



HEALTH & WELL BEING: EMBRYOLOGY by Dr. Trogawa Rinpoche

In the introduction to *Medical Care in the Tibetan Tradition* presented in *Thar Lam*,¹ we looked at care from the philosophical aspect of Buddhism and discussed how important it is for anyone in a medical profession to understand the reciprocity of outer and inner conditions, the co-existence of body and mind, if he or she hopes to treat patients reliably. Understanding the unity of body and mind that sets in the very moment a being is conceived presupposes knowledge of causality, *karma* in Sanskrit. I went through eleven of the twelve links of interdependent origination and closed the discussion by pointing out that “We have lived many lives and each has led to the next, the present most significant due to the energy that is the wind of karma accumulated through positive, negative, and indifferent thoughts and deeds. (...) What is the link between a past and present life? (...) The wind of karma from a past life functions and determines this life and (...) living beings can take birth in different ways: through a miraculous birth, through heat and moisture, from an egg, and from a womb (...)” I want to speak about birth from the womb here.

It is necessary to understand one’s own reality and life before embarking on the spiritual journey, the reason why Buddhist teachers and scholars from all Lineages speak – again and again – about what it means to be born, to live, grow old, and die. They see the significance of this topic and therefore continuously stress and never grow weary

of presenting the instructions on birth, sickness, ageing, and death. The first topic of birth presupposes a founded understanding of embryology, the reason why it was studied and taught extensively in my homeland. The Tibetan medical tradition describes every detail of embryology. I will present a short introduction and mention points one should know in order to appreciate the totality of body and mind.

Tibetan texts that deal with embryology date back thousands of years. Buddha Shakyamuni described the development of an embryo until it is born into the world in “The Sutra of Conception” by Ananda. It is very interesting that his teachings are being affirmed by newer Western medical investigations; ultrasonographic photographs of the embryo and foetus show that the ancient Tibetan descriptions and depictions are exact.

Every living being is moved by a personal and therefore distinct wind of karma that causes him or her to be attracted to future parents when they make love and conceive a child, which is the very moment a body and mind are united in the womb. What attracts a being seeking birth? The orgasm, which must be pure so that it attracts a being seeking birth. It is an aggregation of what is called “the seed of the five elements.” Each seed is the actual energy-source and force of the five elements, therefore called “the wind of the elements” or “the wind of the elemental energy-source.”²

1. *A Short Introduction* by Dr. Trogawa Rinpoche, in: *Thar Lam*, April, 2006, pages 58-61.

2. Ven. Tarab Tulku presented detailed instructions in the section on “*Tendrel* with respect to the three unities of subject/object, body/mind, and energy/matter, an expression of the unity-in-duality paradigm,” in: *Unity-in-Duality – The Ground of Everywhere*, forthcoming.



A being driven to be born possesses a subjective perception and therefore moves the way it does, i.e., the wind of karma unites with the wind of the elements which are energy forces; this process can roughly be compared to a magnet attracted by iron. The physical source arises the very moment conception occurs and it is just this physical source that attracts a being seeking birth. That is how both winds – the wind of the five elements and the wind of karma – unite inseparably. Looking at the links of interdependent origination, this is the stage of the fourth link, “name and form,” the stage at which an individual subject and object is defined as an embryo while in a mother’s womb. During the process of being-becoming the embryo is linked with its mother by the umbilical cord, through which it is nourished with the distilled essence of what a mother consumed.

The embryo develops a navel during the fifth week of life. The central nerve (referred to as “channel” in the Tibetan tradition) begins to develop during the sixth week from the navel upwards to what will later become the head. The long central nerve is both the earth and the

water element-force and therefore the basis and source for both elements that sustain a body.³ The central channel serves as the seed for the physical humour of phlegm, is therefore the basis for the emotion of ignorance.⁴

The second channel extends from the navel towards the heart and liver. It is the fire element-force and therefore the source for the element of warmth and heat in the body. It serves as the foundation of the seed for the physical humour of bile, is therefore the basis for aggression.⁵

The third channel reaches from the navel downwards to the lower part of the body. It is usually described as the wind element-force and is the basis and source for passion and greed. Tarab Tulku speaks of “(...) the air element-source (as being) the original force for movement and expansion; the space element-source the potential of the first four (...)”⁶ Again, the entire development of the channels and growth of the body during this phase is what is meant by “name and form.” Body and mind continue developing and the sensory organs come into being, first the visual faculty – even before the head has evolved into form.

3 In *Unity-in-Duality*, Tarab Tulku tells us: “According to Buddhist theories of evolution and dissolution, the earth element-source (the most coarse) is the initial force that induces solidification into matter; the water element-source the primordial force of cohesion.”

4 Theophrastus von Hohenheim, pseudonym Paracelsus (1493-1541, German renaissance physician-philosopher who introduced the relevance of physical and chemical elements for health and well-being into Western medicine), described the humours and spoke of them as “temperaments.” Temperaments are the particular physical and mental characters of each individual and define types believed to be due to the preponderance of the one or other humour; in physiology, a fluid of one of the four: blood, phlegm, choler, and melancholy.

5 Tarab Tulku (ibid.) tells us, “(...) the fire element-source (is) the original force for maturation.”

6 Ibid.

The body of an individual gives birth to all sensory perceptions during the second half of its life in a womb, the fifth link of interdependent origination, “the six perceptual entrances.” The physical sensory gateways for perceptions are prerequisites for the foetus to experience the sixth and seventh links, “feeling” and “contact.”

During the fifth and sixth month in the womb, the body develops an identifiable physical form and the baby wakes up from the sleep-like state it had been in until then. The sensory faculties become active during the seventh month; the baby perceives tactile sensations from the seventh month onwards and feels the temperature of the food and drink its mother consumes. The moment a baby experiences physical contact, a mental relationship with the world starts, the seventh and eighth links in the stages of development, “feeling” and “involvement.”

The physical force of form is finally established during the eighth month and the body merely becomes larger and heavier from then on. At this point, the baby experiences pressure, feels imprisoned, and struggles to be born. At the tenth stage of “becoming,” the baby is born and the eleventh link, “rebirth,” begins. This stage is the source of suffering and happiness, misery and joy during the further evolution of ageing, sickness, and death that underlie every birth.

Question: How did Tibetan scholars gain knowledge of the development of an embryo? They couldn't look at the growing embryo, so did they reach their conclusions through meditation?

Rinpoche: There are two ways to investigate, ontologically or empirically. It is necessary to see how the mind functions through one's own practice of meditation. Both approaches were taught by the Buddha and were included in studies in ancient and extinct cultures. Meditation practice unfolds and manifests qualities of being – specifically the ability to recognize meanings that would otherwise remain concealed. It is a fact that Western researchers are principally concerned with ontological

discoveries and ignore empirical insight. It is also true that empirical knowledge diminishes when materialistic pursuits of a civilisation increase. Buddhist scriptures present detailed and concise descriptions of the mind and its functions, therefore I believe that our understanding of embryology arose and will continue arising from meditative experiences.

Question: How do physical handicaps and a weak body develop? How does karma determine bad health while the body develops and grows?

Rinpoche: It is first necessary to understand the wind of karma, which is the habits accumulated in the past. A past karmic foundation gives rise to unfavourable physical circumstances and conditions, even if it may seem as though external causes are to blame. The karmic basis of an embryo in the womb can drive a mother to take invasive medicine that threatens or distorts the healthy growth of her unborn baby.

Question: Would you please speak about remembering prenatal stages?

Rinpoche: Advanced practitioners do remember their life as an embryo and tell us that they gained this knowledge, which they did

not have before, through intensive practice. Memory increases through meditation practice. There is many a practitioner who remembers his or her former life.

Question: How does a shock, which a pregnant woman experiences, influence the life of the embryo or foetus?

Rinpoche: During the advanced period of pregnancy, the baby experiences the same feelings and emotions as its mother. A shock disturbs the wind-energy in the mother's body and causes the baby to experience the same emotion.

Question: In *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* it is said that a newly born baby feels as though it were smouldering



on ember. It must be terribly painful. Would you please say something about this?

Rinpoche: A baby grows in dependence upon the different elemental winds, which are very active during the first weeks of birth. We discussed the different elemental winds, those of earth, water, fire, wind, and space. Each brings on a different feeling. When the wind of fire arises then there is the feeling of heat. The statement in *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* could be referring to this.

I wish to share a few more thoughts about the elements with you.

The human body consists of five elements. Flesh and bones, the nasal faculty and the respective sensory organ, that allows us to smell, develop from the earth element. Blood and bodily fluids, the tongue faculty and the sensory organ, that makes it possible for us to taste, develop from the water element. Bodily temperature and lustre, the visual faculty and the sensory organ, that makes it possible for us to see (both forms and colours), develop from the fire element. Skin, the respiratory system as well as the tactile ability to feel what we touch develop from the wind (air) element. The space element is the fundamental element that provides space for the other four elements to manifest; furthermore, all physical cavities in the joints, bodily openings, the ear faculty and the sensory organ, that enables us to hear, develop through the space element. The five elements are the bases for the physical body and are permeated by an individual's feelings and thoughts.

The physical body consists of its parent's physical substances; an individual's mind is determined by its past life; and the sensory organs provide the ability to perceive and conceive impressions.

A newly born baby's habits and reactions to outer circumstances are still premature. A baby doesn't develop reference-points or a relationship with the world until it has gradually won impressions, which, in turn, cause it to develop relationships with others and to sustain and explore its own character. This automatically leads the growing baby to reach out to what it likes and to reject

what it dislikes, which, in turn, intensifies and solidifies the ongoing process of being-becoming.

So, a child starts life anew in reliance upon personal tendencies, in reliance upon the spirit of its past life, and depending upon the physical components inherited from its parents. A child's future also depends upon the impressions it was exposed to during early childhood. We can compare this process with the growth of a seedling into a strong plant: If a sprout is not tended carefully, it will cripple or even wither and die.

Nourishment is also a field of study in Tibetan medicine. We believe that every organism consists of natural elements and assume that every natural ingredient that is available and consumed determines health or sickness. The Western attitude of counting vitamins, minerals, proteins, fat, and carbohydrates is also a means to try to lead a balanced life but does not accord with the Tibetan medical system.

Traditional medical scriptures also teach how to raise children kindly, and every Tibetan doctor is very knowledgeable in this field; they are quite concerned that children receive a good education, are strong, courageous, and healthy. The guidelines from the Tibetan medical scriptures should be applied as early as possible.

At the beginning of the 20th century, His Holiness the Thirteenth Dalai Lama founded the University of Lhasa, which offered an intensive education in medicine and astrology, each major and minor supplementing the other. An important field of study for doctors there should have been child rearing, too. His Holiness wanted the education and knowledge acquired at the University of Lhasa spread throughout Tibet, but the project was stopped shortly after his death in 1933. Doctors can do so much to help and support children.

Thank you very much.

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