

The Development of the Human Embryo  
According to Tibetan Medicine: The Treatise  
Written for Alexander Csoma de Kőrös  
by Sangs-rgyas Phun-tshogs

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Csoma de Kőrös's first meeting with Sangs-rgyas Phun-tshogs took place in 1823 in the valley of Zangskar.<sup>1</sup> Sangs-rgyas Phun-tshogs was "the chief physician of Ladakh" at the time. He wrote for Csoma de Kőrös a short survey of Tibetan medicine called *Gso dpyad yan lag brgyad pa rgyud bzhi'i bsdoms tshig bkod pa, Verses of the Four Treatises, the Eight Branches of Healing and Diagnosis*. After the initial benedictions, Sangs-rgyas Phun-tshogs says,

Even so, I will write a little here to repay my debt to my friend who was born in *Rum* of India, a place in the world of Jambudvipa, a scholar joined (to me) by the karmic threads of past deeds.<sup>2</sup>

The book then starts with a general history of medicine in India; subsequently discusses the content of the *Four Treatises*: the *Root Treatise (Rtsa rgyud)*, *Explanatory Treatise (Bshad rgyud)*, *Precepts Treatise (Man ngag gi rgyud)* and *Later Treatise (Phyi ma'i rgyud)*; and ends with a history of medicine in Tibet.

The part I have chosen to talk about is the section on how the fetus develops, explained according to the second chapter of the *Explanatory Treatise*. This section is translated below.

Quite a large part of Tibetan medical literature is devoted to the science of human reproduction and growth. The explanation of human physical development (*lus chags tshul*) is always explained so that it is analogous to ideas on development of the universe (*'jig rten chags tshul*). There are several sūtra sources, the most important being the *Nanda Womb Entering (Dga' bo mngal 'jug*, Peking Kanjur, no. 760.13 vol.23), the work cited by Sangs-rgyas Phun-tshogs at the end of the translation below. Being a sūtra, it of course puts emphasis on the transmigrating consciousness (*bar ma do'i rnam shes*), but it also gives a long discussion of each week of fetal development, for each

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of which it has a special name. Overall, it is very similar to the translation. But there is little mention here of methods to promote conception, and more about the entrance of consciousness into the womb. There are interesting connections with the Tibetan Bardo literature. This is perhaps the source for the statement in the *Bardo Thodol* which surprised Carl Jung, that the transmigrating consciousness will enter the womb and become male if it is attracted to the woman while feeling hatred for the man; or female if it is attracted to the man and feels hatred for the woman.<sup>3</sup> In the first case, the consciousness identifies with the semen. In the second, with the mother's liquid. Without feeling any attraction, the consciousness will not enter the womb and conception will not take place. When the consciousness without good merit enters the womb, it feels fear and has the idea it is running to hide in a grass house, a leaf house, a walled place, a thick mountain forest, a cave, etc. If it has great merit, it has the idea it is climbing on top of a tower or high roof, or is entering a palace to sit on a throne. This sūtra may be the source for the peculiar names for the earliest stages of fetal development found in Tibetan: mer mer po, nur nur po, etc.

There are other Indian sources for fetal development found in Tibetan translation in the Tanjur: 1) *Yan lag brgyad pa'i snying po bsdus pa* by Pha khol (Vāgbhāṭa), Peking, vol. 141, no. 5798, chapter two. 2) the auto-commentary of the same called : *Yan lag brgyad pa'i snying po shes bya ba'i sman dpyad kyi bshad pa*, Peking, no. 5799. 3) *Yan lag brgyad pa'i snying po'i rnam par 'grel pa tshig gi don zla zer*, another commentary on the same by Zla ba la dga' ba, or Zla dga', or Candrānandana, Peking, no. 5800, vol. 142, chapter two.

The famous *Four Treatises*, which are used as the main textbook for the teaching of medicine in Tibet, include in the second chapter of the second treatise, the *Explanatory Treatise*, a discussion of gynecology. One of the most detailed (and also authoritative) of its commentaries is the *Bai dūrya sngon po* by Sde srid Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho.<sup>4</sup> His work contains many details left out by other sources, and he quotes extensively from earlier works, including all of those mentioned above, as well as several tantra sources (of which the *Kālacakra Tantra* deserves special mention).

The first part of the second chapter of the *Explanatory Treatise* (and the same in the commentary by the Sde srid) is devoted to the conditions on which reproduction is based, the menstrual cycle, etc. The second part of the second chapter is on conception and the growth of the embryo. Conception occurs when the following three things meet:

1. Sexual fluids (khu khrag)
2. Five elements ('byung ba lnga)
3. Consciousness (rnam par shes pa).

These three are combined into a seed (sa bon).

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In the recent book entitled *Tibet*,<sup>5</sup> there is a full-color reproduction of a medical scroll illustrating the second chapter of the *Explanatory Tantra*. It illustrates the various faults which may prevent conception, then the various elements that join together at conception. Finally, week by week, the development of the fetus is charted. It has been remarked that the three general stages of fetal development called the Fish, Turtle, and Pig stages sound strangely modern and “evolutionary.” But actually these three stages were known to Karma pa Rang byung rdo rje (1284-1339 A.D.) and Sde srid Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho.<sup>6</sup> I hope this short survey of Tibetan gynecological and embryological literature and the following translation of a text which was written for a non-Tibetan, will spark more interest in the Tibetan view of this strange and often fascinating subject.<sup>7</sup>

I will now tell how that which is to be cared for, the body, is formed. There are three parts to the discussion:

- I. Primary causes of the body’s formation.
- II. Contributing causes of the body’s formation.
- III. The signs of birth.

I. The primary causes of the body’s formation are: the father’s semen, the mother’s blood and the combination of consciousness (rnam shes) and the five elements.<sup>8</sup> If the father’s semen predominates, the child will develop into a boy; if the mother’s blood predominates, a girl; if in equal parts, a neuter.<sup>9</sup> If the blood forms into two (parts), twins will develop. The sperm produces bones, brains, and spinal cord (gzhung pa).<sup>10</sup> The mother’s blood produces flesh, blood and internal organs (don snod).<sup>11</sup> From its own mind (sems) comes the consciousness pertaining to the senses.

II. After (the child) is formed this much, the main contributing causes of its growth are these. The right and left veins of the ‘child container’ (bu snod) and the uterus (bsam se’u, a general term for the organs, male or female, that produce the reproductive substances), the vessel-organ from which the blood falls (these three) are joined to the centre of the semen, blood and mind in the womb. In this way, the chyme of the mother’s food is gradually conducted, as an irrigation ditch from a pond makes the crops of the field grow. There is further growth for nine months, transforming by the motive force (rlung) of thirty-eight weeks.

If described in detail, in the first week it is like milk and blood mixed together. The second week it dries up a little and gels (nur nur por ’gyur rol/). The third week it becomes like a curd. This is the time when the *Explanatory Treatise* describes a method of producing a male child. In the fourth week, if it forms a round shape, it will be a male. If it forms something like wet sand

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(mer mer), it will be a female. If it forms an oblong shape it will be neuter.<sup>12</sup> In this first month, the mother has various mental and physical discomforts.

The second month: In the fifth week, the first part of the body, the navel, forms. In the sixth week, the 'life vein' forms from the navel. In the seventh week, the shape of the two eyes is approximated. In the eighth week, starting from the shape of the eyes, the shape of the head forms. The ninth week, the form of the upper and lower body forms.

The third month: In the tenth week, the shape of the two shoulders and two hips is approximated. In the eleventh week, the shapes of the nine sense openings are approximated. In the twelfth week, the shapes of the five solid organs (don) are approximated. In the thirteenth week, the shapes of the six vessel organs (snod) are approximated.

The fourth month: In the fourteenth week, the upper bones of the two arms and the hip bones become formed. The fifteenth week, the fore arms and shin bones form. In week sixteen, the fingers and toes form. The seventeenth week, the veins connecting the inside and outside (of the body) form.

The fifth month: In week eighteen, the flesh and fat form. In the nineteenth week, the tendons (chu ba dang rgyus pa) form. In the twentieth week, the bones and marrow form. Week twenty-one, it is covered outside by skin.

The sixth month: The twenty-second week, the apertures of the nine sense doors open. The twenty-third week, the hair of the head and body and the fingernails grow. The twenty-fourth week, the solid and vessel organs develop completely. At that time, (the child) will know happiness and sorrow. The twenty-fifth week, the movement of the air (rlung, the nervous impulses) begins. In week twenty-six, it begins to experience clear thoughts.

The seventh month: From the twenty-seventh to the thirtieth week, the whole of the body becomes apparent.

The eighth month: From the twenty-first to the thirty-fifth weeks, the whole body grows larger, internally and externally.

The ninth month: In the thirty-sixth week, (the child) get the idea that it doesn't like the womb. In the thirty-seventh week, it gets the idea to turn upside down.<sup>13</sup> The thirty-eighth week, he turns upside down and comes out. Even when this month is over, it still may not be born because of dripping blood or motive force (rlung). Furthermore, if the right side of the belly is high and the body is light, a son will be born. If the left side of the belly is high and the body is heavy, a daughter will be born. If mixed up, it will be neuter. If the center is high on both sides, twins will be born.

III. The signs of birth: The (mother's) body becomes stretched and loose. The lower part of the body becomes heavy and there is pain in the waist and buttocks. There is pain in the stomach and urinary organs (chu-so) and they expand and contract. When the female organ opens, lots of urine comes out

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and she gives birth with such an excessive pain that she thinks she will die.<sup>14</sup> All this may be known in detail from the Kanjur's *Nanda Enters the Womb Sūtra (Dga' bo Mngal 'Jug)*.

—This was chapter two (of the *Explanatory Treatise*), which shows the manner of the body's formation.

## NOTES

1. Terjék (ed.), *Tibetan Compendia*, English preface.
  2. *Ibid.*, p. 226. Pp. 252-8 are translated at the end of this paper. No title page is given. The same passage was translated by Csoma de Kőrös in his article, 'Analysis of a Tibetan Medical Work'. Differences between my translation and his are footnoted below. His article was first published in 1835, but reprinted in 1984 (see bibliography).
  3. Evans-Wentz (ed.), *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, p. xli. For the passage in the *Dga' bo mngal 'jug*, see Peking, vol. 23, p. 96-2.
  4. Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho, Sde srid, *Bai dūr Sngon po*. See bibliography.
  5. Ngapo Ngawang Jigmei, et al., *Tibet*, p. 124. The letters which mark each part of the illustration are keyed to letters in the text of the *Explanatory Treatise* as found in *Rgyud Bzhi*, part *kha*, ff. 2b-4a. Unfortunately, the reproduction is slightly unclear, and could not be reproduced well enough to be included in this article. In addition to this chart, the reader is referred to the impending publication in the Buryat A.S.S.R. of a complete series of medical charts.
  6. Dbang 'dus, *Gso ba rig pa'i tshig mdzod*, pp. 181, 333-4, 578.
  7. See Prof. Namkhai Norbu's recent book *On Birth and Life—A Treatise on Tibetan Medicine*, pp. 15-30.
  8. Csoma omits "the five elements."
  9. Csoma translates "hermaphrodite," technically incorrect, since *ma ning* means one who has neither or both of the 'marks' of sex, while hermaphrodites have both.
  10. Csoma translates "skeleton" instead of spinal cord.
  11. The Tibetan text is abbreviated here. The internal organs are classified as the five substantial (*don*) and the six container (*snod*) organs. As for the first, they are heart, lungs, liver, spleen and kidneys; the second are stomach, small intestine, large intestine, bladder, gall bladder and reproductive organs (*bsam se'u*, see below). Csoma omitted the heart from the first category and calls the second category, "vessels or veins."
  12. Csoma paraphrases this passage on determining sex.
  13. Csoma says that the child feels nausea on the thirty-seventh week.
  14. Csoma merely paraphrases the third section up to this point saying only, "The tokens and circumstances of approaching birth are then described."
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