

Naga's Fireballs: A Mysterious Phenomenon on Mekong River and Local Buddhists' Trust

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Abstract

It is undeniable that the Buddhism talks about *Naga* (a sacred snake) as it appeared legendarily in early Buddhism. The legend of *Naga* has strong effects to Buddhist Thai society, especially the Buddhists in Northeastern Thailand. The Buddhists therein believe in *Naga* in various roles such as protecting a life of people, bringing them some prosperity, etc. The Buddhists living their life along the basin of Mekong River strongly believe in the existence of living *Naga* as they have annually seen an appearance of the *Naga*, one of these is a fireball phenomenon on Mekong River; which is called the *Naga's* fireball. Surprisingly, the appearance of mysterious phenomenon occurs on full moon day at 11th Thai lunar month which is annually falls on the day-end of Buddhist Lent. It is believed that the fireballs on Mekong River rise from the middle of the river up to sky and disappear without any clue. It results from the *Naga* who needs to celebrate and commemorate the day when Buddha descended to the earth after living on the heaven for three months to give a sermon to his mother. To celebrate and commemorate, the *Naga* fires a fireball from his resident located beneath the Mekong River as the local Buddhists believed. The fireball phenomenon has considerably

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sparked Thais and tourists coming to visit the place where the fireballs rise from the river. More significant, many people from various sections of Thailand need to find out where the fireballs come from; whether from mysterious things, human beings, or natural causes.

Keyword: *Naga*, Fireball, Mysterious phenomenon, Mekong River, Local Buddhists, Trust.

Introduction

Mekong River is said to be a main river to Northeastern Thailand and Laos for their daily life. Mostly, people living along the basin of Mekong River steady belong to Buddhism resulting in living their life in accordance with Buddhist traditions mixed with their own traditions, cultures, and belief succeeding from their ancestors. The concept of *Naga* is one of the exemplified beliefs that mixed with Buddhist-traditional belief constantly embedded in the mind of the local people in northeastern Thailand and in some part of Lao; an artifactual heads of *Naga* widely used as the decorated objects at the main part of monasteries can be explicitly seen as the essential evidence of them. To believe and accept the existence of *Nagas* of the Buddhists could not be completely denied as the legend of *Nagas* is also mentioned in early Buddhism, by then, most of *Nagas* played essential roles for Buddha's and his disciples. Till now, the Buddhists, especially in northeastern part of Thailand and some part of Lao, believe in a living *Naga* appearing on the surface of Mekong River and living beneath the river. In this regard, there is some mysterious phenomenon of fireball rising from the surface of the Mekong River up the sky and disappearing without any clue. People living the life along the basin of the river steady believe that the phenomenon as such comes from the *Nagas* as the they, who have a strong faith in Buddhism since in early Buddhism up to now, want to

commemorates on the day when Buddhism descended to the earth from the heaven that falls on the end of Buddhist Lent. The mysterious phenomenon of fireballs annually occurs at the same time at various places, the locations of which cover Mekong River. The Phenomenon has extremely sparked both Thais and foreigners from everywhere coming to see and witness by their own eyes. As a result, there are normally three groups of those who have already seen the mysterious phenomenon of fireballs: One absolutely believes that it is the mysterious phenomenon rising from *Nagas*; other believes that it might be a hoax made up by human beings thereby shooting from other side of Mekong River, that is Lao; and another believes that the fireballs are a natural phenomenon along Mekong River. Then, they tried to search out the essential evidence and make an experiment regarding the materials they got around those areas so as to reveal the fact of a origin of phenomenon of fireballs.

People and Mekong River

The term “Mekong River” comes from Thai and Lao languages as the term “Mekong” is an abbreviation commonly used in Thai and Lao for “*Meanam Kong*” which means Kong River. The river is said to have its source in Tibet and flows in a great arc around the north-eastern syntaxis of the Himalayan massif exiting to the south of the mountain belt in the “three rivers” region between Myanmar and the Yunnan province of China where the Yangtze, the Mekong, and the Salween rivers are closely aligned. It flows 4800 kms Southeast to the South China Sea, through six developing countries: China, Myanmar, Laos, Thailand, Cambodia, and Viet- Nam. (Campbell, I.C., 2009)With this, it is said to be the longest river and full of significant things such as religious belief, cultures, languages and etc. It might say that this river is called a cultural and spiritual river as most of people such as Thais, Laos, and Cambodians living their life along

the basis of the river steady belong to Buddhism and prefer establishing Buddhist temples and monasteries as their central faith for their performing the religious rituals along the riverbank. To be more precisely, a majority of people living in the countries located along the basin of Mekong River such as Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, China, and Tibet are mostly Buddhist but having different traditions; they practice regarding three major Buddhist traditions. Regardingly, there are three Buddhist traditions that people living along the basin of Mekong River adhere and practice: People in Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia practice in the light of *Theravada* tradition; people in China and Vietnam practice in *Mahayana* tradition, and people in Tibet practice with *Vajrayana* tradition. Therefore, Mekong River is traditionally called the “River of Buddhism”. (Khanh T. Tran, 2016)

Regarding the festivals related to Buddhist traditions, the Buddhists living their life along the basis of Mekong River organize annually various kinds of the festivals related to Buddha’s teachings and history as follows:

- *Lai Ruea Fai* or illuminated boat procession: it is said to be the most famous celebration organized in Nakhon Phanom. The background of organizing the such this festival has originated from Buddha’s history of his returning to earth from the heaven when he ascended to the heaven to give a sermon to his mother. It is also believed that while descending on the earth, the Buddha’s footprint marked on the bank of Nimmathanatee River. Then, people therein believe that all water ways can be linked together, so they decorate illuminated boats for worshipping the Buddha’s footprint. (Chantamool, A., Laoakka, S., Phaengsoi, K., 2015)
- The Garland Festival: it is the festival annually held to commemorate the day buddha descended from the heaven

after sermonizing his mother. With this, Buddhists believe that on that day of returning to the earth he was welcome by the angles with flowers and rice. So, this belief has practically turned to the tradition. By this, to remark that tradition related to Buddhist faith, the villagers make garlands from a baked rice which shown in a parade and used for decorating the temples' pavilion.

- Boat Racing Festival: It has been traditionally held since from the ancient time to mark the end of Buddhist Lents that the people along Mekong River including Laos come to join the festival constantly.

All festivals as mentioned above are organized to cerebrate and remark the events related to Buddhism as most of them strongly believe in Buddhism and practice regarding Buddha's teachings.

A Legend of *Naga* in Early Buddhism

It is undeniable that the serpent (*Naga*) is legendarily accepted in early Buddhism when the roles of *Nagas* related to a history of Buddhism are talked in various sources of Buddhist scripture (*Tipitaka*). At one source in the scripture, it talks about the serpent (*Naga*) who took care of Buddha who was going to get enlightened. Regarding this point, the story said:

When Buddha arose from the state of meditation at the foot of the *Agapala* banyan tree and went to the *Mukalinda* tree and sat cross-legged at the foot of the Mukaling tree uninterruptedly during seven days by enjoying the bliss emancipation, by then, a great cloud appeared out of season resulting in rainy weather which lasted seven days, cold weather, storms, and darkness. The serpent (*Naga*) named king *Mukalinda* came out of his abode and encircled the body of Buddha with his

windings for seven times and kept expending his large hood over Buddha' head together with thinking to himself: "May no coldness (touch) the Blessed One! May no heat (touch) the Blessed One! May no vexation by gadflies and gnats, by storms and sunheat and reptiles (touch) the Blessed One". Having seen the cloudless sky, by the end of seven days, the *Naga* king loosened his windings from the body of Buddha and disguised himself as a young man stationing in the front of Buddha in order to pay homemade to Buddha. (I.B. Horner, 1982)

There is other story in the scripture talking about a serpent (*Naga*) who felt ashamed and aggrieved as he was born as a serpent and tried to find out the way to release himself from being serpent and obtain human nature. He thought intelligently that the only way to obtain a human nature was to get ordination as a novice (*pabbagga*) with Sakyaputtiya Samanas who always led a virtuous, tranquil, and holy life. Then, the *Naga* disguised himself as a young boy and went to the Bhikkhus. By then, he asked for ordination as a novice (*pabbagga*). Finally, the Bhikkhus conferred on him the ordination as a novice and then as a monk later. One day, the *Naga* monk fell asleep; then, his body turned back to *Naga* again. When he woke up, he told all matters to the monks who had seen him. When Buddha had known about these matters, he said to the serpent that serpents were not capable to grow with spiritual in this doctrine and discipline,¹ but serpents would be released from being as a serpent and quickly obtain a human nature if they went and observed fast on the fourteenth, fifteenth, and eighth day of each half month. The serpent thought that he would not be able to grow up in this doctrine

¹ Actually, beings living in a state of perpetual insecurity have difficulty in maintaining calm mental states. For this, and other reasons, animals may not seek admittance to the monastic order (*sangha*) and cannot easily act upon the teachings of a Buddha. See Paul Waldau and Kimcerley Patton (Ed), *A Communion of Subjects: Animals in Religions, Science, and Ethics* (New York: Columbia University, 1893), p. 208.

and discipline, then became sad and sorrowful, shed tears, made an outcry, and went away.

Regarding the concept of a serpent in Buddhism, as the stories mentioned above, some of them can have a wonder power and some can disguise as a human being for some time in order to accomplish some duties. However, Buddha indicates the occasion that a *Naga* could manifest his true nature, though, he has assumed a human being as saying, “There are two occasions, O Bhikkhus, on which a serpent (who has assumed human shape) manifests his true nature: when he has sexual intercourse with a female of his species, and if he thinks himself safe (from discovery) and falls asleep. These, O Bhikkhus, are the two occasions on which a serpent manifests his true nature.”

The Legend of Serpents (*Naga*) in Mekong River

As known Mekong River is said to be one of the longest rivers in the world as it covers many countries, especially southeast Asia such as Thailand, Lao etc. Anyways, most Buddhist people living their life along the basin of Mekong River believe that some kind of a snake, the so-called *Naga*, resides under the Mekong River. It is traditionally believed that Mekong River is the subterranean palace (*wang badan*) of the *Nagas*. The location of Mekong River where is believed to be the subterranean *Naga* is found in Nong Khai province and neighboring Udon Thani province as it says:

There is a subterranean Naga Universe beneath the whole area of Nong Khai and Neighboring Udon Thani province. The portal where the *Naga* enters or exits its lair is called “Mekong Abyss,” an aquatic tunnel buried in the depths of the river near Wat (Temple) Ahong, 100 km further up from Phon Phisai (a district town near which the fire balls appear in greatest numbers)

... it is said that if you follow the riverine tunnel from Mekong Abyss, you will end up at the *Naga's* abode. This turns out to be the area called Kam Chanode in Udon Thani. It's actually a bizarre sight: Kam Chanode is a small island in the middle of expansive rice fields and it is packed with thin, tall palm tree, (*ton chanot*), yet at the center, there is a pond that is believed to be the *Naga's* lair. (Cohen, E., 2008)

Regarding the passage mentioned above, it indicates that the *Nagas* live their life under Mekong River the location of which is found in Nong Khai and Udon Thani province. They use the Mekong abyss as their entrance and exist of lair, but they reside in the area of Kam Chanode in Udon Thani. Therein, it is said to be their lair. In this regard, it signifies that Mekong River and Kam Chanode in Udon Thani are liked each other by an aquatic tunnel in the depths of the river.

There are some evidences for proving the appearance of the *Nagas* available along the basin of Mekong River such as the fossilized objects, alleged to be sections of the *Naga's* skeleton, crest, tooth, and egg, being exhibited in the principle temples of Nang Khai city such as Wat Pho Luang Phra Sai.

Mysterious Phenomenon of Fireballs on Mekong River

On full moon night of the 15th of the 11th lunar month which falls on the month of October of every year and the end of the Buddhist Lent, there is a phenomenon of fireballs rising up from the surface of the Mekong River. The mysterious phenomenon appears on various location of Mekong River, but the famous one is located in Phonpisai of Nong Khai province.

The appearances of the fireballs are explained that each of fireballs consists of red mixed with pink color rising up to sky with 20 to

50 meters high and disappearing without any ray of light and clues falling down to earth; it is different from a fireball in general that rises up on the sky with the ray of light and the clues falling down to earth. By the duration of the appearance, each of them spends 3-7 seconds for occurring that occurs between 7 pm.-10 pm on that day with three sizes, big, medium, and small; there are 20-30 fireballs occurring somewhere, 30-40 in somewhere, 100 fireballs in somewhere, approximately. The locations of fireballs occurring are also different; some occurs near the basin of Mekong River, some far away for the basin of the river.

It is widely said that nobody knows when the fireballs firstly rise up from Mekong River and who was the first person seeing such these fireballs; it was only the most senior villagers that they count the phenomenon as one of their earliest memories. (Cohen, E., 2007)

However, some sources said that once upon the time the adolescents from a village located near the basin of Mekong River made appointment to each other to take their boats caring a small fireball to Mekong River, then, lit their small fireballs rising up to the sky. Suddenly, there were mystic fireballs erupting beneath the Mekong River as if some needed to challenge with the adolescents' fireballs. Since then, the fireballs have been called "*Naga's* fireball", (Kliengpibula, C., 1997) or it was called in past by the inhabitants of the region as "*Spiritual* fireball (*Bong fai phi*). (Cohen, E., 2008)

A Fact of the Fireball Phenomenon on Mekong River

The phenomenon of mysterious fireballs has constantly sparked people worldwide drawing their intention to come to see the phenomenon by their own eyes. However, there are controversies about the origins of fireballs that can be classified into three main groups: (Kliengpibula, C., 1997)

- A scientific group who believes that the fireballs erupting from Mekong River up to sky have a cause from accumulation of gases rising on the surface of the river, reacting with the air and producing a fire consequently.
- A skeptic group who trusts that the fireballs rise up from the Mekong River, but why do they occur only one night, on the 15th of the 11th lunar month, it should occur moving to other day for some year.
- A conservative group who strong believe that on the 15th of the 11th lunar month which falls on the end of Buddhist Lents, it is the day when Buddha spent three months for Buddhist Lents on the heaven as he needed to give a sermon to his mother, then, after three months, he descended back on the earth. By then, people came to greet him by offering the flowers, food, and the necessities. Recently, to commemorate the day, the *Nagas* reside normally beneath Mekong River light a fireball in order to pay homage to Buddha, then, the fireball is called “Naga’s fireball”.

Though many groups of people from various sections of Thailand tried to find out the tracts and collect the evidences for purposely revealing a fact of a origin of the mysterious phenomenon of fireball on Mekong River, but not yet to find the clues of the fact thereof. So, it is still mysterious phenomenon.

Buddhist Way for Revealing a Fact of the Mysterious Phenomenon

Some phenomenon is hard to believe whether it is true or not. However, to reveal the mysterious phenomenon, the Buddha’s teaching in *Kalama Sutta* can be used as a tool for revealing the fact of such the mysterious phenomenon as follows:

- Do not go upon what has been acquired by repeated hearing;
- Do not upon tradition;
- Do not upon rumor;
- Do not upon what is in a scripture;
- Do not upon surmise;
- Do not upon an axiom;
- Do not upon specious reasoning;
- Do not upon a bias toward a notion that has been pondered over;
- Do not upon another's seeming ability; and
- Do not upon the consideration. (Morris, R., 1999)

By the strategy of the Buddha's teaching in *Kalama Sutta* as mentioned above, it can be effectively applied for revealing the true of fireballs origin on Mekong River. This *sutta* teaches us, "We must come to see the phenomenon with our own eyes".

Conclusion

As a role of the *Naga* is talked in various sources in *Tipitaka* (Buddhist Scripture), as a Buddhist, they still believe in a living *Naga* in the present. By their belief, all *Nagas* live underneath the main rivers such as Mekong River. Regardingly, the mysterious phenomena occurring on Mekong River such as fireballs phenomenon, etc. are faithfully explained thereby relating to *Nagas* and worship the *Nagas* for making them healthy and prosperous as they believed. As for the fireballs on Mekong River, the local Buddhists believe strongly that *Nagas* light up fireballs so as to commemorate the day when Buddha descended to the earth after spending three months on heaven for sermonizing his mother and also for worshiping Buddha. Anyways, a fact of living *Nagas* and the origin of fireball on Mekong River is still mysterious; though, people have tried to

find out the evidences and make an experiment to reveal the fact of them.

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