The Suvarnabhasottamasutra's "Vyadhiprasamanaparivarta" and Ayurveda: Similar in Form but Different in Theory

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The Suvarṇabhāsottamasūtra’s “Vyāhipraśamana-parivarta” and Āyurveda: Similar in Form but Different in Theory

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1. Descriptive Similarities between Suv and Āyurvedic Texts

In the “Vyāhipraśamana-parivarta,” the 16th chapter of the Sanskrit version of the Suvarṇabhāsottamasūtra (Suv), a medical discussion can be found, which Emmerick [1996: 78] translates as follows: 1)

(5) The rainy season is seen to be three months, autumn is said to be three, winter likewise three, and three too the hot season. Thus the succession of months (forms) six periods. A year is said to have twelve months. (6) ... The monthly period is to be viewed in twos. Food and drink are consumed accordingly. And the doctor, his skill, and the period, have been explained. (7) And the senses and elements change during the division of the year. The senses changing, the various diseases arise for corporeal beings. (8) In that case, the doctor must have skill concerning the fourfold division into three months, the six periods in the (bimonthly) division, and the six elements. (9) Illnesses due to excess of wind occur in the rainy season. Disturbance of the bile is taught (to occur) in autumn. Likewise, (illness) due to a combination (arises) in winter-time. Illnesses due to excess of phlegm arise in the hot season. (10) In the rainy season, the (characteristic) tastes (are) fatty, warm, salty and sour; in autumn seasons, fatty, sweet and cold; in winter-time, sweet, sour and fatty; and in summer-time, rough, warm and bitter. (11) Excess of phlegm erupts as soon as one has eaten. Excess of bile erupts during digestion. Excess of wind erupts as soon as one has digested. In this manner do the three elements erupt. (12) Give strengthening to one who has wind, a purgative to remove bile, in the case of a combination (give) something endowed with the three qualities, and one should use an emetic during a period of (excess) phlegm. (13) One must know in which periods excess of wind, bile or a combination, (or) excess of phlegm (occur). That food, drink, or medicine must be prescribed which accords with the time, the element and the person.

(Prose is in *italics*, and verse numbers (**) were added by the author)

First the *ṛtus* (seasons) are defined, followed by the disorders found in the medical theory of *tridoṣa* comprised of*vāta* (wind), *pitta* (bile), and *kapha/sleṣman* (phlegm). Then, remedies and *rasas* (tastes) for each season are prescribed. The form of this passage,
though simplified, corresponds to that of the seasonal regimen descriptions commonly found in orthodox Āyurvedic documents.  

Thus, this passage has been considered to have been extracted from, or directly influenced by the Āyurvedic documents.

### 2. Ṛtu and Rasa

However, *Suv*’s description is different from orthodox Āyurvedic documents when it comes to specific concepts. *Suv* introduces four and six Ṛtus as technical terms, but it actually uses only the former in its medical explanation. In contrast, orthodox Āyurvedic documents use six Ṛtus. If directly based on Āyurvedic documents, the regimen would be described using the six Ṛtus, but that is not the case. In this connection, Xuanzang 玄奘 writes in his *Datang Xiyu Ji* 大唐西域記 that there were three concepts of the seasons in India: the common notion of six seasons, and the two understandings found in the Buddhist canon of three seasons and four seasons. While this single record cannot prove the four-ṛtu concept to be distinctive among Buddhists, we can affirm that the concept of seasons in *Suv* is not simply copied from Āyurvedic texts. In addition, *Suv*’s description of rasas loosely corresponds to the Āyurvedic seasonal regimen although its concept of Ṛtu differs (fig. 1). However, the rasas *Suv* enumerates do not match the definition of the śadrasa (six rasas) found in orthodox Āyurvedic texts. Moreover, supposedly earlier *Mahāyāna* texts such as the *Da zhidu lun* 大智度論 and *Mahāparinirvāṇamahāsūtra* 7) mention the concept of śadrasa. Thus *Suv*’s theory of rasa does not coincide with that of Āyurvedic texts, nor especially closer than that of other Buddhist texts.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RTU (seasonal regimen)</th>
<th></th>
<th>Seasonal regimen in <em>CS</em> and <em>Suv</em>.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>rū</td>
<td>doṣa disordered</td>
<td>rasa appropriate remedy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>vāsanta</td>
<td>kapha</td>
<td>[kaṭuka, tikta, kapāya, tikṣuṇa, uṣṇa, rūkṣa]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>grīṣma</td>
<td>pitta</td>
<td>madhura, śīta, drava, snigdha</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>vāra</td>
<td>vāta, etc.</td>
<td>amla, lāvāṇa, snigdha</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>śārad</td>
<td>pitta</td>
<td>madhura, tikta, laghū, śīta, satīkta</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hemantaka</td>
<td>vāta</td>
<td>amla, lāvāṇa, snigdha</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>śīśira</td>
<td>vāta</td>
<td>amla, lāvāṇa, snigdha</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fig. 1 Seasonal regimen in *CS* and *Suv*.
3. Tridośa

In Āyurvedic texts, it is said that there are 62 saṃnipāta (combinations of disorders), but their particular symptoms are not assigned to specific seasons.8) By contrast, in Buddhist texts we often find 404 types of diseases, which are seen as arising from the four elements (mahābhūta) or the dhātu. In this framework, each is assigned a doṣa: vāṭa to air (vāyu), pīṭa to fire (tejas), kapha to water (āp), and saṃnipāta to earth (prthivī).9) In fact, dhātu and doṣa are different names for the same thing; dhātu is the term used to describe elements comprising the body, whereas doṣa is used when they are the causes of disease. Thus, in the above passage, dhātu/mahābhūta and dhātu/doṣa are used interchangeably.10) In the Buddhist conception of 404 diseases, it is quite common to juxtapose tridoṣa and saṃnipāta. Suv supposedly also adopted this manner.

4. Saḍḍhātu

Suv mentions saḍḍhātu (six elements) in the above-cited 8th verse, as well as in the prose following the verses.11) In the 11th verse, tri-dhātu are mentioned as doṣa. While in this context saḍḍhātu must include tri-dhātu/doṣa, in orthodox Āyurveda such a conception cannot be found.12) Thus we have no choice but to understand these three dhātu/doṣa as three dhātu/mahābhūta, and saḍḍhātu as the classical Buddhist concept of the elements of body, i.e., earth, water, fire, air, void (ākāśa), and cognition (vijñāna), which includes the three dhātus.13)

5. Conclusion

As seen above, while the medical regimen in Suv is similar to Āyurvedic texts in form, it differs in content. Its understandings of seasons, etiologies, and the concept of the elements of the body are closer to classic Buddhist theory. There are two possible reasons for this: Suv's seasonal regimen could be unique to Buddhism, belonging to a line of transmission different from orthodox Āyurveda,14) or it could be an imitation only in the form of an Āyurvedic seasonal regimen.

Notes
The Suvarṇabhāsottamasūtra’s “Vyādhipraṣamana-parivarta” and Āyurveda (E. Hino)


13) Ex. AKBh I. 28, p. 18. CS also presents  saḍhātu as consisting of earth, water, fire, air, void, and ātman (Sū, 8, 9, 25. 14). Nowhere else in Sūv is  saḍhātu found, despite dhātu being used in “Relic” (ch. 2) and in “Four Elements of the Body” (ch. 5). 14) See G. Zysk [1991].

Abbreviations


Skj. Prods Oktor Skjærvø, This Most Excellent Shine of Gold, King of Kings of Sutras: The Khotanese Suvarṇabhāsottamasūtra. [Cambridge, Mass.]: Harvard University, 2004.
The Suvarṇabhūṣottamaśūtra’s “Vyādhipraśamana-parivarta” and Āyurveda (E. Hino) (181)


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References


〈Key words〉 Suvarṇa(pra) bhāṣottamasūtra, Mahāyāna, Āyurveda, rtu, dhātu, doṣa

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