

## Water Rituals – Reflection and Being



Water Drop Falling into a Bowl of Water  
Wiki Commons: High Fin Sperm Whale

Two water metaphors almost never used in Judeo-Christian traditions show up quite clearly in Eastern philosophies. From the Buddha, we see mental clarity being compared to water that is no longer muddied by "sense-desires" or "ill-will." From Hinduism and the Tao Te Ching, we find references to "being like water." Even though Americans often think of water in these ways, we don't generally find water rituals based on these themes. Because water is ubiquitous, plentiful, and inexpensive – at least in our culture – it is quite simple to develop rituals around these metaphors that can be done either on your own or with a group.

### *Water as Reflection*

The word “reflection” is derived from the Latin verb “reflectere,” which means to “bend back.” I’m not usually big on etymology, but I think it’s helpful in this case. Too often, reflection ends up being a rehashing rather than a re-viewing. We perseverate on something we did or something someone else said as we toss and turn in the middle of the night revisiting the details in our minds. Many times, we find some sense of closure or resolution only when we look at the incident in a new way. When we see it from a new angle. When we stop repeating and start bending.

Like all great spiritual teachers, the Buddha taught people to view the world in a different way. In this passage from the Pali canon, a disciple asks the Buddha why sacred words studied for a long time often remain unclear. The Buddha responded with a long treatise that uses water as a metaphor. If you’ve ever read such teachings, you know they can feel wordy and repetitive to Westerners, so I offer just an excerpt. You might need to read it through a couple of times to get a sense of its rhythm. The passage was taken from the [Access to Insight](#) web site.

“Imagine, Brahman, a bowl of water mixed with lac, turmeric, dark green or crimson dye. If a man with good eyesight were to look at the reflection of his own face in it, he would not know or see it as it really was. In the same way, Brahman, when a man dwells with his heart possessed and overwhelmed by sense-desires... then he cannot know or see, as it really is, what is to his own profit, to the profit of others, to the profit of both. Then even sacred words he has long studied are not clear to him, not to mention those he has not studied...

...“Imagine a bowl of water, agitated, stirred up muddied, put in a dark place. If a man with good eyesight were to look at the reflection of his own face in it, he would not know or see it as it really was. In the same way, Brahman, when a man dwells with his heart possessed and overwhelmed by

doubt-and-wavering... then he cannot know or see, as it really is, what is to his own profit, to the profit of others, to the profit of both. Then even sacred words he has long studied are not clear to him, not to mention those he has not studied. But, Brahman, when a man dwells with his heart not possessed, not overwhelmed by sense-desires... ill-will... sloth-and-torpor... worry-and-flurry... doubt-and-wavering... then he knows and sees, as it really is, what is to his own profit, to the profit of others, to the profit of both himself and others. Then even sacred words he has not long studied are clear to him, not to mention those he has studied.”

[[Tipitaka, Sutta Pitaka, Samyutta Nikaya \(Grouped Collection\), Sangaravo Sutta: Sangarava \(The Hindrances\)](#)]

The next time you look into water, let it bend back your perceptions a bit. Is your life full of worry-and-flurry or clouded by doubt-and-wavering? What attachments prevent you from seeing how your own thoughts and actions are muddying the waters? Are there events in your life that remain unclear despite your long-time perseverance? How can you look at these feelings in a new way that might bring more clarity to your life? How can you bend back your tumultuous waters?

### ***Being Like Water***

The other metaphor actually comes to us from [Bruce Lee](#) who said,

“You must be shapeless, formless, like water. When you pour water in a cup, it becomes the cup. When you pour water in a bottle, it becomes the bottle. When you pour water in a teapot, it becomes the teapot. Water can drip and it can crash. Become like water my friend.”

Bruce Lee may be the most famous person to suggest that, but he’s certainly not the first. The idea has long been part of Asian teachings. A friend who formerly served as a Hindu monk in the Caitanya Vaisnavism tradition had this to say:

“Water, by its nature, takes the shape of whatever vessel it is put into. Likewise, our attitude towards serving God should be to accept whatever service comes to us as is and embrace that service as its own reward. So the appropriate attitude is ‘being like water’ – willingness to wholeheartedly do whatever service is offered by God and His representatives, the saints. Without this attitude, we become cold-hearted, like ice.”

Passages from the Tao Te Ching offer similar teachings. The most direct version of this idea is found in chapter 78:

Nothing in the world  
is as soft and yielding as water.  
Yet for dissolving the hard and inflexible,  
nothing can surpass it.

The soft overcomes the hard;  
the gentle overcomes the rigid.  
Everyone knows this is true,  
but few can put it into practice.

The Tao Te Ching also contains other relevant references to water. The first stanza shown below is found at the beginning of chapter 8; the next two are found at the beginning of chapter 66.

The supreme good is like water,  
which nourishes all things without trying to.  
It is content with the low places that people disdain.  
Thus it is like the Tao. (From Chapter 8)

All streams flow to the sea  
because it is lower than they are.  
Humility gives it its power.

If you want to govern the people,  
You must place yourself below them.  
If you want to lead the people,  
You must want to learn how to follow them. (From Chapter 66)

[*Tao Te Ching*. Trans. Stephen Mitchell. NY: Harper Perennial, 1988. Print.]

In what ways are you like water? Can you find power through humility? Do you nourish others – or even yourself – without forcing it? Are you both active and contemplative? Do you know when to persevere and when to simply accept? Can you influence without being forceful? What can you do to be more like water? During the next week, simply run your hands through water for one minute while pondering the lessons that water offers. You might be surprised at the changes you notice – both in yourself and in others.

*(In last week's blog, I presented the first part of my Big I conference talk on [water metaphors](#) found in the sacred texts. That post focused on water as a primordial element and water as a purifying agent. This post is a version of the second half of my talk.)*