself can be *under a cloud* when under suspicion or in disrepute, but it is common knowledge that *every cloud has a silver lining*, something good will always come from a situation, however unfortunate, difficult or unpleasant it might be. Starry eyed dreamers and visionaries are said to *be in the clouds* or at least *have their head in the clouds*, but anyone can occasionally be so extremely happy or content that they are *on cloud (number) nine* or *in seventh heaven*. In the ten-part classification of heavens in Dante's Paradise ('Divina Commedia') the ninth was next to the highest (the empyrean) and thus closest to the divine presence. According to the pre-modern cosmography the heavens were thought to be divided into spherical shells, one outside the other and varying in number from seven to eleven. Both Talmudic and Muslim authorities considered the seventh heaven to be the highest, where God existed and a state of eternal bliss was to be enjoyed.

EARTH, passive and dark, usually appears in mythology as a feminine deity. In one type of the "world parents" myths the two are identified as Sky (male) and Earth (female), originally a primeval identity. When this union is split, creation takes place, often depicted as the result of a reproductive act in which the earth is fertilised by the sky. Thus the earth is often compared with the womb, yet since it is also the grave into which all life returns, the ambivalent figure of the Great Mother emerges, who is magnificent and terrible at the same time. Initiation rites and burial rituals often allude to the close connection between these two aspects of the earth.

In contrast to any of the other three elements: air, water or fire, earth is first and foremost solid. This obvious and clearly perceptible aspect is at the root of the expression *down-to-earth*, which is how you would describe something realistic or practical, or a forthright and plain spoken person. When you are forced to abandon fantasy and impractical dreams for reality, you either *come* or are *brought back to earth*, usually *with a bump*. *The four corners of the earth* can be used as a more emphatic variant for 'everywhere', and *the ends of the earth* refer to the remotest parts, regions farthest from civilisation. Fox hunting gave rise to the pair of *go to earth*, that is, into hiding, and *run to earth*, which means to trace something to its source. The sky-earth dichotomy can be glimpsed in the background of *to move heaven and earth*, suggesting you do everything possible in order to achieve a certain goal, or in the description of an extremely pleasant place or a perfect state of affairs: it is *heaven on earth*.

Variants of 'earth' can be 'dust', 'ground' or 'sand', like in different forms of the expression originally used of men killed in battle who fall to the ground with their faces downwards. It has a classical origin in Homer's Iliad: "May his fellow warriors, many a one,/ Fall round him to the earth and *bite the dust*." (Translation by W. C. Bryant, American poet.) Today the meaning has widened to encompass any situation when someone suffers a severe setback or something stops working or being useful.

One way of misleading your competitors or enemies is *to throw dust in their eyes*. The allusion is to 'the swiftest runner in a sandy race, who to make his fellows aloofe, casteth dust with his heeles into their envious eyes.' (R. Cotgrave, 1611) Equivalents can be

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found in Latin, Romanian, German, Hungarian and several Slavic languages. Originally it was the enemy's eyes in which you were supposed to throw dust during a battle or a hand-to-hand combat, blinding him and thus rendering him defenceless for enough time to deliver a decisive blow or sword-cut. However, there might have been another observation at the origin of the phrase, since the trick described above is also used by animals: the pursued fox is supposed to kick sand or earth into the eyes of the fox-hound close on its heels, and sometimes fighting dogs or wolves use the same tactics to confuse their rivals.

In contrast to water, which is sometimes attributed with being the origin of the world, FIRE is often thought to come from heaven, and is considered to be holy, purifying and renewing. As a creative or terrible manifestation of divine power or wrath, it can be either the origin of all being, or as a destroying force, a means of perfect cleansing and rebirth on a higher level. Its relation to sun and light is apparent, but it is also connected to lightning and thunder that accompany thunderstorms and rain.

When you meddle with that which is perpetually dangerous or harmful, you are said *to play with fire*, and if you make an already difficult situation worse, you either *add fuel to the fire* or *fan the flames*. Two people may enjoy each other's company, often just after meeting, and they *get on like a house on fire*; similarly, when something causes great interest or gives delight (to a theatre audience, for example), it *sets the house on fire*. On the other hand, when you consider it unlikely that something will prove so wonderful as to cause much excitement and gain a wide reputation, you can predict that *it will never set the Thames on fire*. This phrase has a popular explanation: the word Thames could be a pun on the word 'temse', a corn-sieve; and that the parallel French locution, 'set the Seine on fire', a pun on 'seine', a drag-net; but these solutions are not tenable. However, there is a Latin saw, 'Tiberum accendere nequaquam potest,' which is probably the basis and starting point of other parallel sayings; like the German 'Den Rhein anzünden' as early as 1630.

The idiom chosen for the title of the present paper refers to an ordeal, hardship or test one has to suffer: *to go through fire and water*. The word 'ordeal' comes from O.E. 'ordel', meaning 'judgement'. It takes us back to the ancient Anglo-Saxon and Teutonic practice of referring disputed questions of criminality to supernatural decision, by subjecting the accused to physical trials in the belief that God would defend the right, even by miracle if needful. Hence, figuratively, an experience testing endurance, patience, courage, etc. These methods of trial were popular in many parts of Europe: the ordeal of fire was for persons of high rank, where carrying a red-hot iron or walking barefoot and blindfolded over red-hot plough-shares were the usual forms. If the accused showed no wound after three days they were adjudged innocent. The second option, ordeal of boiling water was usual for common people and involved plunging the hand into hot water either up to the wrist or to the elbow and guilt was presumed if the skin was injured. Thirdly, ordeal by cold water meant that the accused was bound and tossed into water. Floating proved guilt, but those who sank were hauled out. In time, this became a

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common test for witchcraft. All ordeals, except that by battle and cold water, were abolished in England in the early 13th century when trial by jury took their place.

LIGHTNING and THUNDER are the prerogatives of the highest god in many mythologies. The speed of the first is referred to in the similes *as quick as lightning* or *like greased lightning*, when you move or do something very fast, and the force of lightning must have suggested the phrase *as if struck by lightning*, which is how you feel when something unexpected has just had such an impact on you that shock and amazement has left you dumbfounded and paralysed.

When you spoil a person's attempt to be impressive or receive congratulations by doing or saying what he had intended to do before him, you *steal their thunder*. The story at the origin of this idiom is that the critic and writer, John Dennis (1657-1734), invented a device for simulating the sound of thunder in the theatre. It was used in 1709 in one of Dennis' plays ('Appius and Virginia', a failure but for the one distinction of the new device). Shortly after his play had finished its brief run, Dennis attended a performance of 'Macbeth' in which the improved thunder effect was used and he is reported to have exclaimed in a fury: "Damn them! They will not let my play run, and yet they steal my thunder."

WATER cannot be held in one place, it is an unformed, undifferentiated mass and can easily turn into a destructive power. The symbolic meanings of water are complex. It is regarded as the 'materia prima' in several creation myths, standing for the abundance of all possibilities. It is associated with dark depth, with the feminine, with fertility and life. It is the symbol of cleansing for the body, the emotions and the spirit alike; also of renewal and eternity, or, as the fountain of youth, of eternal life.

When we want to emphasise the fact that family relationship has a claim which is generally acknowledged, we say that *blood is thicker than water*. (Blood and the colour red are associated with fire.) Originally it referred to a boat or vessel that leaked, today we say it of an argument, idea, theory or plan that is not correct, not tenable, or cannot be brought to reality: *it won't hold water*. Inspired by sailing on the waters of seas and oceans, the antonymic pair *in deep water* and *in smooth water* mean in difficulty or great perplexity, and that all is plain sailing, respectively. You are *in hot water* when you have got into trouble, and feel awkward and distressed *like a fish out of water* in an unfamiliar setting. Money problems mean you are *in dead low water* and if you have to struggle to avoid insolvency, you can barely *keep your head above the water* like a drowning man. The statement that *smooth* or *still waters run deep* is usually given as a warning: either that deep thinkers are persons of few words although they have a lot of knowledge, or that whoever is quiet and says little often hides deep feelings, or, worst of all, that silent conspirators are the most dangerous. In Shakespeare's King Henry VI, Pt. II, at the beginning of act iii, the Duke of Suffolk says: "Smooth runs the water where the brook is deep,/ And in his simple show he harbours treason./ The fox barks not when he would steal the lamb:/ No, no, my sovereign; Gloster is a man/ unsounded yet, and full of deep deceit."

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The four elements started shaping our thoughts about the microcosm of man and of the macrocosm of the world a very long time ago: *a lot of water has flowed/ gone under the bridge*, you might say. Still, it is always interesting to trace how beliefs and ways of thinking have left their mark on the way we speak, and you can try it in any language: *come on in, the water's fine*.

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