Nawang Dakpa

CERTAIN PROBLEMS OF EMBRYOLOGY
ACCORDING TO THE TIBETAN MEDICAL TRADITION
FRENCH TRANSLITERATION OF TIBETAN

ñ as in “onions”

ñ as in “ring”

c as in “rats”

ch as in “cats home”

č as in “church”

čh as in “church hall”

j as in “lads”

j as in “jungle”

z as in “rose” but often pronounced as in “sun”

ž as in “leisure” but often pronounced as in “shade”

c as in “shade”
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1. A brief historical observation concerning the Rgyud-bṣi

The complexity of the problem of the origin of the Rgyud-bṣi, its authorship, and the exact date of its compilation is well known to specialists. The full title of the Rgyud-bṣi is bdud-rci-sniin-po-yan-lag-brgyad-pa-sgan-ba-man-hag-gi-rgyud which corresponds to its Sanskrit title amṛtaḥṛdayāṅga-astaṃghya-upadesa-antrānāma. There are different versions concerning the origin of the Rgyud-bṣi even in the Tibetan medical tradition itself. But one can sum them up mainly into two different versions concerning the composition of the Rgyud-bṣi. The first favours the idea of a translation from the Sanskrit and the second a local compilation.

2. Translation from the Sanskrit

In the first case most known versions are about the great translator Vairočana who lived in the eighth century during the reign of the great Tibetan king Khri-sroṅ-ide-btsan. The translation of this famous work from Sanskrit into Tibetan has been attributed to this Lo-ca-ba. He was one of the sixteen most famous disciples, of the great Tantric master Padmasambhava who had obtained sidhi, the power to work miracles. The number of the chief disciples of Padmasambhava in this respect varies from one source to another, and according to certain sources Vairočana was among the twenty five disciples who followed (rjes-'hans) Guru Rinpoche and he was also among nine Siddhas (grub-thob) who were in the entourage of the tantric Master (1). He studied a number of medical treatises with the Indian Ācārya Candrananda Zla-ba-mion-dga' in Tibetan and he has also composed two commentaries which are called respectively Ti-ka-mun-sel-sgron-mtse and Miṅ-don-brda-sprod-mam-lha. On his return to his home-
land Vairocana presented the *Rgyud-b'Zi* to king Khri-sroṅ-ldes-btsan and Padmasambhava who found the text most precious and secret. As the right time for diffusing this secret teaching had not yet come Padmasambhava hid this text with special prayers (smon-lam) in the pillar (ka-ba) situated at the middle storey (bar-khan) of the monastery of Samye (bsam-yas), the most ancient monastery in Tibet (2). This tradition belongs to the tradition of hidden texts (gter-ma) well known in Tibet, particularly to the Rñin-ma School, the oldest Buddhist School in Tibet.

In fact, the teaching of the *Rgyud-b'Zi* has two traditions of transmission: by gter-ma through hidden text transmission and by bka'-rna through oral transmission. In the case of hidden text transmission the *Rgyud-b'Zi* was discovered by one of the greatest discoverers of hidden texts, Grva-pa-mnon-čes in the late 11th century in accordance with the secret indications given by Žan-blon-rdo-rje-bdud-'dul, the chief guardian of the *Rgyud-b'Zi*, who had been appointed by Padmasambhava as guardian deity of the hidden text (gter-bdag) along with Čiṅ-bya-čan and Ča-na-pa, etc., when the *Rgyud-b'Zi* was hidden in Samye monastery. Grva-pa-mnon-čes then passed the teachings of the *Rgyud-b'Zi* on to his disciple Dbus-pa-dar-grags who passed it on to other disciples. (3)

According to the tradition of oral transmission (bka'-ma) of the *Rgyud-b'Zi*, Padmasambhava has given the secret teachings to Mu-ni-btsan-po at his request with an autotranslation (ran-'gyur) of the *Rgyud-M'i* by Guru Rinpoche himself. Padmasambhava said: "I have not given this teaching to Khri-sroṅ-ldes-bcan but I will give it to the prince for the benefit of sentient beings and for the propagation of Buddhism".


3. Local compilation

This second version concerns a local compilation taken from different medical traditions like Indian, Chinese and Žaṅ-źuṅ, at
the same time bearing in mind the importance of the Tibetan environment. This deals with the activities of Gyu-thog-yon-tan-mgon-po the Younger of the 11th century who has modified the Rgyud-b'gi from its ancient form into the actual presentation of the text. According to certain sources, Gyu-thog-yon-tan-mgon-po has even modified the language of the Rgyud-b'gi and put it into the new style of language (skad-gsar-bcad-kyi-gtan-la-phab) (5).

It is quite well known that different commentaries on this work have been written at different periods like the Cha-lag-blo-bgyad by Gyu-thog-pa (11th century), the Legs-bcad-nor-bu by Byan-pa (14th century), the Vaidurya-snon-po and the Lhan-thabs attributed to Sde-srid-sangs-rgyas-rgya-mcho (1653-1705), regent of the great 5th Dalai Lama Nag-dbañ-blo-bzañ-rgya-mcho (1617-1682), and other commentaries (6). Besides, it is true that without the help of these commentaries an accurate comprehension of the Rgyud-b'gi would be very difficult. Meanwhile certain specialists wonder how the sDe-srid could write such a clear commentary without the help of a previous clear commentary. It might be conceivable, but one should not forget the importance and rigidity of the Tibetan oral transmission, whether in the field of Buddhist teachings, medical, astrological or any other traditional science.

4. Observations on certain points of embryology according to the Vaidurya-snon-po

As mentioned above, I am not going to give a systematic description of embryology as those are found already in recent works. Rather, I shall limit myself to certain points that need clarification.

The teaching of embryology is divided into three parts, the causes (rgyu), secondary causes of development (rkyen) and the signs of birth (bca'-ba'i-rtags). The main causes are the semen (khu-ba) and menstrual blood [the rôle of the ovum was not yet known] without defect of wind (rlun), bile (mkhris) and phlegm (bad-kan). The consciousness of the intermediate state (bar-do'i-rnam-čes) which is projected by the force of Karma (las) with
the help of the force of one's prayer (smon-lam) during the preceding life-time accompanied by the assemblage of the five elements. (7).

As the commentary says, the consciousness of the intermediate state which is the main ingredient of conception is one of the many examples of relationship between the Tibetan medical tradition and Buddhist philosophy. For that reason a thorough knowledge of Buddhism, specially Tantric, is necessary in order to understand the Tibetan medical treatises fully and unmistakably. The question of the consciousness of the intermediate state (bar-do'i-rnam-čes) is the basic element of Buddhist philosophy on rebirth conjointly with the law of Karma (las).

In order to understand clearly the process of transfer of consciousness from one life-time to another it is necessary to look at the philosophy of interdependent causation (Sanskrit pratiyatamasutpāda and Tibetan rten-'byin-'brel-ba-'byun-ba). In fact, the twelve links of pratiyatamasutpāda which are rendered in Tibetan as rten-'brel-yam-lag-blu-gnis were illustrated in a wheel at the time of Lord Buddha himself. (8) This is known as bhavačakra in Sanskrit and srid-pa-'khor-lo in Tibetan, and is the most important teaching of Lord Buddha for humanity. The first of the twelve interdependent causes is ignorance (Sanskrit avidya, Tibetan ma-rig-pa) which is the very source of Samsāra ('khor-ba). From ignorance comes action of all kinds, and the second link may be called 'creation of action or creative impulse' (Skt. samskāra, Tib. 'du-byed-kyi-las).

After that creative impulse has taken place, positive or negative actions leave their imprints (bag-čhags) on the consciousness (Skt. viññāna, Tib. ram-čes) which is the third link of the twelve interdependent causes. Once the positive or negative actions have been imprinted on that consciousness it takes their imprints from one life to another. This is the explanation from the technical point of view how the course of the law of Karma passes through countless rebirths.

This consciousness corresponds to that subtle consciousness which is the very essence of life according to the Tantric tradi-
tions and it is called gñug-ma-lhan-čig-skyes-pa’i-sems or rlun-
sems-phra-mo. This very subtle consciousness accompanying the
individuality through all its existence plays an important rôle at
the time of death and birth of sentient beings. It is located in the
central channel called avadhūti or susumna in Sanskrit and rea-
bdu-ma in Tibetan and is the last mental component to leave the
body of a dying creature. This consciousness is the same as that
of the intermediate state which precedes conception.

Another point that we may clarify concerns the assemblage
of five elements: earth (Tib. sa), water (čhu), fire (me), wind
(rlun) and space (nam-mkha’).

In recent studies on Tibetan medicine in English or in French
I have not seen a satisfactory rendering on the nature of that
assemblage or union of the elements with the Vaidūrya-snon-po
distinguishes so clearly:

'di-i-skabs-kyi-’ byun-lña-žes-pa-ni-spyir-khu-khrags-sems-
gsum-rai-rai-gi-čha-la-gnas-pa’i-’ byun-lña’i-čha-cas-rams-la-
zer-ba -yin-kyan / khyad-par-du-bar-do’i-rnam-par-čes-pa-dan-
lhan-čig-tu-gnas-pa’i-’ byun-ba- lña-čin-tu-phra-ba’i-čha-žig-yod-
pa-de-la-byà-žiù / de-yañ-gžan-rams-dan-mñam-du-chogs-par-
ruñ-ba-žig-gi-don-yan-te (9).

‘Concerning the five elements in this passage, though in gen-
eral it means the five elements accompanying the semen (khu),
menstrual blood (khrag) and mind (sems), here assemblage of
five elements means assemblage of five elements in their very
subtle form accompanying the consciousness of the intermediate
state (bar-do’i-rnam-čes) and the five elements accompanying
other factors (menstrual blood and semen). So the union of these
subtle (phra-ba) elements which accompany the semen, men-
strual blood and consciousness or mind should also be understood
as union of elements.’

The commentary adds that without the element earth there
will be no solidification of the body. Without water (čhu) there
will be no aggregation or holding together. Without fire (me)
there will be no maturation (smin). Without the element wind
there will be no development (‘phel) of the body. Without the element space (nam-mkha’) there can be no place (go) of development. (10).

About menstruation the commentary says, except in pregnant and sterile women, the red element (khams-dmar-po) develops from the 16th day to the end of the month, because the solar energy (nī-ma’i-stobs) develops during this period in the organ of generation (sam-se’u). From the first of the month the period which corresponds to the beginning of the waxing of the moon, the red element (khams-dmar-po) passes through two major channels which link with the generative organ (sam-se’u) and the womb from the right and left side and penetrates to the fundus of the uterus. This penetration provokes the opening of the uterus and the menstruation starts to flow. Most of the time menstruation takes place between the first and fifteenth of the month because during this period lunar energy develops and solar energy diminishes. (11). If there is a sexual relation of the 1st, 3rd, 5th, 7th or 9th day after menstruation there will be a boy. On the other hand, on the 2nd, 4th, 6th or 8th day there will be a girl (bu-mo). After the 12th day from the menstruation there will be no fecundation as the uterus closes its opening like the lotus which closes when the sun sets (nī-ma-nub). There is also the question of the proportion of semen and menstrual blood in order to give birth to a boy or a girl. (12).

The consciousness of the intermediate state (bar-do’i-rnam-’bes) in search of rebirth is in a state of delusion and comprises all sorts of feelings of fear, like storm and rain, etc. It enters the womb for protection. This applies, of course, to ordinary beings.

According to the Tantric teachings, in the case of a Nirmānākāya (skye-ba-sprul-skhu) the consciousness enters by the mouth (kha) of the father and passes down to the womb along with semen.

The consciousness of the intermediate state can be either awake or not during the process of conception, and the development of the embryo depends on the degree of an individuality’s spiritual awareness. For example, Buddhas and Bodhisattvas who
have obtained a pure state of mind are absolutely awake through all the process. In fact, there are four degrees of sentient beings whose consciousness is more or less awake:

1) Ordinary sentient beings (so-skye-tha-mal-pa) go through the whole process of conception, development of embryo and birth in total ignorance (mi-dran-mi-čes).

2) Cakravartins (’khor-los-sgyur-ba) and those who have started on the path (rgyun-du-ḥugs-pa) enter into conception with awareness but attend the development of the embryo and the birth in ignorance.

3) Bodhisattva beginners (byan-čhub-sems-dpa’-las-daṅ-po-ba) and the Pratyekas (ran-rgyal) enter into conception and birth with total awareness (dran-čes) but attend the development of the embryo in ignorance.

4) Bodhisattvas who have reached the pure and perfect state (dag-pa’i-sa) attend the development right from conception till birth with total awareness. (13).

5. Illustrations.

What follows, are the explanations of the development of the embryo according to a medical thanka preserved at the Tibetan Medical and Astrology Centre at Lhasa. This painting gives the illustrations of each state of development of the embryo provided with inscriptions in Tibetan in cursive script underneath, and each illustration has been assigned a letter of the Tibetan alphabet.

2. Kha khu-khrag-rluṅ-skyon-čan /
3. Ga khu-khrag-mkhris-skyon-čan /
4. Na khu-khrag-bad-skyon-čan /
5. Ča khu-khrag-khrag-skyon-čan /
6. Čha khu-khrag-bad-rluṅ-skyon-čan /
7. Ja khu-khrag-khrag-mkhris-skyon-čan /
9. Ta khu-khrag-rluṅ-mkhris-skyon-čan /
10. Tha khu-khrag-'dus-pa’i-skyon-čan /
11. Da sa-dan-nam-mkha’-sog-ma-med-sogs-yodpa’i-don /
13. Pa Chui-gis-mṅal-sgor-’byin-ǰag-gsum-’jag-chul /
14. Pha bu-phor-’gyur-ba-mchon-pa /
15. Ba bu-mor-’gyur-ba-mchon-pa /
16. Ma nī-ma-nub-pas-kha-zum-mchon-pa /
17. Cha thig-le-blaṅ-ba-mchon-byed /
19. Va raṅ-ği-sems-las-rnam-čes-byuṅ-chul /
20. Ža sa-las-ça-dan-rus-pa-sna-dri-byuṅ-chul /
22. ā me-las-dred-dan-mdog-skyed-chul /
23. Ya mgul-ba’rluṅ-las-dbugs-sogs-skyad
24. Ra mkha’-las-bu-ga-rna-ba-sgr-a-skyped-chul /
25. La rgyu-rkyen-rtan-’brel-’joms-pa’i-lus-su-grub-chul /
   -ba’-brel-chul /
27. Sa dbun-phrag-dan-po-khu-khrag-’dres-pa /
28. Ha bdun-phrag-gņis-pa-nur-nur-po /
30. Ki bži-pa-gor-gor-mer-mer-sogs /
32. Ge drug-pa-srog-dbañ-čhags-chul /
33. No bdun-pa-mig-dbañ-dod-chul /
34. ċi brgyad-pa-mgo-dbyibs-čhags-pa /
35. čhu dgu-pa-lus-dbyibs-khog-pa-stod-smad-čhags-chul /
36. O ŋa’i-skabs-yin-pa-mchon-byed /
37. ći bcu-pa-dpuñ-pa-dpyi-tsur-dod-pa /
38. Ňa bcu-gčig-dbañ-po-dgu-yi-dbyibs-dod-pa /
39. Ti bcu-gñis-pa-don-lña’i-dbyibs-dod-pa /
40. Thu bcu-gsum-pa-snö-drug-dod-lugs /
41. De bcu-bži-pa-dpuñ-rkañ-brla-dbyibs-dod-pa /
42. No bco-lña-pa-rkañ-lag-rje-nar-dod-lugs /
43. Pi bcu-drug-pa-sor-mo-dod-lugs /
44. Phu bcu-bdun-pa-phyi-nañ’brel-ba’i-ča-čhags-chul /
45. O rus-sbal-gyi-skabs /
46. Be bco-brgyad-pa-ča-chil-čhags-chul /
47. No bcu-dgu-pa—rgyus-pa-čhags-chul /
48. Ci ŋi-çu-pa-rus-dañ-rkañ-nar-čhags-chul /
49. Chu rča-gčig-pa-phy’i-pags-pa-gyogs /
50. Je rča-gñis-pa-dbañ-po-dgu’i-bu-ga-phye-ba /
51. Vo rča-gsum-skra-dañ-ba-spu-sen-mo-skye /
52. Ži rča-bži-pa-don-snö-smin-chul /
53. Zu rča-lña-pa-rlun-gi-rgyu-chul /
54. ’e rča-drug-pa-sems-kyi-drán-pa-gsal /
55. Yo rča-bdun-nas-sum-ču-bar-gyi-gsal-rjogs /
56. Ri so-gcig-nas-so-lia-bar-thams-čad-’phel
57. O phag-pa’i-skabs
58. Lu mhon-par-mi-dga’-skyo-ba’i-’du-čes-’byun
59. Çe so-bdun-log-pa’i-’du-čes-’byun
60. So bdun-phrag-so-brgyad-pa-’go-’jug-log-chul
61. He pho-gyas-su-cog-bur-’dug-chul
62. O mo-rcibs-log-gyon-phyogs-na-’dug
63. Ge’ de-daň-’dres-mar-ma-niň-’byun-ba
64. Do’ mtha’-gñis-mtho-ba-mche-mar-skye-ba
67. Či’ bea’-myoň-gis-bskor-bca’-şin-lte-ba-gčod-pa’i-chul
68. Čhu’ chas-kyis-gso-ba’i-chul

1. Conception impelled by the law of Karma and ignorance as a result of sexual union
2. Semen and blood damaged by wind
3. Semen and blood damaged by bile
4. Semen and blood damaged by phlegm
5. Semen and blood damaged by blood
6. Semen and blood damaged by phlegm and wind
7. Semen and blood damaged by blood and bile
8. Semen and blood damaged by phlegm and bile
9. Semen and blood damaged by wind and bile
10. Semen and blood damaged by the three humours (*do*ṣa) combined

11. Symbol of the five elements: (earth, water, fire, wind and space)

12. Semen and menstrual blood with no defect likely to lead to conception

13. Impelled by wind through the opening in the womb the menstrual blood trickles down for three days

14. Symbol of becoming male

15. Symbol of becoming female

16. Symbol of menstruation ending

17. Semen

18. Way in which from the mother’s menses flesh and blood (i.e. the body) with hollow and solid organs are formed

19. Consciousness taking root in the mind

20. From earth come the flesh, the bones and the sense of smell

21. From water come the blood, the body fluids and the sense of taste

22. From fire come heat and colour

23. From wind come breath and movement

24. From space come the body openings and the sense of hearing

25. The union of these interdependent causes forms the body

26. Representation of the right and left channels linking the uterus to the navel while the embryo develops

27. First week — mixing of the menstrual blood with the semen

28. During the second week the embryo is called *nur-nur-po*

29. Third week a curd-like form
30. Fourth week a round or oval form according to its sex
31. 5th week the formation of the navel (and the central channel and the navel plexus)
32. 6th week the formation of the organ of life (the heart and heart plexus)
33. 7th week the formation of the organ of the eyes (and plexus between the eyes)
34. 8th week the formation of the head
35. 9th week formation of body, upper and lower part
36. Symbolised as the period of the fish
37. 10th week the shoulders and the hips emerge
38. 11th week formation of nine organs (that will develop orifices)
39. 12th week formation of the five solid internal organs (heart, lungs, spleen, liver, kidneys)
40. 13th week formation of six hollow internal organs (stomach, gall bladder, kidney bladder, large intestine, small intestine, generative organ)
41. 14th week formation of upper arms, legs and thighs
42. 15th week formation of feet, hands, fore-arms and shins
43. 16th week formation of fingers
44. 17th week formation of external and internal connective channels
45. Period of tortoise
46. 18th week formation of flesh and fat
47. 19th week formation of sinews and fibres
48. 20th week formation of bones and marrow
49. During the 21st week the body is covered by the outer skin
50. 22nd week opening the orifices of nine organs
51. 23rd week coming forth of hairs, down and nails
52. 24th week solid and hollow organs maturing
53. 25th week functioning of wind energy
54. 26th week the memory is getting very clear
55. From the 27th to the 30th week completion of gradual clearing of the mind
56. From the 31st to the 35th week further development of everything
57. Period of pig
58. During the 36th week a strong feeling of sadness and unhappiness arises
59. 37th week feeling the impulse to turn upside down
60. 38th week: the foetus turns a somersault
61. Boy squatting on the mother’s right side
62. Girl on the left side of the ribcage
63. A bisexual child in the middle of the ribcage
64. Twins if both sides are high
65. Leaning towards the right is a sign that the child appearing in due time on the right-hand side is a boy
66. On the other hand, if it is a girl, there is leaning towards the left-hand side
67. Experienced women assist the birth and cut the umbilical cord
68. The right way of giving food to restore (the mother)
Foot-notes

   Rechung Rinpoche, Tibetan Medicine, Wellcome Institute of the History of Medicine, London, 1973, p. 17
2. rGyud-bṣi, phyi-rgyud, edition Lhun-grub-steṅ, sDe-dge, folio 62a and b
3. Gso-rig-khog-'bugs, pp. 167-8
4. Gso-rig-khog-'bugs, pp. 168-9
5. Bod-rgya-chig-mjod-then-mo, s. 1., Mi-rigs-dpe-skrun-khaṇ, 1985, p. 2622
8. 'Phags-pa-sa-ljān-pa-žes-bya-ba'i-theg-pa-than-po'i-mdo, bka'-gyur, Kyoto, Japan, Otani University, mdo, vol. 34, Chu, No. 876
11. Rgyud-bṣi, bcad-rgyud, Dharamsala, Tibetan Medical Centre, 1971, pp. 56-7
12. Rgyud-bṣi, bcad-rgyud, Dharamsala, Tibetan Medical Centre, 1971, p. 57