

Gone with the Wind:

The Five Elements and the Continuity of the Self in
the *Bhṛgubharadvājasamvāda* (*Mahābhārata* 12.175–185)

TAKAHASHI Kenji

1. Introduction

In the dialogue between Bhṛgu and Bharadvāja (the *Bhṛgubharadvājasamvāda*, hereafter BhBhS) recorded in *Mahābhārata* 12.175–185, Bhṛgu argues that the Self exists as Fire in one's head. Bharadvāja, who is deeply skeptical about Bhṛgu's teachings, casts a serious doubt on the idea of the Self as such by saying that Bhṛgu's argument leads to the undesirable consequence that a human being is reduced to material existence at the time of death and thus challenges the general assumption prevalent in Ancient India that the Self continues after death.

The BhBhS is subdivided into following sections: two different versions of creation (175–176); the five elements within the movable and immovable beings (177); the Self as Fire (178); Bharadvāja's question (179); discussions on the Self as Fire (180); *varṇadharmā* and *āśramadharmā* (181–185). MBh 12.178 is parallel to MBh 3.203.13–30b and MBh 12.180.23–29 to MBh 3.203.30c–35. Comparison between the BhBhS and MBh 3.203.13–35 suggests that the BhBhS inserted an additional discourse (MBh 12.179.1–180.22). This paper focuses on the first half of this interpolated part (179.1–180.10) and examines how the newly inserted questions by Bharadvāja deepens Bhṛgu's argument.

Frauwallner (1925, 60–63) studied the accounts of creation in MBh 12. 175–176. Decades later, this scholar observed that the BhBhS preserved a scientific contemplation on the five elements, but made only a few remarks about MBh 12.179.1–180.10 because he considered it to be a supplement to the whole text (Frauwallner 1953, I, 124–132). Schreiner (1999, 133–137) provided a useful summary of the BhBhS's discussion of Fire. In spite of their insightful observations, however, none of them has analyzed MBh 12.179. 1–180.10.

2. Internal Fire and Wind in MBh 12.178 (Shared with MBh 3.203)

Bharadvāja asks Bhṛgu how Fire and Wind function in one’s body (178.1). Bhṛgu answers (MBh 12.1783–MBh 3.203.15a–d):

Fire is located in the head, protecting the body. And Prāṇa, residing in Fire and in the head, activates [the body].¹⁾

From verse 5 onwards, Bhṛgu explains the roles that digestive Fire and Prāṇas play in one’s body. At the end of the chapter Bhṛgu concludes his discussion as follows (MBh 12.178.16c–17–MB 3.203.28c–f & 130ab):

The wise who have overcome fatigue and mastered seated postures placed the Self in the head. (16cd) In this way, the Fire,²⁾ which is disposed in all the Prāṇas and the Apāṇas of the embodied beings, always stays there (in the head), like [a fire] placed in a dish for a light. (17)

3. Bharadvāja Sternly Challenges Bhṛgu’s Argument

Bharadvāja expresses his doubts about Bhṛgu’s argument: if Wind functions as Prāṇas and if Wind is the agent of breathing and talking, there is no need for the Individual Self (*jīva*, MBh 12.179.1). If the warmth of the body derives from Fire and food is digested by Fire, it is Fire that makes the body older and, again, there is no need for the Individual Self (MBh 12.179.2). Bharadvāja seems to understand that the Self is Fire or Wind. Bhṛgu’s statement in MBh 12.178.2 can give an impression that the Fire in one’s body is identical with Wind, but MBh 12.178.16c–17 suggests that Bhṛgu identifies the Self primarily with Fire and that Wind is hierarchically slightly lower than Fire. Bharadvāja continues (MBh 12.179.3–4):

When a living being is dying, no Individual Self is observed. Wind alone leaves it (the dying living being) and the warmth disappears. (3) If the Individual Self was similar to Wind, and if it was a union with Wind, it would be like a wind-whirl, and it would go with flocks of wind. (4)

The purport of Bharadvāja’s condemnation against Bhṛgu is that if the Self is identified with Fire or Wind, it will dissolve into Fire or Wind outside the human body and the continuity of the Self will be interrupted. He argues further that if a human being is no more than an aggregate of the five elements, it will collapse when any one of them leaves (7–10). Then Bharadvāja argues that Bhṛgu’s theory cannot explain the world after death or

rebirth (11–13). Finally, he refers to the fact that once a tree is cut down, its roots will no longer grow again and that the only a seed that was emitted previously will grow (14–15).

4. Bhṛgu's Reply

Bhṛgu first answers to Bharadvāja's criticism by saying that even if one's body perishes, the Self in the body does not perish, just like Fire does not perish even when the firewood is burned up (MBh 12.180.1–2). Bharadvāja easily dismisses this argument by pointing out that once the firewood is burned up, there is no destination or place of Fire, or there is no means to ascertain its existence (MBh 12.180.3–4). Bhṛgu explains further (MBh 12.180.5–6):

When the firewood is consumed, Fire, although it is still existent, is not observed. For, because it has followed Space, it is deprived of its support and is difficult to perceive. (5) Similarly, when the Individual Self abandons the body, it remains [existent], just like Space. It is not perceived because it is very subtle, just like Light—There is no doubt about it. (6)

In this account, Light (*jyotis*) seems to be a synonym of Fire (*agni*), which is commonly observed in the MBh (cf. MBh 12.224–225 etc.). Bhṛgu then explains how Fire as the Individual Self leaves the body with Wind (MBh 12.180.7–19):

Fire supports Prāṇas. It (Fire) should be understood as the Individual Self. Fire being supported by Wind, it perishes by stopping breathing. (7) When this Fire in one's body perishes, the body loses consciousness, falls down and becomes Earth, because Earth is its destination. (8) Wind of all the movable and immovable [beings] enters Space, and Light follows it (Wind). In it (Space), there is oneness of the three (Space, Wind and Light). The two (Water and Earth) are established in Earth. (9)

He then gives a kind of reasoning for the above argument (MBh 12.180.10):

Where there is Space, there is Wind. There is Fire where there is Wind. They (Space, Wind and Fire) are to be known as incorporeal. Water is corporeal, so is Earth.

Bhṛgu divides the five elements into two categories: the corporeal (Water and Earth) and incorporeal ones (Space, Wind and Fire). This polarity reminds us of the Gārgya-Ajātaśatru discourse in *Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad* 2.3 where Ajātaśatru distinguishes the corporeal and incorporeal forms of Brāhman, and argues that the former corresponds to that which is different from Prāṇa and Space inside the body and the latter to Prāṇa and Space. Using the distinction between the corporeal and incorporeal elements, Bhṛgu explains the invisibility of the Self at the time of death by relating death to the dissolution of elements.

At the time of death, Wind enters into Space, and Fire follows Wind because Fire is supported by Wind. This process presupposes the hierarchy of Space>Wind>Fire. Although this hierarchy of the elements (Space, Wind, Fire) concords with the most prevalent one in Indian philosophy (Space, Wind, Fire, Water, Earth), it deviates from the ones presented in the BhBhS. In accounts of creation (MBh 12.175.11–16; 12.176.9–16), the BhBhS places Water before Wind. Elsewhere in the BhBhS the five elements are arranged according to their common order, suggesting that it was familiar to the author of the BhBhS. 10ab gives a logical explanation for this order: the existence of Space is a sufficient condition for that of Wind, and the existence of Wind is, for its part, a sufficient condition for that of Fire.

5. Concluding Remarks

Bhṛṅu's philosophical ingenuity lies in dividing the five elements into corporeal and incorporeal ones, and in relating death to dissolution of the incorporeal elements into Space. His theory gives an explanation as to why the Self as Fire or Wind is not perceived at the time of death and still remains existent.

The present paper profited from the reading session of the BhBhS held at Leiden University from September 2015 to June 2016. I would like to express my sincere appreciation to Peter Bisschop, Nirajan Kafle, Lidia Wojtczak, Lucas den Boer for their helpful comments then. I would also like to thank James L. Fitzgerald (Brown University) for kindly sharing his unpublished translation of the BhBhS with me. Last but not least, my deepest gratitude goes to Diwakar Acharya (Oxford University) and Andrey Klebanov (Kyoto University) for commenting on earlier versions of the present paper.

Bibliography

Frauwallner, Erich. 1925. "Untersuchungen zum Mokṣadharmā: Die nicht-sāṃkhyaistischen Texte." *Journal of American Oriental Society* 45: 51–67. ———, 1953. *Geschichte der indischen Philosophie*. Band I–II. Salzburg: Otto Müller Verlag. Schreiner, Peter. 1999. "Fire—its literary perception in the Mahābhārata." In *The Perception of the Elements in the Hindu Tradition: La perception des éléments dans les traditions hindoues*, ed. Burger, Maya and Schreiner, Peter, 113–144. Bern; Berlin; Bruxelles; Frankfurt am Main; New York; Oxford; Wien: Peter Lang.

(This research was supported by Mishima Kaiun Memorial Foundation.)

Key words *Mahābhārata*, *Bhṛṅgubharadvājaśaṃvāda*, the five elements

(Graduate Student, Kyoto University)