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 Rājavanaśa (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 samvarta (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, Tsön-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 gsal ba ldus pahi 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. Tsön-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 Tsön-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-kosa (III, 100c—d, and commentary), fire brings an eon of evolution to an end by destroying all of the realm of desire (kama-dhātu) and the First Dhyāna Heaven of the realm of form (rupa-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 Abhāsāvas, the Third Dhyāna by the Subha 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). Ābhāsvaragha (the southern school and Vasantabhaduri 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’ (upādānakā) after each successive death. The Abhidharma-kosa (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 (antarābhavā) between death and rebirth. Asaṅga explains that these ‘men of the first eon’ (prāthamānālpa) passed through these worlds with actions involved with desire (kāmāvacara-karma) that are superior, chief, best (pārta, agra, śīryā), and whose fruitions are experienced immediately, not at another time. And these men have a beautiful form (rūpin) and are ‘made of mind’ (manomaya). 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 essence which some being disposed to greediness tasted with his finger. He pleased him, he came to eat mouthfuls, and other beings followed suit. Thus these beings became dependent on mortar 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 excrecence 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 kīna of food, which does not give rise to excrement or urine.

III. Then, in place of the honey-like earth excrecences, a rice-pap appeared and the beings subsisted on that coarse mortar food, described thus by the Mahāvastu (I, 341—2): ‘rice, not discrete, without chaff, fragrant grain’ (sāli akasa atusah surahitiyadala). At that time, the distinguishing characteristics of male and female appeared, and the beings had mutual sexual desire with associated acts.

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 Sākyan 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”.

The Tantric account presented by Tsok-kha-pa claims to have information about those beings beyond what non-Tantric Buddhism teaches. Thus he writes, “Moreover, the account 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.” Also, “The description ‘adorned with the merits of a Buddha’ does not occur in the Abhidharma or in the Vībhaga”. 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 (klesā) arising from their own mind, and came into the power of those two”. He goes on to explain the reason as the propensities (T. bag chags, S. vāsana) 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 (śrutī) and ‘pondering’ (cintā), and could not comprehend it through ‘creative contemplation’ (bhāvanā). Hence they wander in

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1. This is one of the four kinds of birth in Buddhism. Beings are also ‘born from a womb’ (jāra-yu), ‘born from an egg’ (anda-yu), ‘born from moist heat’ (sama-veda-yu).
phenomenal existence". In further additions to the standard account, Tson-kha-pa calls the earth essence also 'ambrosia' (amritas), and he calls the separation into male and female the division of means (upāya) and insight (prajñā), respectively.

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 reabsorb 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 Tson-kha-pa's word 'amrita'. (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 (brahmācarya). 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 (amrita). I impart to you this bellowed (brahman) secret; there is no state superior to the human". (3) This man then practices yoga and various samādhis which develop certain inner resources and which are supposed to win a command over subtle elements. He reverses the second period, characterized by subsistence on coarse morsel food, and comes to taste the 'primeval earth', the 'deathless' or 'ambrosia' (amrita) — while still a man of Sambhūvipa. (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 predispositions 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 Dharma-kāya, Sambhog-kāya, and Nirmanakāya, who is restricted neither to the quiescent realm nor to the phenomenal world. In accordance with a passage cited above from Tson-kha-pa, one must reach by discipline a condition comparable to the first eon men and have in addition the Husory Samādhi. In Tson-kha-pa's view, one must purify birth, death, and the intermediate state by yoga as 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 Dharma-kāya is the purification of death, because, briefly speaking, the Dharma-kāya is equivalent to the experience by the men of the first eon of the clear light of death". Again, "contemplation of the Sambhogakāya is the purification of the intermediate state", and "contemplation of the Nirmanakāya is the purification of birth".

Tson-kha-pa writes, "Also, the Pañcakrama states, The Sambhogakāya as well as the illusion of conventional truth — that is the Gandharva-sattva, making the Sambhogakāya equivalent to the intermediate state [body]; hence one should have no doubt that the generation of the Priveval Lord (ādīnātha) is an element equivalent to the intermediate state". The Dharmakāya is also associated with death and with comparable states such as coitus [union of upāya and prajñā] in a passage of the Mūkhyāgama quoted in Tson-kha-pa's Skavya rim chen mo. The Nirmanakāya is illustrated in some Tantric āgama by the Avatars of Viṣṇu interpreted as intra-uterine stages.

There are two phases of the Anuttara-yoga-tantra—the Steps of Production (uttāpa-krama) and the Steps of Completion (sampanna-krama), respectively the phase of the path (mārga) and the phase of the fruit (phala). Tson-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". 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'.

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.

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14 Don grol, 25a—4: di kāla da da po mi chen bja'i bzhad po gsal bzhin nang sgron ma dkon po chos kyi snying po leg lin sgron ma pagsal ba /
15 Ibid., 25b—1: bar du sbyon byed lo sgron ma bsgom pa / . sbya ba sbyon byed spro sgron ma bsgom pa /
16 Ibid., 28a—1.2: rin la la khyan / 'byin khor bo ston pa sgrub par snying rgya mtshan de / de lha'i gsal ba sgrub pa /
18 Ibid., pp. 79—72.
19 Don grol, 25a—4: de bzhin phyi rin pa da po mi sbya ba snying po ba / . rnam par phreng ba / .
20 Ibid., 26a—3: sgrustd pa 'byin nang sgron ma / .