

Buddhist Genesis and the Tantric Tradition

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The Buddhist genesis story is very ancient, being found in the Pāli scriptures besides the northern Buddhist accounts. It is mentioned in all three branches of Buddhist scriptures, Sūtra, Vinaya, and Abhidharma. A Sanskrit version entitled Rājavamśa (royal lineage) exists in the *Mahāvastu*. In the Abhidharma literature the account is given in the description of *vivarta* (differentiation of the beings due to evolution of the inferior worlds) as contrasted with *saṃvarta* (consubstantiation of the beings due to dissolution of the inferior worlds). At least in later Buddhist accounts, the legend does not have the importance that the Biblical Genesis has in the Judeo-Christian tradition. Our treatment suggests that in the earliest Buddhism it may well have had a much greater importance than it had later on.

In any case, Tsoṅ-kha-pa (1357—1419 A.D.), founder of the Gelugpa school of Tibetan Buddhism signals the importance of the legend in an elaborate discussion utilizing both non-Tantric and Tantric sources in the first part of his work *Dpal gsañ ba ḥdus paḥi gnad kyi don gsal ba*, "Elucidating the meaning of the essential points of the *Śrī-guhyasamāja (Tantra)*" (Lhasa ed., collected works, Vol. Cha), which has the abbreviated reference *Don gsal*. Tsoṅ-kha-pa uses this legend as a rationale for the types of meditations found in the Anuttara-yoga-tantra, a literature which often mystifies and repels Western scholars because of its complicated ritualism and sexual symbolism. Here there is space for only the main ideas of Tsoṅ-kha-pa's discussion.

The non-Tantric Buddhist legend may be organized and summarized as follows:

There are three efficient causes of the periodical destruction of the world systems, *viz.*, fire, water, and wind. According to the *Abhidharma-kośa* (III, 100c—d, and commentary), fire brings an eon of evolution to an end by destroying all of the realm of desire (*kāma-dhātu*) and the First Dhyāna Heaven of the realm of form (*rūpa-dhātu*). Water destroys all that as well as the Second Dhyāna Heaven; and wind destroys all the latter as well as the Third Dhyāna Heaven of the realm of form. Only the Fourth Dhyāna of this realm remains intact. The First Dhyāna is also referred to by its divine residents, such as the Brahmā retinue deities, the Second Dhyāna by its chief deities, the Ābhāsvaras, the Third Dhyāna by the Śubha deities.

I. In the next period of evolution, while the lower receptacle worlds are re-evolving, the sentient beings fall to lower planes in a process usually described as starting from the level of the Ābhāsvara deity class (after the destruction by fire). They fall from that divine world and come "here". "Here" is explained as Jambudvīpa (our world continent or specifically India). Buddhaghosa of the southern school and Vasubandhu of the northern school of Buddhism agree that these 'men of the first eon' pass through each of the intermediate worlds by a type of birth called 'transformation' (*upapāduka*)¹ after each successive death. The *Abhidharma-kośa* (II, 9b—c) says that the beings with this type of birth are the hell-beings, the beings of the intermediate state, and the gods. Hence the 'men of the first eon' were in a condition rather comparable to the present (disembodied) intermediate state (*antarābhava*) between death and rebirth. Asaṅga explains that these 'men of the first eon' (*prathamakalpa*) passed through these worlds with actions involved with desire (*kāmāvacara-karma*) that are superior, chief, best (*parama, agrya, śreṣṭha*), and whose fruitions are experienced immediately, not at another time. And these men have a beautiful form (*rūpin*) and are 'made of mind' (*manomaya*)². In addition, the *Mahāvastu* (I, 339) says that these men are self-luminous, feed on joy, and go where they wish.

II. Then, on the surface of the earth which at that time was in a fluidic state there appeared an earth essence³ which some being disposed to greediness tasted with his finger. It pleased him, he came to eat mouthfuls, and other beings followed suit. Thus these beings became dependent on morsel food, still subtle. They lost their original qualities of feeding on joy, body made of mind, and so on, and their bodies became heavier and more substantial. The ones who least indulged, retained with pride their beautiful form. The sun, moon, and year became known. In the course of time this earth essence disappeared and a honey-like excrescence appeared on the surface of the earth. Asaṅga explains that hell beings, beings in the embryonic states, and the gods involved with desire (*kāmāvacara-deva*) have just the subtle kind of food, which does not give rise to excrement or urine⁴.

III. Then, in place of the honey-like earth excrescences, a rice-pap appeared and the beings subsisted on that coarse morsel food, described thus by the *Mahāvastu* (I, 341—2): "rice, not discrete, without chaff, fragrant grain" (*śūli akaṇo atuṣaḥ surabhitaṇḍulaḥ*). At that time, the distinguishing characteristics of male and female appeared, and the beings had mutual sexual desire with associated acts.

¹ This is one of the four kinds of birth in Buddhism. Beings are also 'born from a womb' (*jarāyu-ja*), 'born from an egg' (*aṇḍa-ja*), 'born from moist heat' (*saṃsveda-ja*).

² V. BHATTACHARYA, editor, *The Yogācārabhūmi of Ācārya Asaṅga*, Part I (Calcutta, 1957), pp. 41—42.

³ *Ṗṭhivīrasa* in the *Mahāvastu* (I, 339), *bhūmirasa* in Asaṅga's *Yogācārabhūmi*, p. 42.

⁴ *Yogācārabhūmi*, pp. 99—100.

IV. The last phase of the legend shows the arising of the 'private property' idea with individual rice plots, then stealing with consequent violence. Those beings decided to select someone to judge the disputes. He was called the great chosen one (*mahāsammata*), and the beings each gave him one-sixth of the rice crop for his royal services to provide security. Mahāsammata was the first king (*cakravartin*). According to the Buddhist *sūtra*, he inaugurated the lineage of the Śākya clan, in which Gautama Buddha was born. According to the latter's biography, Gautama was born with auspicious characteristics portending either a Cakravartin or a Buddha. In Hindu legend also, "People suffering from anarchy . . . first elected Manu, the Vaivasvata, to be their king; and allotted one-sixth of the grains grown and one-tenth of merchandise as sovereign dues"⁵.

The Tantric account presented by Tsoṅ-kha-pa claims to have information about those beings beyond what non-Tantric Buddhism teaches. Thus he writes, "Moreover, the men of the first eon, i.e., the beings who have died and transferred from the Ābhāsvara god class, and so on, down to their birth as men of Jambudvīpa, agree with the merits (*guṇa*) of the [thirty-two] Characteristics and [eighty] Minor Marks, so they are adorned with the merits of a Buddha"⁶. Also, "The description 'adorned with the merits of a Buddha' does not occur in the *Abhidharma* or in the *Vibhāṅga*"⁷. But why did those beings become dominated subsequently by delusion, lust, and hatred? He says, "Thus, they had obtained possession of the 'knowledge body' (*jñāna-deha*) — the superior body like the body of a god of the 'realm of form', free from the coarse body which undergoes development; but then it was overcome by all the action (*karma*) and corruption (*kleśa*) arising from their own mind, and came into the power of those two"⁸. He goes on to explain the reason as the propensities (*T. bag chags, S. vāsanā*) handed down from beginningless time, and continues, "Although they had a body comparable to the Illusory Body (*māyā-deha*) they did not know the Illusory Samādhi (*māyopama-samādhi*) through hearing (*śrutā*) and 'pondering' (*cintā*), and could not comprehend it through 'creative contemplation' (*bhāvanā*). Hence they wander in

⁵ Kauṭilya's *Arthasāstra*, translated by R. SHAMASASTRY (Book I, Chap. XIII), pp. 22—23.

⁶ *Don gsal*, 19b—6: / de yañ ḥod gsal gyi lhañi riś nas sems can rnamś śi ḥphos nas ḥdzam bu gliñ bañi mir skye ste bskal pa dañ poñi mi rnamś ni / mtshan dpeñi yon tan rjes mthun pa yod pas sañs rgyas kyi yon tan thams cad kyiś bryaṅ cañ /.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 20a—5,6: / sañs rgyas kyi yon tan gyiś bryaṅ pa ḥes pa mñon pa dañ rnam ḥbyed las ma byuñ ño /. By 'Abhidharma' Tsoṅ-kha-pa presumably means both the *Abhidharma-kośa* (both *kārikās* and auto-commentary by Vasubandhu) and the *Abhidharma-samuccaya* of Asaṅga. To this one should probably add the further commentary on the Vasubandhu work by Prince Yaśomitra. By 'Vibhāṅga' Tsoṅ-kha-pa presumably means the *Vinaya-vibhāṅga* in the Tibetan Kanjur and its commentary by Vinitadeva. Tsoṅ-kha-pa by this remark indicates that such a teaching is not found in either the *Abhidharma* or *Vinaya* literature.

⁸ *Don gsal*, 20a—6, ff.: / de ltar ye ḥes kyi lus can te ḥbyuñ bañi lus rags pa dañ brañ bañi gzugs khams pañi lhañi lus dañ ḥdra bañi lus khyad par can thob pa yin yañ rañ gi sems las byuñ bañi las dañ ñon monś pa thams cad kyiś mñon par zil gyiś mñon pa ste de gñiś kyi dbaṅ du ḥgyur ro /.

phenomenal existence"⁹. In further additions to the standard account, Tsoñ-kha-pa calls the earth essence also 'ambrosia' (*amṛta*)¹⁰, and he calls the separation into male and female the division of means (*upāya*) and insight (*prajñā*), respectively¹¹.

The usual Buddhist formulations of the Path, such as the Eightfold Noble Path, are not obviously applicable to the legend, as classically stated. They aim to eliminate the domination of action and corruption. Why try to rebecome the first eon men? These men were pure only through lack of temptations, which had been removed by the dissolution of the inferior worlds and which would inevitably reappear with the new manifestation of those worlds. Yet even the old non-Tantric Buddhism can be interpreted with steps that inversely match the successive periods of the legend, especially with Tsoñ-kha-pa's word '*amṛta*'. (1) A devotee renounces his property to become a monk. He reverses the last period, characterized by private ownership of rice plots. (2) The monk is supposed to regulate his way of life, including moderation in food and adherence to celibacy (*brahmacarya*). He reverses the eon characterized by coarse morsel food and the division into sexes. Also, according to the Hindu epic *Mahābhārata*, the god Brahmā adopted the form of a swan and said: "... I know that self-restraint is the door of immortality (*amṛta*). I impart to you this hallowed (*brahman*) secret: there is no state superior to the human"¹². (3) This man then practices *yoga* and various *samādhis* which develop certain inner resources and which are supposed to win a command over subtle elements¹³. He reverses the second period, characterized by subsistence on subtle morsel food, and comes to taste the 'primeval earth', the 'deathless' or 'ambrosia' (*amṛta*) — while still a man of Jambudvīpa. (4) His mind separates from the 'deathless' and is freed or liberated. He feeds on joy, as did the men of the first eon, but he has arrived at this comparable stage together with a discipline that eliminates the propensities of hatred, lust, and delusion. This stage is called *Nirvāṇa* by the Buddhists, *Mokṣa* by the Hindus.

However, *Mahāyāna* Buddhism claims to have a higher attainment than this liberation, the ideal of early Buddhism. Later the aim was to become a Complete Buddha, with the three bodies called the Dharmakāya, Saṃbhogakāya, and Nirmāṇakāya, who is restricted neither to the quiescent realm nor to the phenomenal world. In accordance with a passage cited above from Tsoñ-kha-pa, one must reach by discipline a condition comparable to the first eon men and have in addition the Illusory *Samādhi*. In Tsoñ-

kha-pa's view, one must purify birth, death, and the intermediate state by *yogas* concordant with the way the men of the first eon experienced those three phases during the interval between when they were still 'first eon men' and when they had the ordinary bodies of period no. 3. (Of course, in Indian belief the men of later periods are those very men.) He says, "Contemplation of the Dharmakāya is the purification of death, because, briefly speaking, the Dharmakāya is equivalent to the experience by the men of the first eon of the clear light of death"¹⁴. Again, "contemplation of the Saṃbhogakāya is the purification of the intermediate state", and "contemplation of the Nirmāṇakāya is the purification of birth"¹⁵.

Tsoñ-kha-pa writes, "Also, the *Pañcakrama* states, 'The Saṃbhogakāya as well as the illusion of conventional truth — that is the Gandharva-sattva', making the Saṃbhogakāya equivalent to the intermediate state [body]; hence one should have no doubt that the generation of the Primeval Lord (*ādinatha*) is an element equivalent to the intermediate state"¹⁶. The Dharmakāya is also associated with death and with comparable states such as coitus [union of *upāya* and *prajñā*] in a passage of the *Mukhāgama* quoted in Tsoñ-kha-pa's *Shags rim chen mo*¹⁷. The Nirmāṇakāya is illustrated in some Tantric *āgama* by the Avatars of Viṣṇu interpreted as intra-uterine stages¹⁸.

There are two phases of the Anuttara-yoga-tantra--the Steps of Production (*utpatti-krama*) and the Steps of Completion (*saṃpanna-krama*), respectively the phase of the path (*mārga*) and the phase of the fruit (*phala*). Tsoñ-kha-pa says, "Therefore, it is a mistake not to finish during the phase of the first Steps (*krama*) the part consisting in the various elements concordant with the three things, birth, death, and the intermediate state"¹⁹. Hence, one must meditate consistently with the three bodies of the Buddha in the phase of the path; in the phase of the fruit one gains those bodies, called the 'three bodies of the fruit'²⁰.

It would be difficult, perhaps impossible, to determine how old such teachings are. However, the above should indicate the profundity of that old Buddhist legend.

¹⁴ *Don gsal*, 25a—4: ... bskal pa dañ poñi mis hchi bañi ñod gsal ñams su myoñ dañ hdra ste mdor byas las chos skur gsuñs pas hchi ba sbyoñ byed chos sku bsgom paño /.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 25b—1: ... bar do sbyoñ byed loñs sku bsgom paño / ... skye ba sbyoñ byed sprul sku bsgom paño /.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 26a—1,2: / rim lña las kyañ / kun rdzob bden pa sgyu ma ñid / loñs spyod rdzogs pañi sku yañ de / de ñid dri zahi sems can yin / zes loñs sku bar doñi dod du gsuñs pas dañ poñi mgon po bskyed pa ni bar do dañ chos mthun par gdon mi za bar bya dgos so /. To understand Tsoñ-kha-pa's remark one should know that in this literature a *gandharva-sattva* means a being of the intermediate state.

¹⁷ Cf. Alex WAYMAN, "Studies in Yama and Māra," *Indo-Iranian Journal* (1959), p. 57.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 70—72.

¹⁹ *Don gsal*, 26a—4: / deñi phyir rim pa dañ poñi skabs su skye śi bar do gsum gyi so soñi chos mthun ños ma zin par hphyugs na ... /.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 26a—3: / ... hbras buñi sku gsum ... /.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 20b—2,3: / hdi la sgyu lus dañ cha hdra bañi lus yod kyañ sgyu ma lta buñi tiñ ñe hdzin thos bsam gyis mi śes śiñ bsgoms pas khoñ du ma chud de des na srid par hkhyañ pa yin te /.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 30b—4,5: ... bdud rtsi ste sañi bcud za ba na ...

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 31a—6 to 31b—1: ... thabs dañ śes rab kyī mnam par dbye ba ...

¹² Critical Edition, *Sānti P.*, 288.20: ... damañ dvārañ hy amṛtasya vedmi / guhyañ brahma tad idam vo bravīmi na mānuṣāc chreṣṭhatarañ hi kiñcit /.

¹³ For further information, one may refer to Mircea ELIADE, *Yoga: Immortality and Freedom* (New York, 1958).