

Nāga

The year of the dragon 2024

By Piya Tan

THE CHINESE DRAGON

According to the Chinese lunar calendar, this is the dragon year. It is one of the most fascinating animals in world mythology. The Chinese dragon is unique in featuring a comprehensive set of qualities combining various kinds of animal qualities and the 4 elements.

According to Marinus Willem de Visser, *The Dragon in China and Japan* (1913:70):

“The people paint the dragon’s shape with a horse’s head and a snake’s tail. Further, there are expressions such as “3 joints” and “9 resemblances” (of the dragon), to wit: from head to shoulder, from shoulder to breast, and from breast to tail.

These are the joints; as to the nine resemblances, they are the following:

his antlers resemble those of a stag, his head that of a camel, his eyes those of a demon, his neck that of a snake, his belly that of a clam (*shèn*, 蜃), his scales those of a carp, his claws those of an eagle, his soles those of a tiger, his ears those of a cow.

Upon his head, he has a thing like a broad eminence (a big lump), called *chǐ mù* (尺木). If a dragon has no *chǐ mù*, he cannot ascend to the sky.”

The Chinese dragon thus represents the universality of life and its versatile qualities. The dragon’s body may be seen as representing the earth element. It is able to breathe both water or fire; fire from its nostrils and water from its mouth. It walks the earth dexterously and flies freely into the air despite not having wings. These 4 elements are also those of a human, which means that we can also be versatile in our ways to live well and wisely. After all, we are the ones who created the dragon.

THE BUDDHIST NAGA

The dragon in Buddhist mythology is the *nāga*, a word which has a few meanings. The Buddhist naga is basically a magical serpent that inhabits deep underground or under the water, ranging from rivers to oceans, depending on their powers and size.

The Bodhisattva, after taking his last meal before the awakening, floated his bowl on the river Nerañjarā, and made an act of truth, that the bowl would flow against the currents and go upstream if he were to succeed in his quest. It did and then sank down deep into the river into the realm of the *Nāga Kāla*, the guardian of the bowls of the 3 previous buddhas. Gotama’s bowl took its place at the bottom of the stack of buddha-bowls.

Then there is the giant 7-hooded serpent Mucalinda that came out from underground to shelter the meditating Buddha from the great storm during the 6th week after the awakening. After the storm, he transformed himself into a young boy to received teachings from the Buddha. This means that any being with a power of understanding will be able to

benefit from the Buddha's teachings if they are willing to learn. If we are unwilling to learn we will remain unevolved.

Nāga is also the name of the leading bull elephant in the herd; hence, it means powerful and wise leader. The Buddha is the first amongst the arhats, who are all awakened like him. The arhats are also called nagas. In this case, the etymology of *nāga* is:

āguṃ na karotī ti nāgo, "one does no wrong-doing, thus one is *nāga*" (Nm 201).

We have so many blessed things to reflect on this year. May you be blessed with a good life, beauty, happiness, strength, and above all peace everywhere. Like the dragon we are capable of innumerable good. Blessed lunar New Year to all.

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