

# the mouth of the gods

- A brief history of fire ritual in Central Asia -  
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The Heavens and the Earth travailed,  
There travailed also the purple sea,  
The travail held  
The red reed stalk in the sea.  
Through the hollow of the reed stalk a smoke rose,  
Through the hollow of the reed stalk a flame rose  
And out of the flame ran forth a youth.  
He had hair of fire,  
He had a beard of flame,  
And his eyes were suns.

This is the song of the birth of *Vahagn*, the fire God from Armenian mythology<sup>1</sup>. Born out of a reed stalk after having traveled both earth and sea, the song refers to a practice that predates even the time when man made his first fire. A technology that survives to this date among but a few indigenous tribes in the jungles of Asia and South America, this ancient song captures in words the practice of maintenance and transportation of perpetual fire. Originally caught from a wildfire sparked by lightning perhaps, a designated member of the tribe carries carefully wrapped glowing embers from the village's hearth fire as these nomads travel to new lands. This handling of perpetual fire has ever since been ritualized, as has the later uses of fire as a domestic source and means of communicating with the Gods.

When Aryan<sup>2</sup> nomads migrated into the valley of the Ganges and introduced their fire cult in the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BC - one that seems to have been common amongst all Indo-European peoples - it was received into an existing indigenous cult of which unfortunately no records survive. It is therefore difficult to assess how the two interacted and eventually merged to become the Vedic ritual tradition<sup>3</sup> some 500 years later. The fact that the Aryan migration predates by far even the compilation of the earliest *Vedas*<sup>4</sup> gives ample weight to the belief that the pre-historic fire cults have their roots in and developed from an earth based shamanic practice. An argument sustained by surviving present day shamanic practices in Central Asia and ceremonies within Tibetan and Japanese Tantric Buddhism wherein fire ritual, mountain worship, communion with deities and unseen forces and asceticism still walk hand in hand. Once the Aryan nomads had settled in the Indian region the culture, its religious pantheon and the rituals developed into a more complex and elaborate structure, giving birth to the Vedic Tradition. An altar made out of brick, set within a religious space or temple, replaced the portable altar and village fireplace at the center of their once movable dwellings. As part of the development of the Vedic rites, the shape of the

<sup>1</sup> The mythology originating in the region of the Caucasus and Eastern Asia Minor

<sup>2</sup> Referring to the people of Indo-Iranian and Indo-European origin who moved into what is now Northern India around 2000 BC

<sup>3</sup> Religious tradition that originated in India from the merging of the rites and knowledge of the Aryan nomads with the existing indigenous cults

<sup>4</sup> Lit. knowledge; sacred texts of the Vedic tradition of which the oldest, the Rig Veda, dates back to ±1500BC

altars used for the fire rituals became more complex and the ceremonies highly stylized. The refinement of its religious expression eventually resulted in a separation of the rituals of a domestic nature (*grhya* rites) that are performed by the householder himself, from the more elaborate priestly ceremonies (*śrauta* rites) that are only performed by professional priests. This ensured the Brahmins<sup>5</sup> already firm grip on society and added to the ever-growing complexity of the Vedic rites and body of sacred texts, and its expanding influence in the region.

The priestly *śrauta* rites make use of three different kind of fires: a householder's fire at the West of the ritual space (round hearth), a fire that is home to the ancestors and evil spirits in the South (semi-circular hearth), and a fire dedicated to the Gods in the East (square hearth). Some suggest that these three shapes correspond with the earth, the atmosphere between earth and the overarching heavens, and the four-directioned sky. One of the most basic *śrauta* rites that belongs to the sacrificial offering practices is the *Agni Hotra*<sup>6</sup> fire ritual. In it an offering of ghee (clarified butter) and rice is made to a small fire of dried cow dung, accompanied by specific chants and prayers.

### **Agni, the God of fire**

The God of fire *Agni*, *Indra's*<sup>7</sup> twin, is found at the base of the Vedic sacrificial rituals serving a twofold function in the rites, being both the purifier and conveyer of the oblations made to the Gods. *Agni* is related to other Indo-European fire Gods as: *Atar* (Avesan) and the before mentioned *Vahagn* (Armenian), who are both masculine. *Agni* also relates to the feminine deities of the hearth fire in ancient Greece and Rome<sup>8</sup>. In the Vedic tradition *Agni* is associated with three kinds of fire: the domestic & ritual fires, which are under human control, the solar fire, and lightning and thus sparked wildfires and rainstorms. Here the element of water in the form of rainstorms is also attributed to the God of fire.



In a second Armenian tradition of a more shamanic nature predating the rise of the Vedas there is another reference of the alchemic relationship between the fire and water. Here fire, the feminine aspect, when being extinguished in ritual is thought of as the sister of water, the masculine aspect, being welcomed into the arms of her brother. In the fire rituals of Tantric Buddhism water is used as an offering to the deity and a purifier of the mouth of the deity, hearth and practitioner. And in the big fire rituals of Japanese *Shugendō*<sup>9</sup> the monks and priests are wont to throw buckets of water onto the burning pile to release the steam that will carry the prayers to the heavens.

In the East *Agni* is often depicted as a being with a butter smeared face, wild hair, swift tongues, sharpened jaws and golden teeth, riding on a chariot pulled by red horses leaving a blackened trail behind them. In the *Vishnu Purana*<sup>10</sup> the essence of *Agni* is captured in the following story<sup>11</sup>:

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<sup>5</sup> Priests of the Vedic tradition

<sup>6</sup> Lit. oblation or sacrifice to *Agni*

<sup>7</sup> One of the major deities in the Vedic- and later Hindu tradition

<sup>8</sup> Hestia and Vesta

<sup>9</sup> A unique blend of asceticism, mountain worship and Tantric Buddhism

<sup>10</sup> One of the oldest Hindu religious writings complementing the *Vedas*

<sup>11</sup> *New Larousse Encyclopædia of Mythology*, Hamlyn Publishing groups, 1995

Legend relates that one day Bhrigu<sup>12</sup> cursed Agni. A woman named Puloma was betrothed to a demon, and Bhrigu seeing she was beautiful fell in love with her and, after marrying her according to Vedic rites, secretly abducted her. But thanks to Agni's information the demon discovered the place where the young woman promised to him was hidden, and brought her back to his dwelling. Furious with Agni for helping the demon, Bhrigu cursed him saying: "Henceforth thou shalt eat of all things." Agni demanded of Bhrigu the reason for his curse since he had only told the demon the truth. He pointed out that if a man is questioned and tells a lie he is cast to hell, along with seven generations of his ancestors and seven generations of his children. Moreover, the man who fails to give information is equally guilty. And Agni went on to say: "I too can hurl curses but I respect the Brahmans and I control my anger. **In truth I am the mouth of the gods and of the ancestors. When clarified butter is offered them, they receive it thanks to me, in their mouth, so how can you tell me to eat all things?**" Hearing these words, Bhrigu agreed to change his curse and said: "As the sun purifies all Nature with his light and heat, so Agni shall purify everything which enters his flames." (my emphasis)

With the spreading of Hinduism<sup>13</sup> throughout most of South East Asia and Indonesia (±1500 BC >), the Vedic fire ritual merged with many different indigenous religious practices, forming a unique attribute to South East Asia's religious diversity. At present fire rituals with Vedic roots can be found in Cambodia, Vietnam, Malaysia, Sri Lanka, Indonesia and Bali, of which some include firewalking<sup>14</sup>.

### **On the wings of Buddhism**

With the development of Buddhism from the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC onwards the ritual use of fire, is dispensed throughout Central Asia essentially as part of the expansion of the *Mahayana*<sup>15</sup> tradition in this region. Known as the Great Vehicle, the influence of esoteric *Mahayana* Buddhism stretches primarily from India all the way through Central Asia into Japan, whereas exoteric *Hinayana* Buddhism, known as the Small Vehicle, evolves more generally into South East Asia. The first waves of the Buddha's teachings reach beyond the Indian region into China in the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC, South East Asia from the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD, Korea & Japan in the 6<sup>th</sup> century and Tibet in the 8<sup>th</sup> century AD.

The earliest indication of the use of fire in ritual within the Buddhist tradition is from an early third century AD Chinese translation of a *sutra*<sup>16</sup>. This is during the period known for the development of 'mixed'<sup>17</sup> Buddhist Tantra<sup>18</sup> in India, which spans from the 2<sup>nd</sup> century until the 6<sup>th</sup> century AD.

One of the main characteristics of Tantric Buddhist ritual is the importance placed on the inner practice, which emphasizes the unity of the deity and the practitioner and the complete alignment of the three mysteries of body (ritual action, asana<sup>19</sup>, mudras<sup>20</sup> etc), speech (dharanis<sup>21</sup>, mantras<sup>22</sup>, invocations etc) and mind (visualizations, mandalas<sup>23</sup>).

During the fire ritual the practitioner visualizes the mouth of the deity, the mouth of the altar hearth and his own mouth as one, the ceremony being the vehicle for the inner realization of unification with the deity to take place.

<sup>12</sup> Brahman sage who is mentioned in the Vedas in several stories

<sup>13</sup> Hinduism originated from the Vedic tradition

<sup>14</sup> Firewalking originates long before recorded history and is considered to be part of a universal practice among the indigenous peoples of all continents

<sup>15</sup> Lit. great vehicle. One of the three major Buddhist traditions: Hinayana, Mahayana and Tantrayana/Vajrayana/Mantrayana

<sup>16</sup> A sacred text that is part of the Buddhist pantheon

<sup>17</sup> Esoteric Buddhist teachings incorporating folk religious elements

<sup>18</sup> Tantric Buddhism is a form of worship in which the practitioner seeks to attain a permanent state of enlightenment through a ritual practice in which he identifies himself repeatedly with a specific deity by means of chants, prayers, body and hand positions, imagery and visualizations.

<sup>19</sup> Body postures

<sup>20</sup> Hand positions

<sup>21</sup> Long prayer formulas

<sup>22</sup> Prayer formulas, chants

<sup>23</sup> A graphic or three dimensional representation of (an aspect of) reality



It is within the Tantric Buddhist tradition that fire ritual further evolves in Central Asia. In the 8<sup>th</sup> century it is introduced into Tibet when *Padmasambhava* travels the Silk Road through what is now Afghanistan into the high Tibetan plateau. He founds the *Nyingma* School of *Vajrayana*<sup>24</sup> Buddhism, incorporating some of the existing nature based *Bon*<sup>25</sup> religion and so ultimately replacing it as the official state religion. In the early 9<sup>th</sup> century *KoBo Daishi Kukai* founds the *Shingon* School in Japan, successfully incorporating native *Shinto*<sup>26</sup> religion and the *Shugendo* tradition of mountain worship and asceticism. The practice of firewalking that can be found in both Buddhist schools is part of the big seasonal fire rituals and is thought to stem from the more shamanic and indigenous elements. Both the Tibetan and Japanese schools practice the same four kinds of fire rituals and are the sole Buddhist ambassadors of the ancient fire practices of Aryan origin in Central Asia up to this day. Unfortunately no other Tantric Buddhist tradition survives on the mainland due to the many political upheavals of which the recent communist revolution was probably the most devastating to the region's cultural and religious depth and diversity.

Since the dawn of time the peoples of Central Asia have used fire in their rituals. From its shamanic origins to Vedic tradition and Buddhist Tantra, fire has been used to offer, to make sacrifice, to please the Gods, to invoke unseen forces and to identify and unite with beneficial deities. Some of the ancient traditions and their rituals are still alive today: from big fire rituals in Sri Lanka, purification rituals in India to Tantric ceremonies that include the ancient practice of firewalking in Tibet and Japan. Throughout time and into the present fire continues to be a vessel for humanity to connect to and align with a higher source. Or as *Agni* stated:

***"In truth I am the mouth of the gods..."***

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<sup>24</sup> Also referred to as Tantrayana or Mantrayana Buddhism

<sup>25</sup> A religious tradition unique to the Tibetan region with strong shamanic influences

<sup>26</sup> A nature based religious tradition unique to Japan with roots in shamanism and Taoism

Sources:

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Images:

Page 2: Vedic God of Fire Agni

Page 4: Bodhisattva Fudoo Myoo (Skt: Acala) who is one of the main deities in the fire rituals of Shugendo