Tibetan Buddhist Narratives of the Forces of Creation

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The effort to explain the nature of phenomena without positing their permanent existence led to highly developed theories of causality in Buddhist literature. In this essay I will consider the mechanics of causation in Tibetan narratives of human gestation. Buddhists throughout history have concerned themselves with describing how change occurs in the various realms of human experience, and embryology is fundamentally about change. From India, accounts of early human development traveled to Tibet with other sorts of Buddhist literature, and they were embellished by Tibetans in religious and medical circles over the centuries to follow. This essay will consider how embryological accounts interacted with each other and with their literary environments throughout Tibetan history, asking more widely what embryology may tell us about the intertwining of religion and medicine in Tibet.

In the doctrines of the early Buddhist canon, humans are said to be composed of five components, or "aggregates" (in Pāli, *khandha*), the proportions and nature of which are continually shifting, such that an individual cannot be, in reality, a stable entity, unchanging from moment to moment. Misperception of the basic fact of substantial instability, or impermanence, and the imposition of a stable, constant "self" upon this shifting configuration of aggregates is in Buddhism considered the central downfall of humankind. Belief in a self that underlies or unites the aggregates into one, the Buddha taught, is the root of all human suffering. The trouble with this theory, however, is the continuity across multiple lifetimes asserted by the process of rebirth. According to

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Buddhist doctrine, the world is created by the actions (in Sanskrit, *karman*) of sentient beings. All actions leave upon the actor an imprint that has an effect on the actor's future, dictating the direction of his or her rebirth. The issue of how these imprints are transferred over lifetimes, however, is complicated by theories of impermanence and no-self, and this problem has been one of the central topics of debate in Buddhist philosophy over the centuries.[1]

Karmic causality is thus a historically and systematically complex notion. Although it is but one aspect of Buddhist causal theory overall, karmic causality is at the root of much of Buddhist thought and practice. In Tibetan discussions of the body at the level of fetal development, concerns with the workings of karma are at the heart of debates in both medical and religious systems. Many of these systems award karma a significant, motivationally shaping role in the creation of a new human body. In this essay, I will discuss how embryology is used in Tibetan literature to express a range of Buddhist notions of causation, change, and growth. I will focus on four models of causation found in twelfth- to sixteenth-century Tibetan embryological narratives: a model in which the primary causal force is karma, another in which the primary forces of growth are the body's energetic winds, yet another in which the primary forces are all of the natural elements together, and, finally, a model in which the primary force of growth is the wisdom of a Buddha. Over the course of this essay, by examining the presence in embryological discourse of competing models for causation and human growth, we will see that while karma was vital to some models, others emphasized the power of other psychosomatic features of the individual. We will observe that embryology is at the center of a fundamental Buddhist concern, explored here through discussion of the role of karma in becoming human and disagreement over the primary forces that motivate human development.

Competing Models of Growth: The Force of Karma

How karma works, and how exactly karmic causality can be effective from one lifetime to the next is an issue that has been debated since the beginning of Buddhism. Buddhist texts as far back as the *Saṃyuttanikāya* feature philosophical dialogues between the Buddha and his students on the topics of causality in the context of rebirth specifically; this topic has been well summarized by Surendranath Dasgupta, James McDermott, and others.[2] Karmic causality is an integral part of both Āyurvedic

1. For a brief overview of such debates in Tibetan Buddhism, see Lobsang Dargyay, "Tsong-Kha-Pa's Concept of Karma," in *Karma and Rebirth: Post Classical Developments*, ed. Ronald W. Neufeldt, SUNY Series in Religious Studies (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986), 169–71. For a discussion of medieval Theravāda views on karma's relationship to rebirth, see Bruce Matthews, "Post-Classical Developments in the Concepts of Karma and Rebirth in Theravada Buddhism," in *Karma and Rebirth: Post-Classical Developments*, ed. Ronald W. Neufeldt, SUNY Series in Religious Studies (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986).

2. See summaries in Surendranath Dasgupta, *A History of Indian Philosophy*, 5 vols. (New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1975); and James P. McDermott, *Development in the Early Buddhist Concept of Kamma/Karma* (New Delhi: Munishiram Manoharlal, 1984), and "Karma and Rebirth in Early Buddhism," in *Karma and Rebirth in Classical Indian Traditions*, ed. Wendy Doniger (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1983).

medical and Indian Buddhist sources on rebirth, and all Tibetan authors who write on embryology—whether affiliated with medical or religious traditions—acknowledge the role of karma in human conception and development. Karma plays a role in embryology on two levels: first, in the larger context of the Buddhist law of interdependent origination (*rten cing 'brel bar 'byung ba*; Skt. *pratītyasamutpāda*), and, second, in the context of the specific causes of conception and fetal growth.

The law of interdependent origination is a doctrine of causality that explains the ultimately interdependent nature of all phenomena in the world, a notion that is the basis of the Buddhist thesis that all phenomena are impermanent, arising through causes and conditions. It is interpreted variously by all schools of Buddhism and is arguably the philosophical helm of Buddhist thought. Traditions such as the Mādhyamika used the twelve sequential stages of interdependent origination to justify their position that because all phenomena are interdependent, they must therefore be intrinsically selfless or empty.[3] From this perspective, there *are* no things causally connected—ultimately there is only causal connection. The doctrine of interdependent origination serves as a mediating concept, a "middle way," between the two extremes of eternalism, in which one believes that the individual, or an essential portion of the individual, continues unchangingly throughout a series of lifetimes, and nihilism, in which one believes that an individual is completely annihilated at death. The doctrine allows Buddhists to speak of a causal chain connecting actions and their effects, without asserting a permanent transmigrating entity. Significantly, it also explains that the cause of ultimate liberation is the cessation of the mechanics of karma, which means the end of the cycle of rebirth. This places embryology—where the mechanics of rebirth is taught—at the center of Buddhist soteriology.

Within embryological accounts, the problem of karma is addressed in the context of explaining both the causes of conception and the course of fetal development. All accounts of human development agree that conception is caused by three main factors: the joining of the two healthy reproductive substances of a man and a woman in intercourse and the consciousness of the transmigrating sentient being, which is generally said to be propelled toward that particular copulating man and woman by its own karmic imprints. This basic model of conception arrived in Tibet in the eleventh century with Vāgbhaṭa's Indian medical text, the *Eight Branches*, which was widely influential in the subsequent development of Tibetan medical literature; it is the model present in the Buddhist sūtra, *Teaching Nanda about Entering the Womb*, the most widely cited source for Tibetan embryology; and it can be seen in the earliest of Buddhist texts, such as the *Majjhima Nikāya* and the Abhidhamma.[4] There is little disagreement among Tibetan religious or

3. The twelve stages are explained clearly in Jeffrey Hopkins, *Meditation on Emptiness* (London: Wisdom Publications, 1983), 275–83. The doctrine of interdependent origination is also represented iconographically by the "wheel of life" (*srid pa'i 'khor lo*). See, for example, Geshe Sopa, "The Tibetan Wheel of Life: Iconography and Doxography," *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 7, 1 (1984). See also David M. Williams, "The Translation and Interpretation of the Twelve Terms in the Paticcasamuppada," *Numen* 21 (1974).

4. In Tibet, the most influential Indian medical text with a presentation of embryology is Vāgbhaṭa's *Aṣṭāṅgahṛdayasaṃhitā* (*Yan lag brgyad pa'i snying po bsdus pa*, referred to in this article in English as the *Eight Branches*). On the *Sūtra of Teaching Nanda about Entering the Womb* (*Āyuṣmannandagarbhāva-krāntinirdeśa-sūtra*), see Robert

medical writers on these key features of conception. Although we will see that in other aspects of gestation the issue of causality is more problematic, to this degree and in this context, karma is important to all.

In the earliest extant examples of Tibetan embryology in medical texts, such as in the *Four Tantras* and its first commentaries,[5] conception is a significant, heavily commented-upon topic. As above, the factors required for conception are typically listed as nondefective male reproductive substance (*khu ba*), nondefective female reproductive "blood" (*khrag*), a transmigrating consciousness (*rnam shes*) that is drawn from the space where it waits between lifetimes toward a man and woman in sexual union, plus, in some sources, the five natural elements (*'byung ba*), earth, fire, water, wind, and space. Menstruation is also discussed in this context to explain exactly when a woman is fertile. According to medical traditions, if these necessary factors are defective or not present, conception will not take place. Defects in either the female or male reproductive substances will make them unsuitable to cause normal development, resulting either in unsuccessful conception or in a fetus that is severely deformed. If the reproductive substances are not defective but there is no karmic connection between the transmigrating consciousness and the potential parents, it is said that there will be nothing to draw the consciousness to those parents—thus in this case also, conception will not occur. Early Buddhist scriptures are cited as evidence for this view. Some sources note that the presence of each of the five natural elements is also required for successful conception and growth.[6] The elements provide the material and energetic opportunity for development: the substance of the body is composed by the earth element, its fluidity and flexibility by the water element, its maturation by the fire element, its growth by the wind element, and the space in which it grows is provided by the space element. Each of these conditions must be in place for gestation to occur. The developing embryo is thus bound by the same laws of natural physics, as it were, as every other impermanent phenomenon in the natural world. Other requirements for successful conception include the woman's fertility: she must be at the proper phase of her menstrual cycle. When the "womb is open" (*mngal kha bye*), conception can occur. The womb is open for up to twelve days per month—menstrual blood is collected in the womb during the first three of these days, and conception can occur there

Kritzer, "Garbhāvakrāntisūtra: A Comparison of the Contents of Two Versions," *Maranatha: Bulletin of the Christian Culture Research Institute (Kyoto)* 6 (1998); and Marcelle Lalou, "La version Tibetain du Ratnakūṭa," *Journal Asiatique* (October–December 1927). For more on the sources for embryology available to Tibetans, see Frances Garrett, "Ordering Human Growth in Tibetan Medical and Religious Embryologies," in *Textual Healing: Essays on Medieval and Early Modern Medicine*, ed. Elizabeth Lane Furdell (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2005).

5. The *Four Tantras*, still today considered the principal medical text in Tibetan medicine, was arranged in the twelfth century by the Tibetan physician Yuthog Yonten Gonpo (*g.yu thog yon tan mgon po*, 1112–1203), probably following several centuries of development. The earliest commentaries on the *Four Tantras* date to the time of Yuthog himself. Portions of the *Four Tantras, Bdud rtsi snying po yan lag brgyad pa gsang ba man ngag gi rgyud*, (Delhi: Bod kyi lcags po ri'i dran rten slob gner khang, 1993) are available in translation as *The Quintessence Tantras of Tibetan Medicine*, trans. Barry Clark (Ithaca, N.Y.: Snow Lion Publishers, 1995).

6. Skyem pa tshe dbang, *Mkhas dbang skyem pa tshe dbang mchog gis mdzad pa'i rgyud bzhi'i 'grel pa bshugs so*, Vol. 2 (New Delhi: bod gshung sman rtsis khang, n.d.), 125.

up to the eleventh day. After this time, the "old blood" is eliminated and the womb "closes."[7]

In his treatise, *Transmission of the Elders*, the sixteenth-century medical scholar Zurkhar Lodro Gyalpo (b. 1509) condemns those who only make passing note of the causes of conception, stating that simple explanations do not adequately explain how the consciousness enters the womb or how precisely the body is established.[8] He insists that one should describe the causes of conception fully as follows: one, the healthy wind (*lung*), bile (*khris pa*), and phlegm (*bad kan*) humors that are present in the father's and mother's reproductive substances; two, the transmigrating consciousness that is impelled toward human rebirth by its karma; and three, the very subtle forms of the five natural elements that exist within the reproductive substances and the consciousness. Only with these causes in place, if the healthy man and woman copulate, will a transmigrating consciousness be able to enter the womb.

Whereas the commentaries on the *Four Tantras'* terse statements on the *causes* for conception emphasize karma's role in conception, when addressing *how* conception occurs, the causal significance of the winds is also introduced. Lodro Gyalpo contends that the transmigrating consciousness, driven by its karmic imprints, is caused by the winds to observe a man and woman in copulation, whereupon karma impels the consciousness into the womb. At the time the consciousness melts into the mixture of male and female substances, it experiences a moment of senselessness, as if intoxicated.[9] Lodro Gyalpo cites tantric accounts, the *Guhyasamāja* tantra and a work by the fourteenth-century tantric writer Rangchung Dorje (1284–1339), to emphasize the role of the winds as well as the karmic imprints in bringing the transmigrating mind into the womb.[10] He also describes an alternative Indian Buddhist tradition in which the transmigrating being enters the mixture of reproductive substances and immediately reacts to one or the other substance in a way that instantaneously determines its sex—attracted to the mother's substance, it becomes male; attracted to the father's substance, it becomes female. This early Buddhist Abhidhamma account makes sex identification central to conception itself.

Karma is given responsibility for more than pushing the transmigrating consciousness toward the copulating man and woman. Citing the *Entering the Womb* sūtra, Lodro Gyalpo explains that the transmigrating being must possess an adequate level of virtuous karma to be born as a human and that the karma of the transmigrating being and that of the parents must be equivalent in "type" or "class" (*rigs*) and level of meritorious distinction. In this case, therefore, karma also plays an important role in what *type* of rebirth one obtains. Lodro Gyalpo summarizes

7. Ibid., 128.

8. The *Transmission of the Elders*, by Zurkhar Lodro Gyalpo (zur mkhar blo gros rgyal po, 1509–1579), is a famous commentary on the *Four Tantras*. Zur mkhar pa blo gros rgyal po, *Rgyud bzhi'i 'grel pa mes po'i zhal lung*, 2 vols. (krung go'i pod kyi shes rig dpe skrun khang, 1989), 103–105.

9. Ibid., 116.

10. Ibid., 117. The text referred to by Rangchung Dorje (*rang byung rdo rje*, 1284–1339) is the *Profound Inner Meaning* (*zab mo nang don*), a text on yogic physiology and practice.

a tradition present in the *Entering the Womb* sūtra that is maintained by various Tibetan religious scholars, such as Gampopa (1079–1153), in which transmigrating beings entering the womb are of two types, some possessing more merit, others possessing less merit. Gampopa's narrative explains that all transmigrating beings possess miraculous abilities before taking rebirth, such as being able to walk on air and see with divine eyes, but after a period of time the strength of their karma causes them to have frightening visions, such as that of a storm, heavy rain, a darkening sky, or the roar of a crowd of people. As they approach the womb of their rebirth, they envision entering a place such as the second story of a house, a throne, a thatched hut, a leaf house, a shelter of grass, a jungle, or a rocky crevice. Those with exceptional merit will see palaces or mansions, while those with low merit will be directed toward rocky crevices. Arriving at their envisioned destination, they are immediately attracted to either the father's or the mother's reproductive substance. Colored by this emotional reaction, the consciousness enters into the mixture of the reproductive essences, whereupon conception has occurred.[11]

Lodro Gyalpo explains that, according to sūtric traditions, ordinary beings experience a loss of awareness upon entry into the womb, whereas the classes of beings with higher levels of spiritual realization have different experiences.[12] Advanced Buddhist spiritual figures known as universal monarchs (*'khor los sgyur ba*, Sanskrit *cakravartin*) and stream-enterers (*rgyun du zhugs pa*, Sanskrit *shrotāpanna*) are aware of their entry into the womb, but then lose awareness for the duration of gestation. Even more advanced first-level bodhisattvas (*byang chub sems dba' las dang po*) and solitary realizers (*rang sangs rgyas*, Sanskrit *pratyekabuddha*) also are "unconscious" during gestation, but they are aware of entering the womb and leaving the womb at birth. Higher level bodhisattvas are aware of the entire process.[13] Tibetan authors in both religious and medical traditions thus used embryology to perpetuate Buddhist taxonomies of embodiment, conceptual systems that organize bodies by their moral status.

Methods for Overpowering Karma

Following models inherited from Indian texts, for Tibetan authors karma plays a critical role in causing rebirth and in directing the type of rebirth one takes. Some of these authors admit, however, that the effects of karma may be overwritten by ritual intervention or medicinal application. In some contexts, therefore, one's karmic destiny can be overcome by human intervention. Medicinal or ritual intervention is said to be able to affect the health of one's reproductive substances, for example. For conception to occur successfully, male and female reproductive substances must

11. Gampopa, *The Jewel Ornament of Liberation by Sgam.po.pa*, trans. Herbert V. Guenther, The Clear Light Series (Berkeley, Calif.: Shambala Publications, 1971), 63–64; Zur mkhar pa blo gros rgyal po, *Mes po'i zhal lung*, 106–107 and 116–17.

12. Zur mkhar pa blo gros rgyal po, *Mes po'i zhal lung*, 106–107 and 116–17.

13. Ibid., 119–20.

not possess humoral disorders, and these defects may be caused by karma. Lodro Gyalpo says that one can observe the many signs of texture, color, and taste that are adequate indications of the condition of these substances. When the reproductive substances are defective, conception will not be possible, and yet some types of defects can be treated medicinally. Lodro Gyalpo refers the reader to the texts of Vāgbhaṭa and his commentators in which appropriate treatments are described. He notes that these texts also provide rituals that men and women can do themselves to promote healthy qualities in their own reproductive substances.[14]

More dramatically, medical texts claim that the very sex identification of the fetus can be changed medico-ritually. The issue of how to guarantee the birth of a male child is of great importance in Tibetan medical embryological works, although this is a matter ignored by the embryological accounts of religious texts. Rituals to transform the sex of the fetus described in the *Four Tantras* and its commentaries, as derived from Vāgbhaṭa's *Eight Branches*, are alchemically and astrologically oriented.[15] Such rituals are not described in the *Entering the Womb* sūtra, and the issue of sex transformation is not mentioned. The *Four Tantras* and its commentaries state that these rituals should be performed during the third week of gestation, and they summarize various methods for ensuring the development of a male child. Fifteenth-century commentator Kyempa Tsewang argues that although generally the sex of the fetus depends on its karmic inheritance, because additional factors do play a role in development, rituals should still be performed.[16] Clearly, although karma is accepted as a primary cause of rebirth and cited by many as the determinant of body type, there is nonetheless a conflict between the apparent predeterminism of the karmic model of causality, on the one hand, and the need for medical systems to assume that intervention can be efficacious, on the other. Medical interventions are in fact regularly cited as strategies that have the power to override the effects of karma, even in the matter of forming the human body.

The Role of the Energetic Winds

The firm foundations of karma's predeterministic role in rebirth is shaken by more than this, however. Despite the ubiquitous presence of karma as a force of conception and growth in these accounts of creation, some medical commentators use tantric texts as authorities for attributing a role to the energetic winds in conception. Beyond the moment of conception, there are numerous disagreements in Tibetan texts over the relative importance of karma and other factors, such as the winds, during gestation. By the eleventh century, Tibetans had available to them two Indian textual models for the function of the winds in embryology. The Indian

14. Ibid., 104.

15. *Vāgbhaṭa's Aṣṭāṅga Hṛdayam Sūtrasthāna* (Varanasi, India: Krishnadas Academy, 1996), 365–66.

16. Skyem pa tshe dbang, *Rgyud bzhi'i 'grel pa*, 133–34.

medical model, on the one hand, ignores the role of the winds in favor of karma, even during the process of gestation. On the other hand, the Buddhist canonical model, as revealed in sūtras and tantras, emphasizes the causal function of the winds over that of karma. These narratives offer intricate schemes for attributing growth during gestation to a host of variously named winds.

In Tibetan medical and religious embryological narratives alike, various Buddhist sūtras are referred to as authorities on the process of transmigration, the nature of the transmigrating entity, the workings of karma and the four elements, the relationship between the mind and the body, and other topics relevant to human growth. The *Entering the Womb* sūtra, for instance, makes note of independently named winds that are responsible for fetal growth during each week of gestation. These details are extensively cited by many Tibetan authors who write about embryology in both medical and religious traditions. In the early twelfth century, the religious writer Gampopa utilizes such details in his *Jewel Ornament of Liberation*, crediting the sūtra specifically. Citing the *Entering the Womb* repeatedly, the medical commentator Lodro Gyalpo states that it is very important in embryology to get the names of the weekly winds correct, and that this is an issue about which other scholars are often mistaken. The names and functions of the winds, as taken from Buddhist sūtra, are the most prominent and consistent details that medical commentators add to their accounts of the body's weekly development.

Another tradition of embryology in which specific causal forces for fetal development—that is, forces other than karma—occur is that of the tantras, which outline ten winds that play a role in tantric psychophysiology. In the context of his embryology, the twelfth-century scholar Drakpa Gyeltsen (1147–1216) explains that when discussing winds functionally, tantric traditions generally describe five primary winds, also called the five "outer" winds (*phyi'i rlung lnga*), and five subsidiary winds. The life-sustaining (*srog 'dzin*) wind originates at the heart and is generally responsible for the integrated relationship between mind and body. The downward-clearing (*thur sel*) wind originates near the anus and is responsible for waste elimination. The fire-accompanying (*me mnyam*) wind is at the navel, aiding in the digestive process. The upward-upholding (*gyen rgyu*) wind is at the throat, allowing speech, laughter, or vomiting. The all-pervasive (*khyab byed*) wind, finally, pervades the entire body. Drakpa Gyeltsen's embryology also describes five subsidiary winds, located at the sense organs and the joints and responsible for interacting with external objects.[17] Tantric texts discuss these winds in various ways in the context of embryology. Some narratives link each of the five primary and five branch winds of tantric physiology to each of ten months in the womb. Others simply note the general role of the five primary winds throughout fetal growth. Still others attribute fetal growth to each of the four natural elements, one of which is wind. While tantric narratives do discuss the causal relationship

17. This discussion about the winds is at Grags pa rgyal mtshan, "Rgyud kyi mngon par rtogs pa rin po che'i ljon shing," in *The Complete Works of Grags pa rgyal mtshan*, ed. bsod nams rgya mtsho, *Sa skya bka' 'bum (The Complete Works of the Great Masters of the Sa skya Sect of the Tibetan Buddhism)*, Vol. 3 (Tokyo: Toyo Bunko, 1968), 63a–65b.

between the winds and the general *stages* of fetal growth, however, it is primarily the sūtric tradition in which separate winds are enumerated for each *week* of development.[18]

As in the Buddhist sūtras and tantras, many Tibetan religious and medical scholars felt that intermediary causal forces—that is, forces other than karma—were essential to the growth of the body. Other scholars in Tibet who wrote about embryology did not mention such intermediary forces at all, by contrast, leaving karma as the sole causal force. In the *Eight Branches'* model of embryology, it is karma alone that provides the impetus, at the time of conception, for the growth of the body, and over the course of fetal growth no other force, not even that of the winds, has any causal function. The *Four Tantras* is also largely silent on the role of the winds in the body's development. The earliest extant commentaries of the *Four Tantras'* embryology, three small medical texts likely authored by students of Tibetan physician and editor of the *Four Tantras* Yuthog Yonten Gonpo, also do not mention the weekly winds. It is clear that the winds played a larger role than karma in theories of the developing body that are based on Buddhist canonical materials, than in those closer to Indian medical models. There is a historical aspect to this: given the evidence available to us today, earlier accounts of embryology—those from the eleventh or twelfth centuries—are significantly less likely to attribute causality to the winds than are later embryological accounts, where doing so becomes almost ubiquitous, especially in the case of medical texts. What is interesting here is the absorption of the Buddhist canonical model into the Tibetan medical commentaries. By the fifteenth century, medical texts focus heavily on the intermediary causal role of the winds during gestation. In the matter of identifying causal forces responsible for the growth of the body, over time the Buddhist canonical model—emphasizing the causal influence of the winds—won out in Tibet over the early medical model, which left developmental causality up to karma.

The Role of the Natural Elements

For some authors, wind is not the only natural element playing a role in human growth. Whereas most accounts state that the natural elements are essential to the process of creating a new human life, Tibetan descriptions of the precise role of the four or five natural elements in embryology are far from consistent. Some authors emphasize the essential role of all the elements, others ignore most elements in favor of the wind element alone, and yet others neglect to mention the elements at all. The three earliest extant commentaries on the *Four Tantras*, for example, do not mention the role of the elements in embryonic development. Other authors, such as Gampopa, provide details on the activities of the wind element, but overlook the activities of other elements. The *Entering the Womb* sūtra does discuss the

18. Further discussion of the winds in various sources can be found in Frances Garrett, *Religion, Medicine and the Human Embryo in Tibet*, Critical Studies in Buddhism series (New York: Routledge, 2008).

importance of the elements for conception, but it downplays the role of all but one of the elements in the subsequent process of fetal growth.

As noted above, in his *Transmission of the Elders*, Lodro Gyalpo is highly critical of those who question the need for all the elements in embryology (despite the absence of the elements in Vāgbhaṭa's *Eight Branches,* one of his primary medical sources).[19] Both the reproductive substances of the parents and the transmigrating consciousness, he argues, are necessarily possessed of subtle forms of the five elements, and therefore it is logically impossible for conception to occur without the presence of all elements. The natural elements refer not to static material elements, he says, but rather to qualitative, dynamic functions. For instance, the earth element refers to the quality or function of hardness, and the water element refers to the quality or function of cohesiveness, flexibility, or coolness. The natural elements are thus the very functional interactivity that makes change and growth possible. Acknowledging the *Eight Branches'* neglect of this matter, Lodro Gyalpo looks to another Indian source, noting that the *Entering the Womb* does clearly state that each element is essential.[20] Lodro Gyalpo defends the presence of the elements in the transmigrating consciousness especially, maintaining that consciousness and the five elements necessarily exist interdependently. He asserts that conception is the role of the earth element, generating the embryonic form is the role of the water element, ripening the fetus is the role of the fire element, growing the fetus larger is the role of the wind element, and providing the opportunity for all of this is the role of the space element. The elements are also held responsible for the development of the sense powers and other aspects of the body. Unlike the majority of Tibetan embryologists, who only discuss the functions of the elements at the time of conception, Lodro Gyalpo also maintains that the five elements are responsible for generating various aspects of the body throughout the course of its development. Intrinsically part of the reproductive substances and the mind that join in the womb at conception, the initially subtle elements grow stronger during gestation because of the power of the nutrients consumed by the mother.[21] As the fetal body grows, supported by the mother's supply of nutrients, the strength of the elements increases.

The description of fetal development by the fourteenth-century religious scholar Longchenpa (1308–64) is dominated by the activities of all the natural elements to a far greater degree than other Tibetan presentation of embryology.[22] Longchenpa organizes the first two weeks of development into seven-day cycles according to the functions of the elements: during days one through four, each of the four elements is sequentially predominant; on days five and six they operate

19. Zur mkhar pa blo gros rgyal po, *Mes po'i zhal lung,* 107.

20. Lodro Gyalpo also explains here why the *Entering the Womb* mentions four elements, and the *Four Tantras* and other Tibetan sources describe have five. Ibid., 108.

21. Ibid., 120.

22. Klong chen pa, *Tshig don mdzod, Mdzod chen bdun* (Gangtok, Sikkim: Sherab Gyaltsen and Khyentse Labrang, 1983), 188ff. The *Tshig don mdzod* is translated in David Germano, "Poetic Thought, the Intelligent Universe, and the Mystery of Self: The Tantric Synthesis of rdzogs chen in Fourteenth-Century Tibet (Buddhism)," Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin, 1992. My discussion of Longchenpa's work in this article relies upon Germano's extensive research, and I am grateful to him for generously sharing his manuscripts.

in pairs; and on the seventh day they function together as a group. This organizational principal is said to pertain to the entire period of gestation, although Longchenpa provides details only for the first two weeks. His account of the first week of development describes the four elements' activation of four very subtle circulatory channels in the embryo's body: named for the elements themselves, these are a water channel, an earth channel, a fire channel, and a wind channel. The space element operates on the seventh day to provide a place for the four elements to gather together. In the second week, the work of the elements continues as the embryo is dissolved, compacted, baked, and scattered about, dispersing "like fluffy clouds in the sky." On the eighth evening, by the power of karma and predispositions, these fragments are gathered by the water element. In the third and fourth weeks, the embryo is again sequentially destroyed and reconstituted, as new structures and energies of the subtle body are formed within the embryo.

In this quite unusual presentation of the role of the elements in embryology, Longchenpa also distinguishes between conventional (*kun rdzob*) and ultimate (*don dam*) elements. Through the male and female substances, the conventional elements become functional—these conventional elements are responsible for the development of physical features during gestation. The activity of the conventional elements thus generates the body's blood, flesh, breath, as well as many of the mental abilities of cognition, perception, and awareness. Through the mind and wind, which are the contributions of the transmigrating being, the ultimate elements become functional—these allow the consciousness to take hold of its new body, and they initiate the maturing dynamic energies of differentiation and assimilation that cause embryonic development. The ultimate elements thus generate the eyes, four wheels (*'khor lo*, Sanskrit *chakra*), and three circulatory channels of the embryo. With the parents' reproductive substances causing physical development and the consciousness's contribution causing the organizational impulse for development, the role of the natural elements is discussed in a unique and much more subtle and detailed way in Longchenpa's writings than in any other tradition. In the case of Longchenpa's tradition, the emphasis on the activities of the natural elements during gestation is justified by the tradition's overall philosophical and soteriological system. The significance of the natural elements here, then, goes far beyond their role as the building blocks of material reality.

The Power of Gnosis

Up to this point I have argued that, as in the Buddhist sūtras and tantras, many important Tibetan religious and medical scholars felt that causal forces other than karma were essential to the growth of the human body. Those other forces—the winds alone, or all of the natural elements—were themselves integral components of the newly developing body of the ordinary human fetus. In these models, the various features of the growing body themselves thus served to cause further development, in a gradually accumulative way. Notably, however, these forces are impure, part of the world of *saṃsāra*. There is another model of causation in human growth, however, one that differs quite radically from other presentations,

and one in which change is motivated by an eminently pure phenomenon, the wisdom of a Buddha.

Longchenpa's narrative of embryology is unusual not only for its particular attention to the role played in growth by the natural elements; also remarkable is his discussion of the formation of the eyes in the embryo. His theory of fetal development describes the formation of two tiny "eye-like" features, called the "eye of the lamps" (*sgron ma'i spyan*) and the "eye of the elements" (*'byung ba'i spyan*). Whereas in other Tibetan embryological accounts the eyes are said to appear only much later in gestation, in Longchenpa's account these eyes appear within the circulatory channels during the first week of gestation. The "eye of the elements" directs the development of the physical body, and the "eye of the lamps" is given ultimate responsibility for the subtle body, and therefore also, later on in life, for the visionary experiences felt during specific forms of contemplative practice in Longchenpa's tradition. The designation of these forces as "eyes" and their placement in the very earliest stages of human development is dictated by the importance of vision in his contemplative system. In this context it is also notable that, by attributing the force of causality in embryonic growth to these "eyes," which are explicitly correlated to innate wisdom (*ye shes*), Longchenpa has effectively given the Buddha's wisdom the power to cause human growth. In this model, therefore, a purified form of knowing is explicitly the operative causal agent of human existence. Contrasting this model with the earlier model valuing the role of karma, here we see a primacy of epistemology over ethics—in other words, a valorization of cognitive over moral transformation. The wisdom of a Buddha—not karma—is the primary causal dynamic operative in this notion of generation.

Forces of Creation

Embryology is a means for Tibetan authors to define human bodies, and to say something about what it is, or what it should be, to be human. In addition to deciding what counts as a body, embryology divides bodies into a range of body types. A typology of bodies is done according to some underlying organizational principle; in our society, for example, bodies may be sorted by explicitly racist or sexist schemas. The problem of how bodies are differentiated is one that all religions try to solve. Why are some born healthy, some beautiful, some ugly, some into poverty and distress? Why do illness and misfortune strike some and not others? Why do they strike when they do?

An answer is provided in Buddhism by the concept of karma, which rationalizes and moralizes that which otherwise would seem random, instructing humans to cherish their human embodiment as a precious opportunity to generate good karma and obtain a better rebirth. It is also karmic merit or demerit, however, that keeps one locked in the perpetual cycle of rebirths until ultimate salvation. In early Indian Buddhism, one's karmic destiny is largely only a matter of one's own concern—that is to say, one's karmic effects are carried solely within one's own lineage of rebirths and do not affect to a significant extent the rebirth paths of others. With the Mahāyāna bodhisattva ideal, the notion of karmic destiny is expanded

beyond one's own line of lifetimes: the bodhisattva generates a karmic force powerful enough to liberate all beings from their own karmic destinies. In Vajrayāna Buddhism, the emphasis on ritual action is seen as an essential intervention, as many traditions rely on the power of the divine—whether embodied within oneself or called upon as an external force—on the path to enlightenment.

In this essay we have seen that for Tibetan authors, karmic causality is far from the only pattern of thinking about the causation of the human individual. I began by explaining that karma as articulated in embryological accounts—both in its involvement with the Buddhist law of interdependent origination, and in its specific role as a causal agent in conception and fetal growth—is held by some early Tibetan embryologists to be the sole causal agent in human rebirth and development. Karma is an integral part of the law of interdependent origination, propelling the transmigrating being along the path toward physical embodiment and defining the nature of that embodiment. Karma is also responsible for the type of body a transmigrating being could obtain: transmigrators carrying superior moral achievements could obtain psychophysiologically and soteriologically superior bodies. I also demonstrated that a karmic theory of causality was not enough for all embryologists, and that for some authors other factors, such as winds, natural elements, or one's Buddha-nature, are the dominant causal contributors to the formation of the new human being. Medieval Tibetans seemed little constrained by the authorities of scripture or empiricism, apparently free to write the details of embryonic growth as they liked. Tibetan embryology germinated the individual human body with a scholar's own specialized narrative about causation and growth. Embryological accounts defined certain acceptable paradigms for change and growth. Change and growth happen in stages, as for Drakpa Gyeltsen and other writers who outline the religious path structure; they are completely integrated with both the emotions and the workings of the natural elements, as for Longchenpa, and in his tradition they are ultimately driven by an enlightened form of knowing. In some accounts, change and growth are innately present as potentials within the fetus; in others, they require the successful workings of an intricately coordinated complex of sequentially generated causal forces. In Tibetan literature, embryology thus imbues religious doctrines with specific, personified models of temporality.

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Female Feticide in the Punjab and Fetus Imagery in Sikhism

Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh

Plato has it backwards; the search for the wholly transcendent is, historically and psychologically, the search for the remembered state of union with the wholly immanent.

—Naomi Goldenberg, "The Return of the Goddess"

Currently, sex-specific abortions eliminating female fetuses are rampant in the Punjab. From time immemorial, the patriarchal society of northern India has been obsessed with sons: the region resounds with the blessing "May you be the mother of a hundred sons!"[1] The great Rig Veda, one of the earliest textual pieces produced in India, begins with Agni granting many "heroic sons" to his worshippers. Over the centuries, this wish has only deepened. The rich soil of Punjab, literally the land of the "five rivers," has attracted many outsiders including the Indo-Aryans, the Greeks, the Afghans, Persians, Turks, Mughals, and the British. Both these geohistorical contingencies—the settled agricultural communities and the constant waves of invasions—have reinforced the wish for heroic sons who will plow the land and fight the enemy.

The Sikh religion was birthed in this geographical landscape, and it developed within a doubly patriarchal milieu. Between the birth of the founder (Guru Nanak in 1469) to the death of the tenth guru (Guru Gobind Singh in 1708), the Hindu society of North India succumbed to

In this chapter, I draw upon my previous work, *The Birth of the Khalsa: A Feminist Re-Memory of Sikh Identity*, chapter 5, and *The Feminine Principle in the Sikh Vision of the Transcendent*, chapter 2.

1. See Elisabeth Bumiller's *May You Be the Mother of a Hundred Sons* (New York: Random House, 1990).