Chapter 7: Creative Buddhas and Pure Lands in Renaissance Tibet

Introduction

A brief historical overview of the Great Perfection (rdzogs chen) itself will help situate the temporal and cultural context for the tradition’s innovations discussed herein. The rubric the Great Perfection in fact embraces a wide diversity of religious traditions in Tibet prior to the fifteenth century. The majority of these traditions are only attested in Tibet, where most emerged through the revelatory process of the treasure (gter ma) tradition. Since the "treasure" tradition was based on the claim that later generations of Tibetan from the eleventh century forwards were generally excavating 8th and 9th century translations concealed by Indian masters such as Vimalamitra and Padmasambhava, this entailed that the vast majority of Great Perfection texts and traditions were believed to be 8th and 9th century Indian compositions.

My own recent research has argued that in fact only a slim volume of texts is plausibly Indian in origin, and that instead the Great Perfection as a whole constitutes a uniquely Tibetan development with its roots in the 8th century, but gradually elaborated over six centuries and culminating in the great syntheses of the fourteenth century. In this context, I believe the treasure tradition functions as a hermeneutical enterprise by which not only was the Great Perfection tradition itself continually rethought and reinvented, but also new Indian and Tibetan developments were assimilated and rethought themselves against the horizons of an ever changing Great Perfection.

As for the Seminal Heart (snying thig) variant of the Great Perfection in particular, I have argued that it is specifically a Tibetan eleventh century creation, which developed until its classical form in the 14th century. It thus must be understood in the context of contemporary Indian and Tibetan movements, both tantric and non-tantric, ritual and philosophical. Indeed, it is distinctive for creating an intensely philosophical discourse out of Buddhist tantra. While the Great Perfection is often thought of as a religious tradition of extreme rhetoric but little if any ritual or contemplative content, its transformation within the context of the broader eleventh century religious ferment in Tibet produced new movements that reincorporated tantric praxis into their very core. The most elaborate and specific of these movements was none other than the Seminal Heart tradition.

I have been trying in my work to show how this tradition with its multiple innovations can be understood as being a deeply embedded yet thorough critique of Indian Buddhist traditions. At the same time, its various distinctive facets are very suggestive of possible connections with certain Shaivite lineages in India, as well as Daoist traditions in China, from the 8th to 11th centuries in particular when Tibetan religious culture was exposed to a variety of international influences still poorly understood. In the present essay, I focus on the key issue of divine creation and would like to discuss possible relationships such a model might have to Daoist movements during this time period.

Pure lands, Buddha nature and divine creation

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The central nexus of the Seminal Heart tradition of the Great Perfection is a model of gnostic creation portraying body, mind and world as articulated and sustained by a variety of Buddhas operating from within and without the human self. At the level of being and its matrix, an exclusively gnostic vision is offered in which all manifestation ultimately derives from the primordial gnosis (ye shes, Skt. jñāna) of Buddhas. This divine ontology is complimented by a bifurcated epistemology, which accounts for the problem of suffering and impurity by delineating two contrasting modalities in which being and non-being are interpreted, and which we might term karmic and gnostic epistemologies respectively. Thus the traditional Buddhist presentations of karmic creation – which accounts for the creation of body, mind and world on the basis of emotionally infused volitional acts by living beings in a type of karmic idealism – are repositioned as secondary processes which are more hermeneutical in character than ontological. In other words, they only effect the experiential quality of the world, not its basic character, which continues to be articulated and sustained by an perpetual efflorescence of gnosis referred to most typically as spontaneity (lhun grub). Thus gnostic creation, and idealism – the notion that the external world is a manifestation of what is literally primordial knowing (ye shes) – accounts for being, while karmic creation simply accounts for a particular tendency towards interpretation and the feedback mechanisms through which those interpretations are expressed and proliferate. These models of creation are also bound up with distinct visions of the nature of relatedness. Karmic creation is portrayed as linear sequences of causes and effects (rgyu 'bras) associated with manipulation, exertion, rigidity, restriction and otherness associated with the traditional model of interdependent origination (rten 'brel). Gnostic creation in contrast is described as a “magical web of emanation” (sgyu 'phrul drwa ba), complex self-organizing systems of coordinated expanding and collapsing hierarchies, and rhetorics of naturalness, ease, release, freedom and self.

The Seminal Heart presents this complex system through an innovative intersection of various strands of Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna Buddhism with a particular focus on encounters with Buddhas. In particular, the Mahāyāna notion of an indwelling Buddha – the “womb/embryo of the Buddha” (tathāgatagarbha) rendered into Tibetan as the “nucleus of the Buddha” (de bzhin gshegs pa'i snying po) – is integrated with the Mahāyāna motif of cosmological Buddhas, Buddhas that bodily create and sustain worlds to create a complex vision of reality that is woven together across interior and exterior registers with a common thread of gnostic creation. The crucial bridge between these visions of vast and intimate Buddhas, as well as the central dynamic of creation and the underlying structure of all worlds and communities, lies in pure lands (dag pa'i zhir), another lynchpin of Mahāyāna literature. The proliferation of Buddhas in Mahāyāna went hand in hand with an evolution of a new figuration of Buddhas which came to include as a central defining element the creation of worlds for the salvation of followers, worlds that were known as “pure lands”. This formed the background for the evolution of cosmological Buddhas, the most splendid of which is no doubt the vision of Mahāvairocana as a vast body with galaxies literally pouring out of the pores of his skin. At same time, these accounts defined a creative process that offered a new competing model to older models of creation as karmic in character. These creative processes eventually devolved onto human practitioners in ritual developments of Mahāyāna that eventually blossomed in tantric practice, as formalized miniaturizations of pure lands known as maṇḍalas. Whether iconographic depictions, contemplative variants evoked within the body, around the body or in front of the body, or in social formations of a local culture forming around a Guru, maṇḍalas are bound up with practitioner’s training in the creative processes originally limited to the depiction of Buddhas and their creation of pure lands.
Another fertile area of gnostic creation in Mahāyāna was the evolving yogācāra theology of the “three bodies” (sku gsum, Skt. trikāya), which described a Buddha’s protean capacity to create not worlds, but multiple bodies. Obviously these processes intersect with the creation of pure lands, since the divine bodies emitted in this fashion both articulate and are situated within these pure lands. Indeed the two together present a joint account of the creation of divine bodies or identities, which then fashion broader worlds around them, and cultures which reside within those worlds. The great narrative introductory frames (gleng gzhi) of Buddhist sūtras and tantras themselves are thus important resources for understanding these issues, as they are dedicated to narratively describing the encounters with Buddhas, their cultures and their worlds which form the conditions for the oral speech constituting the bulk of the text in question. These encounters came to be described in terms of five sublime facets (phun sum tshogs pa), namely teacher, retinue, location, place and teaching. A distinct pedigree of development, however, lie in the sūtras articulating the notion of an “embryo of a Buddha” coded within the bodies of all living beings, thereby at least implicitly raising the possibility of a gnostic process of creativity at work within beings, and not simply without them. Vajrayāna conjoined these distinct processes with an elaborate contemplative physiology portraying divine Buddhas seething with activity within the very flesh and blood of embodied existence, thereby building upon the Mahāyāna motifs but extending them in important ways.

This forms the background for post-tantra, a rubric which expresses the indebtedness to, and yet fundamental divergence from, Buddhist tantra that characterize the Seminal Heart and the Great Perfection overall. The system is dominated by issues pertaining to the multiple encounters with interior and exterior Buddhas, with a socio-epistemological focus on “encounter”, “(non) recognition”, and “introduction”. Buddha nature, pure lands, and cosmological Buddhas function to integrate embryogeny, psychology, physiology, cosmogony, and so forth into a complex philosophical architecture, leading to some referring to it as an instance of philosophical Vajrayāna in contrast to the more ritually focused strands of mainstream Vajrayāna. Using this gnostic vantage point, the tradition can be understood as a wide ranging reinterpretation of Indian Buddhism that reveals how the intersection of Buddha-nature and pure lands serves as a base to reinterpret contemplative praxis, death, psychology, embryogeny and other dimensions. It is perhaps best understood as an innovative response to one of the great questions haunting earlier Buddha-nature literature in India, literature centered on the assertion of a primordial “nucleus” or “womb” of the Buddhas as present within all life: how does Buddha-nature actually function in the lives and worlds of living beings who are manifestly not Buddhas? Or is it simply a vague potential that remains wholly inert in the present? The tradition responds to this problematic by looking to descriptions of how Buddhas function in the world, and in particular, how they create worlds, or pure lands. These same processes of creation, or creative processes, are then redeployed to account for the generation of physical form with embryos, human sensation, individual creativity/imagination, death, and so forth in relationship to ordinary life processes.

These creative processes are described in terms of the three bodies of a Buddha: the Reality Body (chos sku, Skt. dharmakāya), the Enjoyment Body (longs sku, Skt. sambhogakāya) and the Emanational Body (sprul sku, Skt. nirmānakāya). Most importantly, the movement from the Reality Body to the Enjoyment Body became a site of intense philosophical speculation about how form comes into being from non-form/emptiness, the nature of creativity and creation. Buddhology, Buddha nature, and cosmology all combined together in this inquiry into creation,
the stepping into being of form, and the gnostic or karmic character of agency in the creation of form, as well as its personal or impersonal character. The tradition of the Seminal Heart is distinctive throughout for how a wide variety of issues often not seen in Indian Buddhism as central philosophical issues – relegated to issues of narrative, lay/popular concerns, or practices falling outside of philosophical inquiry - are instead deeply interwoven as central themes into a broader and complex philosophical system. These include pure land, relics, post-death intermediate states, and yogic practices. The overarching architecture of this philosophical and yogic system lies in the linkage of cosmology to the human interior, with the paradigmatic instance of each being pure lands and Buddha nature respectively. Thus the movement across, exchanges between, and interrelation of exteriority and interiority gets expressed preeminently as the explosion of Enjoyment Bodies out of the Reality Body, and the withdrawal of Enjoyment Bodies back within the Reality Body. For instance, cosmology begins with an explosive growth of Enjoyment Bodies and their pure lands across an expanding universe, which is immediately followed by either an enlightened withdrawal back into a thoroughly reflexive and dynamic Reality Body, or an unenlightened withdrawal back into an embodied Buddha nature. Across these fluctuating rhythms of creation and dissolution that constitute, dissolve, and reconstitute boundaries of exterior, interior, and interpenetration, all these other elements – relics, pure lands, yogic contemplations, physiology, and so on – are employed in ongoing inquiry into questions of self and other. Thus, for example, there are the controversies over whether a given pure land is “manifest only to self” (rang snang) or “manifest to others” (gzhon snang), a controversy which revolves around issues of the relationship of Buddhas to sentient beings, and the status of external reality in relationship to knowing.

Scholarship on East Asian Buddhism generally uses the rubric of “pure land” to identify and emphasize the central importance of sectarian movements focusing on devotional prayer and contemplation centered around a particular Buddha and rebirth in his/her pure land. While not exclusively so, the cultic focus of these movements is generally the Buddha Amitābha (’od dpag med), and his western Buddahfield named Blissful (bde ba can, Skt. sukhavati). Their practices stress recitation of the Buddha’s name and/or simply prayers focused on him, as well as the aspiration to be reborn within his pure field. In contrast, despite the pervasive importance of pure lands, corresponding belief systems, and similar practices in Tibet, scholars have rarely spoken of any parallel movements, or attempted to contrast the configuration of religious literature, practices and beliefs relating to pure lands in Tibet to that in East Asia. I believe this in part because of the profoundly tantric character of Tibetan Buddhism, which tended to subsume devotionalism and pure lands into the broader tendencies of tantric practice with its maṇḍalas and devotion to the Guru-principal. The present chapter offers the beginning outlines of how distinctive tantric systems arose in Tibet based, however, upon pure lands and their formation.

**Gnostic Buddhism**

I refer above to the Seminal Heart as a “gnostic” interpretation of Indian Buddhism, a seemingly foreign rubric with problematic baggage. Michael Williams has suggested that on the one hand “gnosticism” has become a sick term that signifies everything to everybody; in addition, he suggests that as a historical construct referring to particular connected religious traditions, it has become a distorting rubric embedded pejorative caricatures as well as suggesting a false
intellectual and social unity with respect to the traditions involved. In this regards, it should be noted that my use of “gnostic” in reference to Buddhism is strongly linked to tantra, which as a rubric has itself recently suffered from becoming a sick concept itself, as well as associations with pejorative stereotypes, including sexual licentiousness, chaotic texts, loose thinking, compromise with popular demands, and so forth.

Thus we should begin with a clear definition of the use of gnostic in this context, and complement it with several caveats. The Seminal Heart tradition can best be understood as focusing on, within non-tantric Mahāyāna, a configuration of materials focusing on Buddhas, their cultures and their visionary encounter: the pure land literature, the vision quests, the cosmological Buddhas whose bodies contain cosmos, the ritual evocations of Buddhas, and the Buddha-nature literature with its Buddhas contained within ordinary bodies. This is reinforced by certain elements drawn from the Mahāyāna exegetical movement known as “Yoga Practice” (Skt. yogācāra) - an innately luminous mind contained below conscious awareness, idealism or mentalist rhetoric often interpreted as idealism, and the three Bodies theory of Buddhahood. It also deals with key tantric elements, such as deity yoga, the basic notion of a subtle body within the physical body, as well as spontaneous light images flowing out of subtle body yogas. These various elements are bound together by a common concern with the figure of the Buddha in terms of his/her ongoing presence and divine creativity, and the way in which ordinary individuals encounter and participate in both.

In fact, while a Tibetan equivalent is not used adjectivally in this way, the use of the English term “gnostic” or “gnosticism” for this configuration of elements is drawn directly from the Seminal Heart’s own central defining contrast of gnosis to karma. In short, the term gnosis (ye shes, Skt. jñāna) refers to a wisdom of a Buddha, which in Tibetan literally reads “primordial-knowing”. I thus use “gnostic” in this context to refer to Buddhist scriptural traditions presenting a Buddha’s gnosis as the critical and preexistent agency in the primordial generation of a world, cosmos, individual body, and individual subjectivity. This contrasts with - and complements - a Buddhist tendency to begin with the problem of impure cyclical existence (‘khor ba, Skt. samsāra) and human action (las, Skt. karma), and thus view the Buddha as a type of telos arrived at only by a long and arduous contemplative path. Gnosis, also, then, is both an end product, and an insight into reality, not a generative force or creative matrix. In the gnostic view, however, Buddha-nature is understood as a radically active agent that is operative primordially in constituting world, body, and mind. Its activity is modeled after the explosion of Enjoyment Body pure lands out of the Reality Body, a process which is located in many contexts in which we don’t generally think of the Buddhas as active agents. This innovative reinterpretation of Indian Buddhism blends ritual, yogic, and philosophical elements; in particular, the Seminal Heart needs to be considered as a systematic philosophical discourse that ranges over such classical Buddhist philosophical topics such as the ontological status of external objects, the nature of emptiness, the nature of the mind, epistemology, and so forth.

I am not, however, arguing for a gnostic movement in India itself, and do not want to create “the impression of a generalized historical and social unity for which there is no evidence and against which there is much”. I simply use it as a rubric to highlight the distinctive way an eleventh century through fourteenth century Tibetan movement reinterprets Indian Buddhism, and the


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manner in which it links together disparate sources. In addition, I disavow any suggestions of a historical or thematic connection to “gnosticism” as it is typically used in relation to Western religious traditions, a subject which would lead us to far afield in the present context. For example, many of the stereotypical associations pertaining to the use of gnostic as a rubric identifying a number of early Christian movements - perverting orthodox doctrine, hatred of the body, anti-cosmic motifs, orientation towards protest and so forth - don’t apply to the Seminal Heart or even polemical representations of it. For example, in gnostic Buddhism we have a divinization of the human body, not its rejection, though certainly there are strong similarities in the idea of a “divine spark” within men and women. In addition, the notion that Western gnosticism is above all else an orientation towards esoteric knowledge embraces the whole of later Indian Buddhist tantra.2 Hermeticism, symbolic thinking, and experiential emphasis are important aspects of the Seminal Heart and its reading of Indian Buddhism, but don’t constitute its uniqueness when considered within the broader discursive terrain of Indo-Tibetan Buddhist tantra. Williams’ own proposal of an alternative rubric - biblical demiurgical materials - also is problematic as applied to the Seminal Heart, though it does raise interesting issues which will become apparent in the course of the present study.3

However, Williams’s agenda is a fairly narrow historical one of classification. Dan Merkur, in contrast, has recently suggested using gnostic to refer to historical movements involving “an esoteric practice of visionary and unitive mysticism,”4 a definition which is of more interest for understanding the character of gnostic Buddhism. Merkur argues that it is unusual in the history of religions to find a tradition that centers around the integration of visionary and unitive experiences, but the Seminal Heart reiterates the old Great Perfection emphasis on unitive contemplative experiences with a new visionary focus on the manifestation of Buddhas out of the body’s interior.5 A related, but psychologically less interesting, argument has been made in Roelof van den Broek and Wouter Hanegraaf, who argue that Gnosticism and hermeticism in the West represent a marginalized alternative to Greek rationality and biblical doctrinal faith. They characterize this third alternative as an emphasis on “the importance of inner enlightenment or gnosis: a revelatory experience that mostly entailed an encounter with one’s true self as well as with the ground of being, God”.6 While these broader uses of the rubric of gnosticism do point to possibly fruitful comparisons, they are not necessary nor entailed by my present adaptation of the rubric “gnostic” to Buddhism.

**Section on gzhi snang**

To be added

**Nine applications of Gnostic creativity**

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2. For the latter point, see Williams 1996, p. 5.

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In order to unfold the articulation of this model of gnostic creativity, I will discuss nine key elements exhibiting it, and demonstrate how together they constitute an intricate portrayal of a primordial Buddha possessed of radical and primary agency in almost every conceivable cosmic and human process. I have organized these nine in a temporal sequence to evoke the way this primordial Buddha’s activities constitute temporal arcs spanning the origins to the ends of the universe, as well as spatial expanses across myriads of galaxy, bodies of self and other, interior and exterior spaces, and life and death. They include a cosmogony, cosmology, embryology, physiology, psychology, epistemology, soteriology, thanatology, and eschatology. The nine are further grouped into three triads concerned with origins, endurance as life, and ends.

1. Cosmogony

The first three contexts emphasize beginnings: the origins of being, world and human life. In each case we find a Buddha’s gnosis is the key creative agent. To begin with, the Seminal Heart emphasizes a cosmogonic account of the beginnings of the universe, which it presents in both a philosophical and abstract account of the ground of being, and a narrative account of Buddhas such as All Good (kun bzang, Skt. samantabhadra), Vajra Holder (rado rje ‘chang, Skt. vajradhara), and Illuminating (rnam par snang mdzad, Skt. vairocana). Both presentations share a description of the unfolding of bodily displays (sku) out of a Buddha, the former involving more generic pure land displays, and the latter involving more particularized accounts of specific Buddhas. Since the narrative account proceeds to a detailed cosmology of the consequent structure of the universe detailing its plural worlds, I will discuss it subsequently under the heading of cosmology.

The philosophical cosmogony begins with a ground (gzhi) of pure potentiality devoid of exteriorized manifestation; it is subsequently identified with the Reality Body as well as Buddha nature. It is imaged as “a youthful enlightened body within a vase” (gzhon nu bum pa’i sku), i.e. a luminous body contained within a vase so that it is only internally radiant. This ground has three qualities described as empty in essence, radiant in nature, and all-pervasive in compassion, which clearly relate directly to the three Bodies of a Buddha. Thus *The Tantra of Self-Arising Awareness* describes it thus:7

That which is termed "the great originally pure ground" abides in terms of the triad of essence, nature, and compassion. That essence is unceasingly radiant as unchanging primordial gnosis, and as such is termed "the abiding condition of the Youthful Body in a Vase". Its nature is the unobstructed and unceasing presencing of the five lights, while the presencing of its compassion is like a cloudless sky. That triune ground is termed "the abiding reality of original purity", and is utterly devoid of any fragmentation or lapsing into partiality.

*The Tantra of Exquisite Auspiciousness* offers a similar description:8

Prior to the emergence of Awakened Ones in consequence of their realization, and the emergence of sentient beings in consequence of their non-

7. Located in TB11 435.1 and AB1 529.5.
8. Located in TB12 174.3 and AB1 210.1; also cited by TCD1 285.2.

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realization, awareness' self emergent primordial gnosis doesn't waver from the ground, and dwells together with its triune lighting-up. The Self-Aware Primordial Gnosis itself taught this abiding reality of its own manner of being: "Hey! This vast space of its great presencing abides as the super expansive awakening which never strays from the great unwavering Body of Reality. The Essence's Spiritual Body is unceasingly present: its essence is unchanging and its means secret; it has never wavered, it is unwavering, and it is without agitation; therein all presences are simultaneously perfectly complete; all primordial gnoises are instantaneously perfectly complete; all Spiritual Bodies are present in ripened form; and all luminous appearances and visions are radiantly clear without obscuration. This abiding reality's lighting-up is unobscured by its manifestation-modes, and is a total Great Perfection with its essence, nature, and compassionate resonance devoid of fragmentation.

This state of pre-cosmic hyper-interiority is ruptured (rgya ral) when a gnostic wind stirs (ye shes rlung), such that the agent of manifestation is the Buddha's primordial gnosis. Gnosis impells an exteriorization referred to as the ground’s presencing (gzhi snang), which is described explicitly as the flowing out of pure lands rather than an emanation of phonemes, for example. These pure lands are described as vertical array with the Reality Body's open sky at the uppermost apex, and trailing off into the impure lands of cyclic existence down below. Dominant, however, is the intermediate pure land arrays of the Enjoyment Body, which are centered on the five Buddhas - Vairocana, Akṣobhya, Ratnasambhava, Amitābha, and Amoghasiddhi - in their peaceful and wrathful reflex. The full maṇḍala is of one hundred deities, a set drawn from the eighth century Guhyagarbha Tantra. The phased manifestation of these arrays of Buddhas clearly is based upon the description of enlightenment, and the sequential manifestation of Enjoyment Body Buddhas out of the Reality Body, and Emanational Body Buddhas out of them in turn. The following typical passage is from Longchenpa’s The Treasury of Words and Meanings:

The encasing seal of the Youthful Body in a Vase (the primordial ground of the originally pure internal expanse) is rent open, and the gnostic winds' impulsion raises awareness up from the ground. As its self-presencing thus dawns in the eight gateways of spontaneous presence, the originally pure Reality Body's manifestation like a cloudless sky becomes present above, while directly in front the Enjoyment Body's luminously radiant pure land-manifestations pervade the sky's expanse. Through its dynamism the great ground-presencing is present below, while through its dynamism in turn the Enjoyment Body's manifestations are present below, the natural Emanational Bodies’ pure land manifestations are present in their interstices, and down further below are the measureless world systems of the sixfold living beings' self-manifestations through the gate of cyclic existence. Because all of this naturally arises from the manifestation of spontaneous presence's eight gateways, it is termed "the simultaneous dawning of cyclic existence and transcendent reality's great lighting-up". As these appearances arise in external radiance from within internal radiance, essence's lighting-up is an inherently radiant unobstructed clearing-


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Thus instead of the typical Buddhist cosmogonic accounts where world generation is driven by the impure karmic residue of beings from a former eon, here we find that a Buddha’s gnosis ignites and impels the process, and that the bodies of a Buddha constitute the initial manifestation of the process itself. Thus gnosis is not only primordial, but it also has prior agency in the generation of worlds and being. And the primary act of creation in the universe is that of pure lands.

A final point of note is the “Buddha” here is understood to be indeterminate, in that it can yield both saṃsāra and nirvāṇa. Thus despite the use of all the classic descriptive terms for a Buddha, its knowing and its bodily displays, there is an crucial lack of reflexivity which yields a bifurcation based upon the interpretative response: the incipient cognitive capacity deriving from gnosis either self-recognizes (rang ngo shes pa) the display, or fails to do so. The former yields nirvāṇa and gnosis goes into the reflexive ascendancy, while in the latter eventuality, karma goes into the ascendancy, and gnosis retreats into the background. This dualism is persistent throughout the system.

2. Cosmology

Against this background, which accounts for the emergence of being from non-being, the narrative literature describes a secondary cosmogony describing the creation of precise worlds in a type of historical space beyond the generic emergence of being outlined in those philosophical accounts. Drawing heavily upon Mahāyāna sūtras, especially the Avatāmsaka sūtra, these narrative begin with the impersonal Buddha-ground spinning out beings and arrays, within which one is primordially awakened right in the moment of emergence. He is “All Good” (kun tu bzang po, Skt. Samantabhadra), the primordial Buddha. Longchenpa’s The Treasury of the Supreme Vehicle describes the process in the following:

The first topic is that prior to everything - cyclic existence and transcendence not being divided, not dividing, nor to be divided - All Good, the teacher whose dominion is perfectly complete, himself arose in the ground-presencing from the primeval ground, the expanse that is self-emerging primordial gnosis, the nucleus of the ones gone to bliss. In that instant as he raised up from the ground, he recognized (everything) as self-presencing, such that through the triune self-emerging principle he took hold of his imperial citadel within the sheath of precious spontaneity, the great original purity of the primeval site of exhaustion, the field of the youthful body in a vase. Having perfected the enlightened qualities in renunciation and realization, he was expansively awakened into Buddhahood within the natural being of the Reality Body, and abided within its internal radiance. His dynamism or inspiring blessings (gave rise to) the dense array of spontaneous self-presencing pure land permeated with the five primordial gnoses (rang snang lhun grub stug po bkod pa). Its maṇḍala as

10. Vol. 1, 3.3.
endless as the sky, the individual Buddhas corresponding to the five affinities were arrayed in self-presencing fashion, and resided there beyond the scope of anyone requiring training (i.e., ordinary living beings).

Then after a long time, he saw fluctuations emerging out of the dynamism arising within the ground-presencing from the ground, as living beings (originated) who experienced straying right within the absence of any cause for straying, like in a dream. He thus felt a gentle compassion stir, and he arrayed cosmos for the welfare of these beings. Out of the manifestation of the self-presencing Perfect Enjoyment Bodies, he arrayed the glacial oceans Bodies of the victors of the five affinities in extent as endless as the sky itself. Lotuses were born from within the interior of the manifestation of their (respective) precious hand-held seals, namely a wheel, vajra, jewel, lotus and double vajra. Atop the lotuses are twenty five cosmic fields, while in the expanse of the flowing glacial oceans of the incensed water streaming from the pores of their skin, there are minute particles of earth, water, fire and wind….

In all (those particles’) spaces to their full extent, (these Buddhas) make manifest the different cosmic fields (stemming) from the Buddhas’ blessings and the karma of ordinary living beings in an inconceivably limitless (variety) of forms and arrays such as spherical, square, elongated, and half-moon shaped.

All Good’s gradual awareness of less fortunate newly emergent beings elicits a response in the way of the creation of pure lands. The most significant is his manifestation as fivefold massive Enjoyment Body Buddhas known as gang chen mtsho, or “overflowing oceanic” Buddhas. They are so named because the pores of their skins overflow with perfumed oceans, within which galaxies originate. Their bodies literally overflow with worlds, which constitute a web of billionfold galaxies. The most important is the overflowing oceanic form of Vairocana, since he constitutes the matrix for our own world. These manifest emanatory reflexes, or Emanational Bodies, which permeate the vast universes which they bodily constitute, such as the twelve emanations of Vajra Holder (rdo rje ‘chang, Skt. Vajradhara), or the three sources of the teachings - a vajra, statue and book - that spin around the universe emanating out enlightened activities.

The description of the process is - barring the narrative details - simply a straightforward description of the sequential manifestation of Enjoyment Body Buddhas out of the Reality Body, and Emanational Body Buddhas in turn out of them. It is conjoined to the Mahāyāna notion of seeing the creation of pure lands as a paradigmatic act of a Buddha following enlightenment, which is here seen as entailing that gnosis is the constitutive agent in the external worlds of the universe. A Buddha is a world-creator, and hence our world-environments are contained within, and fabricated out of, massive Buddhas.

3. Embryology

From these cosmic processes, we will now turn to a much more intimate space, namely the process of embryogeny taking place within a mother’s womb. In other words, the creation of a human body. Although within samsara, gnosis operates in the background, and has not achieved reflexive self-knowledge, in fact it continues to be the primary agent in human existence in a
radically active way. Mainstream Buddhist accounts of the development of the embryo view the karma of the reincarnating individual as the driving force. In contrast, Longchenpa describes the process in *The Treasury of Words and Meanings* in the following way:11

On the fourteenth day, the embryo's space energy opens-up space, whereby in the middle of these four energy channels' development (which stems from the navel's channel-knot at our body's center, like the stretching out of ropes) the two small "eyes" - the Eye of the lamp and the Eye of the elements - become much more clearly manifest than previously. Within these small eyes, the extremely subtle and difficult to analyze essence of primordial gnosis is also present.

He is even more explicit in *The Treasury of the Supreme Vehicle*, where he makes clear these “Eyes” (*spyan*) organize our entire existence, both of the physical body and our capacity for vision:12

At the time of the body first developing, within the energy channel-knot of the generativity wheel (i.e. the navel) which previously developed in dependence upon water energy, the pair of the Eye of the Lamps and the Eye of the Elemental Energies develop. The subsequent manner in which our physical body constituted of the four energies takes form (in embryogenesis) from the Elemental Energies Eye has been previously explained. From the Lamps Eye, two channels running (up from the navel/heart) to the center of the two eyes' pupils originate (resembling the horns of a buffalo yet with a narrow base and opening wide at their tips (i.e. as they reach the eyes)), operating as the foundation of the ultimate transcendent reality (*nirvāṇa*), which has the nature of primordial gnosis' manifestation in terms of lights, seminal nuclei, the Spiritual Bodies and so on. That is called the far ranging noose water lamp, and in dependence upon it there is the empty seminal nuclei lamp, the self-emergent insight lamp, and the thoroughly pure expanse lamp.

Thus the physical and mental generation of a human embryo is guided by two “Eyes” (*spyan*),which are undoubtedly the Eyes of the Buddha within as signified by the use of the honorific term. One is the Eye of the Material Elements, and the other is the Eye of the Lamps, the latter being the term used to describe the lamps of the teachings that Buddhas array to illuminate the ten directions. In this system “lamps” are used to refer to the luminosity of the Buddha-nature which constantly spills out of its interior state, whether at the cosmos’s beginning, or the heart of the human body, into external fields of perception. The Eye of the elements acts to impel and organize the embryo’s physical development, while the Eye of the Lamps impels and organizes its mental and spiritual development. The embryo is thus from its conception to birth impelled first and foremost by gnostic forces, even if karmic forces are constantly modifying and redirecting the final result.

11. P. 201.

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4. Physiology: The human body

The second triad then turns from origins to persistence, namely in the form of human existence. They range over body, mind and perception, and in each case, gnosis is the primary agent, and karmic processes derivative. When we turn to the adult human body, we find a significant alteration of tantric physiology. Against the backdrop of the ordinary body within a body - the three vertical channels, which have central nexuses or wheels ("khor lo, Skt. cakra") at the crown, throat, heart, navel and sometimes genitals - it adds a network of light channels ("od rtsa"). In addition, the Buddha-nature is represented by mandalas of 42 peaceful Buddhas in the heart - called a tsitta palace - and 58 wrathful Buddhas in the skull - called a conch shell chamber. The light channels are called nirvānic channels, and are described as permeating the body, but in particular as running from the heart to the two eyes in a “crystal channel”. The eyes are termed the “gateway” by which Buddhas exit and enter the body. *The Tantra of Unimpeded Sound*: 13

As for the gateways of primordial gnosis's shining forth,
It issues forth through the gateways called Tsakshu
Which comprise all the vibrant energies (the body's quintessence),
And appearances are seen in two dimensions.

It develops from the navel wheel, emerges linked through the central channel (in particular),
And via becoming a single channel at the "summit",
That single channel bringing about the shining forth of the sensory objects
Has five branches manifesting
At and as the respective gateways of the five sensory faculties;
In particular, "the illuminating faculty of defective and holistic qualities" channel
Winds around like a buffalo's horns,
And thus at the "pupil" with its half black and half white subtle translucency
There is awareness in which visible forms are apprehended,
And the natural efflorescences of cognition are completely displayed.

Through this (lamp), the real primordial gnosis emerges.
By virtue of its immediacy and inherent dynamics,
The self-manifest objective dimension of pure reality
Is present with all that involves conceptuality in a state of cessation.

In Longchenpa’s *Introduction to the Lighting-up of the Expanse* found within his *The Seminal Quintessence of the Dākīms*, the understanding of these channels is particularly explicit: 14

In this body of ripened karmic propensities during the straying (of samsāra),
the principal channels (are as follows). White quintessence ("dwangs ma")
descends through the the channel-petals in which fierce winds flow via the right flavor ("ro ma") (channel). Red quintessence descends from the channel petals in

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13. Located in TB12 94.4 and AB1 113.5; also cited by TCD2 71.3, KNT1 457.2, and partially by KYT2 371.4.
14. KGYT3 118.3.

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which gentle winds flow via the left solitary (rkyang ma) (channel). The great intense quintessence descends by means of the neuter winds (ma ning gi rlung) via the middle central (channel), and acts as support for the channel petals in which flows the element of primordial gnosis beyond the coarse. The (three channels) support the three (emotional) poisons, and thus are termed “the channels of sāṃsāra... The ordinary tantras explain these three channels as the three Buddha Bodies, the three gateways, the three emotional poisons, and the (contemplative trait of generation, perfection and (great perfection), but since they are not ultimate, they are termed the “channel-petals of sāṃsāra”. The primordial channel-petals of the great nirvāṇa are also termed the “channel of self-emergent primordial gnosis”, “the channel of the spontaneous presencing within the ground”, and the “pure crystal tube”...

This body within the body in fact is the residue of the primordial divine cosmogony, since the two maṇḍalas of Buddhas are the interiorized remains of the original pure land displays that began the universe. Even more explicitly, the heart is described as the “ground”, and the light channels are explicitly portrayed as the perpetual overflowing of that ground into the luminous display of the ground-presencing. The original cosmogonic scenario is thus reinscribed within the body’s interior as a perpetual event occurring and reoccurring in the background of all life. Thus “three thousand Buddhas” permeate the bodily channels as fragments of this ongoing explosion of Enjoyment arrays. while the entire pure lands lay encoded within fragments of light floating across the eyes imagistically termed “little linked lambs” (lu gu rgyud). And the same recognition scenario with its interpretative bifurcation also endlessly repeats itself.

5. Psychology: The human mind

However, to describe these internal Buddhas as residences would be inaccurate, since in fact these Buddhas and their gnostic overflow are depicted as the primary agents in the ongoing generation of the human body and mind. In the eventuality of non-self-recognition, the luminosity of the central channels is sequentially converted in an ongoing fashion into ordinary psycho-physical processes. In terms of psychology, there is again a strict duality between two types of cognitive process: primordial gnosis (ye shes) and ordinary mind (sems). The primary activity is the gnosis stirring out of these internal Buddhas, but it gets diluted and distorted into ordinary mental processes, which are thus a mere epiphenomenon. The following passage from Longchenpa’s The Treasury of Words and Meanings describes the relationship of ordinary mind and gnosis:15

In this way, the cloud-like mind obscures primordial gnosis, and any identification of it with the sun-like primordial gnosis is simply impossible - they are distinct from each other as "the obscured" (i.e. primordial gnosis) and "the agent of obscuration" (i.e. the mind). Thus when you understand how your ordinary mind and the appearances it perceives are distorted, you realize that these externally appearing objects and the mind which apprehends them are adventitious and groundless; when you understand (and tune into how) primordial gnosis and its lighting-up is undistorted, you attain mastery over the mandala of


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awareness' Reality Body. Thus the mind and primordial gnosis must be differentiated from each other! Their non-differentiation entails the defect of primordial gnosis' continuing obscuration by your mind, such that its own essence (which links you back to reality) can't manifest.

The bodily character of gnosis is made The Tantra of the Adamantine Hero's Heart-Mirror says:16

Incredible! Listen up you mistresses of vast space!

The enlightened nucleus of realized-energy resides within all sentient beings in the worldly realms, like oil pervades a sesame seed. Furthermore, as to its basis or support, it is based upon their physical body.

As to its residence, in the mandalic center of their heart is "the wisdom of the closed amulet of the All Good One", which is analogically like a closed amulet of red-gold enamel. Within it is five-colored light, in the center of which the mustard seed-sized Peaceful Spiritual Bodies reside, with the lights resembling their luminous home. That is the residence of awareness, analogically like a Body in a vase.

As for the primordial gnosis which emerges from that (i.e. its radiation shining out from the heart), it resides in the site of the brain, the conch shell house. To expand on this, it is present as the mustard seed-sized wrathful Bodies, with proportionately sized eyes. They are also present in the manner of light rays. The light emerging from that is radiant and lucent like the center of a mirror-disc, or it can be said that it is present amidst light rays, analogically like a fish's eyes.

The connection-site between this and awareness is a channel up from the heart's tip that runs as a mere thread of white silk up in the proximity of the vertebrae. (Awareness' radiation) having emerged on its pathway through this, it enters into the head: this channel proceeds upwards from the left "small extremities" (channels in the throat), and thus links up with the brain. Having then proceeded onwards from the right and left areas near the ears, it links up with the eyes.

Via this (channel), having upturned your eyes towards the sky and applied pressure to this channel, when you look the sky will be filled with the luminous presences of primordial gnosis.

Thus primordial gnosis is not a refinement of the mind, or its enhancement, but rather is a deeply somatic process which is constantly active within the body's interior. These activities remain in the background of human awareness, but they still retain the primary agency in human awareness. This is imaged as the action of sun rays gives rise to clouds, but the sun remains primordially active and generative behind their screen.

6. Epistemology

Epistemology, how human perception takes place, is also accounted for in primarily gnostic terms, and only secondarily in terms of karmic processes. The body’s light channels project out

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16. TB11 207.1; AB1 334.1; also cited by TCD2 68.4; partially cited by LYT1 463-4).
into the eyes "like water buffalo horns" and the visual objects flow out from within. Vision is thus understood to be radically projective, and not just receptive. The same character is in fact explicitly attributed to the ears, also a "gateway" to gnosis via these light channels, and thus to hearing. In either case, the principle example of this projective nature of sensation - a fluid process in contrast to the constructive projections of karmic sensation - is that of the manifestation of pure lands. Again from Longchenpa’s *The Treasury of Words and Meanings*: 17

The actual gateway for the shining forth of primordial gnosis's lighting-up in external radiance is the two eyes. To expand on that, the vibrant dimensions of the four energies develop as two Eyes in the channel-knot of the navel wheel. The three channels link them to the other wheels thus: from the navel they are connected to the heart; then they are connected to the throat; and then to the brain, the conch chamber. Therein and spiralling to the right, the single root of the channel which, from among the four (?) channels is that one which brings about the shining forth of the sensory faculties' objects, divides into five tips, and thus acts as the support of the individual five sensory gateways. From these five tips, in particular the channel which acts as the support for the vision of forms is named "the sensory faculty illuminating defective and positive qualities". With narrow root and large tips, two channels like buffalo horns run to the vibrant lucency of the two eyes' pupils. Within the vision of manifest forms in dependence upon these channels, there are two visual processes: the vision of earth, stones, mountains, rocks and so forth, the distorted appearances of impure cyclic existence; and the vision of the lighting-up of radiant light, the empty forms of the pure passage beyond misery.

This aspect of sensation thus becomes an important site for the discussion of idealism: are appearances "projections of the self" (*rang snang*), or "projections of an other" (*gshan snang*)? The central place these issues are raised is the manifestation of pure lands in cosmogony and in contemplative vision: are these visions "self" or "other"? For example, one text asks the practitioner to close their eyes, only to discover that the visions persist. This is offered as clear evidence that the visions are self-projections, and not independently existent external objects.

Finally, there is the theme of the five senses being the site of liberation: “liberation upon seeing” (*mthong grol*), “liberation upon hearing” (*thos grol*), and so forth. In this sense also, sensation leads directly to liberation, and epistemology thus becomes the study of soteriology.

7. Soteriology: The path

The final three elements shift then to questions of ends: liberation, personal death, and collective salvation. The accounts of each is dominated, again, by the preexistent and spontaneous dynamics of gnosis. Liberation is generated by the central contemplative process, known as direct transcendence (*thod rgal*), which in essence constitutes a cultivation of spontaneous but phased visions of pure lands. The practice is prefaced by the cultivation of perfectly fluid awareness through “breakthrough” (*khregs chod*) contemplation, which itself reiterates the

17. P. 259.

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primordial ground of pure potential. The following passage from Longchenpa’s *Treasury of Words and Meanings* describes the initial stages of practice:18

In accordance with the three postures and three gazes, you focus on the sky twelve finger widths in distance from the spot between your eye brows. This is done in accordance with the key points of the triad of the eyes not wavering, the mind not distracted, and the winds thoroughly quiet. With respect to that, at first you see forms like smoke, white clouds billowing, a mirage, stars, fire sparks, a butter lamp, and the great pervading blue's light in the form of a black figure like a (Tibetan) *naro* (vowel). Light rays, nuclei, and immeasurable empty forms of the expanse/awareness thus shine forth.

The direct transcendence consists of using external light sources - such as the sun, moon or a lamp - or complete darkness within a specially prepared house, to cultivate a spontaneous flow of visual images through simple postures, breathing and gazes. One is not supposed to intentionally modify this flow of images, but rather allow them to develop on their own accord. The driving force behind this imaginal flow is believed to primarily be the internal Buddhas, especially those located within the heart and skull as the iconic manifestations of the internal Buddha nature. The practice creates an opening for their self-expression, and they flow via the light channels to permeate the exterior visual field through the gateway of the eyes. The other agent - both of manifestation and influence - is that of the emotional distortions (*nyon mong*), and thus the practice also involves techniques for eliding their manifestation and instead encouraging the expression of the Buddhas’ agency.

Through a developmental process of many phases summed up overall into four visionary sequences (*snang ba bzhi*), the imaginal flow slowly self-shapes itself into *maṇḍalas* of peaceful and wrathful Buddhas that constitute a massive pure land pervading the entire sky. *The Tantra of Unimpeded Sound* describes the later phases of the practice, all of which are claimed to spontaneously afford beyond intentional mental processes:19

> In optimization, the body as well becomes thus;  
> Having divested yourself of the body's material atoms,  
> A window of light manifests in space,  
> And from it light rays in the shape of iron hooks,  
> Slender and coiling, take hold of the visions.  
>  
> Your body's corporeality having ceased in and of itself,  
> It becomes a stainless transparent body of light beyond material resistance,  
> And its center is marked by an *a*.  
>  
> Light rays a full fathom in extent shine from your "hair-tuft"  
> While your winds elevate (the nuclei) from your "hair-knot",  
> And the peaceful deities are interlinked  
> With garlands of light from your fingers;

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18. P. 283.  
19. Located in TB12 143.1 and AB1 170.4 (question #12 of chapter 4); also cited by TDD, TCD2 233.5 and LYT1 479.4. TDD

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Experienced by the mind without sounds,
The wrathful Herukas come to the fore
From the immeasurable mansion of your crown's skull.

At this time your own body is optimized,
And in its transparency encapsulates the three Spiritual Bodies.

The entire array of interior Buddhas has been fully exteriorized at this point, particularly the key Enjoyment Body images. The entire pure land then begins to collapse within itself back to the dark blue expanse, identified as emptiness and the Reality Body, which marks the attainment of enlightenment.

The practice thus involves an autonomous, self-organizing process driven by the active agency of Buddhas outside of intentional plans or programs. Agency is explicitly understood as pertaining to the interior Buddhas, not the mind of the practitioner. This revision of late tantric contemplative procedures also questions the necessary centrality of ritualized deity yoga practices in classical tantric Buddhist systems, as well as the priority of internally mastered interior spaces in subtle body practice. The pairing of breakthrough and direct transcendence brings the process of gnostic efflorescence into reflexive self-awareness, and directly echoes the primordial cosmogony of the ground, its presencing, and All Good’s liberation.

8. Thanatology: Death

We now shift from liberation, the end of ordinary existence, to the more common endings of death. The early Seminal Heart literature is the original matrix in which the innovative post-deaths scenarios of the so-called Tibetan Book of the Dead were actually worked out. In fact, in contrast to earlier forms of the Great Perfection, the literature is very thanocentric, with a pervasive interest in corpses, dying, and post-death intermediate states (bar do). This interest is one of the most important fault lines between the various subtraditions of the Great Perfection.

For our present purposes, it is the tradition’s innovations in Buddhist post-mortem theory that is most relevant. Earlier Indian Buddhist literature often referred to a type of intermediate existence (Skt. antarābhava) between death and rebirth. However, this phase is dominated by karmic experiences of the past life, and in particular portents of one’s impending rebirth back in saṃsāra. Buddhas are only involved in this process in two specialized contexts. (i) On the one hand, they can appear as escorts to lead a devotee to a pure land. (ii) On the other hand, masters of tantric contemplations are said to be able to emerge within the post-death state in the form of their chosen personal deity (yi dam), by force of their sustained visualization of themselves as that deity.

The Seminal Heart is innovative in its creation of a new phase of post-death existence which pushes the earlier postmortem phase into a secondary and subsequent role. The Tantra of Unimpeded Sound provides the following typical discussion of such a phase:20

The five colored light and rays

20. Located in Tb12 146.7 and Ab1 175.1; also cited by TDD, TCD2 444.4.

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Spreading out from the propelling winds
Manifest in rainbow colored designs, without any predetermined forms.

Via the engaging and ripening winds, those visions
Are present throughout the four quarters, zenith and nadir,
And by force of the directions' light gathering
The Bodily Images of the five spiritual families light-up as well -
Deep blue, white, yellow, red and green,
Each Buddha manifests with its respective consort.

If you cognitively apprehend their intensifying diffusion outwards,
The Buddhas' spiritual qualities will be perfectly completed,
And you will not enter the three realms of cyclic existence.

Their characteristics are like this:
Since they beyond dependence upon the coarse elements
Pairs of nuclei blaze forth from the light,
And nuclei linked in quintads are filled with the Buddhas' Bodily images,
As from initial presences of their half-Bodies, their complete forms emerge.

Thus from Bodies only half visible, quintadic couplings of their full presence develop;
The individual complete clusters then link together
In quintads, tens, hundreds,
Thousands, and hundred thousands -
They light-up naturally pure of intellectual perspectives,
And in inexpressibly infinite numbers.

This new phase, most commonly termed the chos nyid bar do, is driven by the spontaneous agency of internal Buddhas. The peaceful and wrathful Buddhas of the body’s interior are released through the rupture of physical embodiment, and unfold out of death’s empty radiant light (stong pa'i 'od gsal). These visions of radiant light (snang ba'i 'od gsal) flow out through the deceased’s eyes to temporarily pervade the visual field. This exteriorization of pure lands thus explicitly reiterates the depiction of cosmogony and the core contemplative process of direct transcendence. In all three processes you find the same encounter scenario with interior Buddhas – the womb/embryo of the Buddha - confronting one in an exterior field of vision. In addition, these Buddhas are primarily portrayed as Enjoyment Body Buddhas flowing out of the interior Reality Body, and constituting pure lands, spontaneously without any explicit human constitution of the event. Finally, in all three cases we find a bifurcated response expressed as recognizing these Buddhas self (rang ngo shes pa), or failing to do so, which results in the dissolution into nirvāṇa or reconsolidation of saṃsāra respectively.

Finally, these spontaneous events also exist in a scripted ritual system famous as "The Tibetan Book of the Dead", itself based on the Seminal Heart. A lama uses name cards and so forth to ritually lead the deceased person's consciousness sequentially through these pure lands.

In summation, in death also we find Buddhas as invariably an active and primary agent in the central process that constitute the event in spontaneous irruptions. In contrast to the ordinary

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Indian Buddhist depiction of death as a process dominated by karmic processes, we instead find effulgent Buddhas. The encounter scenario precisely reiterates the original divine cosmogony, as well as the self-organizing visions dominating the contemplative process.

9. **Eschatology**

Our account ends with eschatology, the collective end which mirrors the personal end of death. The Seminal Heart developed a complex set of prophetic histories tracing the past and future, and this includes the projection of future moment when all sentient beings without exception throughout the universe will be enlightened through the activities of these webs of Buddhas both within and without. Longchenpa’s *The Oceanic Clouds of Profound Meaning*:21

> Those Realized Ones pervade everywhere in the limitless reaches of the sky’s expanse pervaded by the realms of sentient beings. Abiding in all of it right up to its outer limits with a teacher taming as appropriate, retinue, teachings and so forth, this is a single *Great Eon of the Great Brahmā*. It is spontaneously present as a single great taming field of the glorious All Good who is enlightened directly within the ground. He remains right up until all sentient beings are freed from cyclic existence, the gyration of inexhaustible beauty in his Enlightened Body, Speech and Mind emanating in those worlds and great eons in the form of Buddhas taming as appropriate, teachings, religious communities, sages, Brahmins, Brahmā, Indra and so forth. Thus, acting naturally, he (eventually) empties out cyclic existence. A thoroughly pure taming teacher called “World based on Great Brahmā,” acts for the welfare of sentient beings in piecemeal fashion. Finally he sets forth the vehicle of the adamantine nucleus, and when not even one sentient being remains (as all) are expansively awakened into Buddhahood, the activities of All Good are finally completed. That is known as “emptying out *The Great Eon of the Great Brahmā*.”

Similar comments are made in *The Treasury of the Supreme Vehicle*:22

> After that, all the beings in that field - as well as those in all the fields present in *The Great Brahmā Eon* (cosmos) arrayed by the Vajra Holder - will be freed within the primeval site. *The Great Brahmā Eon* arrayed by the Vajra Holder together with its material environments and life forms will thus be emptied out. Becoming the same as space, it abides for eighty five eons. *The three sources of the teachings* naturally vanish within the expanse of reality’s serenity and no longer manifest, once the Vajra Holder has completed this great activity. Then living beings again manifest from the expanse and the great Brahmā land is arrayed with emanations.

Finally, the following from Longchenpa’s *Introduction to the Precious Secret Path* is more explicit on how the three Buddha bodies gradually dissolve back into one another:23

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21. KYT2 44.6.

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He remains without transmutation or change across the three times in the state like the moon of the empty sky, that of the Reality Body’s sheath of precious spontaneity. The fields of the Enjoyment Body (manifest) without wavering from the Reality Body for the sake of those requiring taming, and from them, immeasurably many Emanational Bodies uninterrupted act in spontaneous fashion for the sake of living beings. Later again the Emanational Bodies dissolve into the Enjoyment Bodies, and the Enjoyment Bodies dissolve into the Reality Body. Thus there is no transmutation or change within the primordial gnosis of the four times’ sameness, such that it abides in the single flavor of the expanse and primordial gnosis.

Not surprisingly, this collective enlightenment is understood as a collective non-manifestation, such that the universe is literally empty, just as direct transcendence contemplation culminates in a perfect emptiness of the sky’s dark blue expanse. Left with no further rationale for being, the Emanational Body Buddhas withdraw back into their Enjoyment Body matrix, which in turn retreat into the Reality Body, which itself folds back into the expanse (dbbyings). Here it is said, even the Buddhas no longer see each other. And hence we find, in the end, gnosis alone (’ba’ zhig), the same active agent which initiated the beginning.

**Divine creation**

I would like to now retreat from the particulars of these accounts of gnostic creation and agency to trace three broad tensions in Indian and Tibetan Buddhism which I believe best explain the background of this gnostic reinterpretation: creation, the body and the Buddha.

The most central motif of gnostic Buddhism is the notion of divine creation, which is directly linked to the visionary apparitions and experience of Buddhas. Mahāyāna materials are marked by a often ignored tension between karmic and gnostic models of creativity. It is not simply an experiential focus on centrality of personal realization through contemplation - gnosis - rather than mere intellectual knowledge acquired through study of books. Creation in Buddhism is ex nihilo, out of nothing, but extraordinarily refined and nuanced ways of thinking about “nothing” evolved. With the rise of Buddhist skepticism and claims of radical emptiness that deconstruct the entire world, interior and exterior, in some sense the most compelling question in its wake becomes the question of creation and the status of transformation. Mahāyāna presents a further paradox in that the motif of emptiness is complemented by equally radical practices of compassion, which simultaneously call for an utter engagement of the world on altruistic grounds. So we faced with a problem: how do we reemerge from emptiness? how does body, self and world reform? how does a new world, self, body, ethics or community get created? These radical calls upon human responsibility push one back into the messiest of all possible spaces – ordinary human communities – and thus back into the world. Yet how does it not simply reform the same old problems, neurotic fixations on permanence in an impermanent world, stable selves in an instable universe? Thus the problem of emptiness, and what survives of Buddhism, conventions, life, and the problem of compassion – what are the guidelines for

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23. *Introduction to the Precious Secret Path*, KYT3 160.2. See related comments on KYT1 306.5-307.3 and KYT3 91.5-92.2. KYT3 92.1 appears to be explicit that the Reality Body dissolves into the expanse, and then subsequently straying into saṃsāra remerges.

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engaging others, for constructive activities – both lead us to the central problem of creation. Vajrayāṇa in particular thus centers around the issue of transformation, and each of its broad phases – classical, radical and post tantra – struggle with these problems of emptiness and creation in distinctive ways. How is a life, body, world envisioned that endures, and begins to actualize the promise of a nirvāṇa involving equal measures of dissolution and creation. What would creation be outside of the well known karmic paradigms?

The classic Vajrayāṇa solutions tend to involve intentional models of creation, which are pervaded by rhythms of control and manipulation. We see this in the maṇḍala generated by scripted visualization, with evocation handbooks (sgrub thabs, Skt. sādhana) that spell out each step of a mental creation of this iconic representation of a new world in which one assumes a new body and identity. Later forms of body yoga continue this model in their deliberate manipulation of bodily energies throughout the body towards a broader project of creation. Post-tantra, however, sees this as entirely problematic, and diagnoses it as essentially karmic projects, not gnostic. It remains a self-centered model of creation dominated the logic of controlling centers, manipulation, and artificial designs centered on autonomous parts. Post-tantra also criticizes the maṇḍala as authoritative, hierarchical, and structure-bound due to this model of centralized, deliberate creation. The Seminal Heart system is thus driven by a complex inquiry into how being comes from nothing, whether that being be worlds, body, mind, images, or Buddhas. It interprets Indian Buddhism as offering two distinct paradigms for the generation of structure, or for how being comes into being out of emptiness: a gnostic model based on a Buddha’s gnosis as the primary agent, and a karmic model based on the impure karma of sentient beings as the primary agent. Instead of beginning with the problem of saṃsāra’s suffering and constructed nature, the gnostic model begins with the pure gnosis of a Buddha as the primary and primordial agent to the emergence of being, while the karmic model only explains derivative processes of structure formation or creation when gnosis goes awry. And its vision of the maṇḍala is thus one governed by equality and self-organization, with “self” not understood in the sense of a central dominant self intentionally guiding the process, but rather “self” as a field of fluid interdependent processes with an emergent intelligence embedded within their interaction.

In Indian Buddhism, the Seminal Heart locates this gnostic principle above all else in the primary and normative way in which a Buddha was thought to create: the array of Enjoyment Bodies and their pure land cultures out of the Reality Body. This single principle then is seen in the creation of pure lands, as well as the cosmological vision of Buddhas in, for example, the Avatamaka Sūtra, wherein vast bodies of a Buddha are seen as containing and constituting the worlds in which we live. In the Seminal Heart, this is extended into a detailed cosmogony that involves a ground of being clearly identified with the Buddha nature, which then bifurcates into primordial and spontaneously liberated Buddhas on the one hand, and straying sentient beings who consequently construct saṃsāra on the other hand. This same principle is also used to interpret Buddha nature literature, since the internal Buddha - identified with the innately pure mind of Yogācāra literature - is understood as an active agent whose continual dynamism generates the ordinary body and mind from within. The praxis of deity evocation and vision quests - whether exterior or as self - are also understood as the same unfolding of Enjoyment Bodies out of an empty matrix.

This creative process driven by Buddha(s)’ divine agency is central to all nine of the processes discussed above. As outlined above, however, three distinct versions of it are presented as

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impelled by the impersonal ground (gzhi), the nucleus of the realized Buddhas (de bzhin gshegs pa’i snying po), and the fully realized Buddhas (sangs rgyas); clearly this maps onto the pervasive Buddhist triad of ground, path and fruit (gzhi lam ‘bras bu). In many passages, the authors are careful to distinguish between these different dimensions of creative Buddhas’ different identities. Buddha-nature performs the meditating function, since its deeply interior potentiality is explicitly identified with the cosmogonic ground, while its unfolding in contemplative visions reaches out towards the fully realized Buddha. While the dichotomy of the virtual reality of internal radiance (nang gsal) contrasted to the manifest reality of external radiance (phyir gsal) is important, in fact the fruit of Buddhahood is as much a hybrid phenomena of both as the internal Buddha-nature. The more crucial distinction tends to lie in the presence or absence of reflexivity (rang ngo (ma) shes pa).

At the same time, the vocabulary used to describe these three dimensions of creative Buddhas is otherwise identical, and indeed, other texts often blend the three together, especially in the evocative poetic language of the tantras. An excellent example is The All Creating King, a Great Perfection tantra spoken by "enlightening mind" (byang chub sens, Skt. bodhicitta) which "creates all" (kun byed). Often "the all creating king" clearly portrays the cosmogonic ground or the embodied nucleus, but his verbal presiding over the tantra itself and articulate boasting also point to the many other contexts in which he clearly presents himself as a realized Buddha. The following excerpts from chapter 11 provide a typical example:24

Hey, listen up Great Heroic Being! The root and nature of all phenomena is like this – I am the nature of all phenomena, and there is no phenomena other than my nature….I teach the desire realm, the form realm and the formless realm also to be the nature of I, the All Creating One. The five great (material) elements are also my nature, and the sentient beings of the six types are my nature. All appearances are my nature, and all that exists is my nature. That which is encapsulated by the elixir (of living beings) and the vessel (of the material environment) are my nature. Since nothing exists other than my nature, the root of all phenomena is subsumed within me…

Out of the nature of I, the All Creating King, everything in its entirety of appearances and living existence, the elixir and the vessel, has been created by me, and has emerged from me. Thus there is not even a single phenomena which is not subsumed within me…

In summation, the same creative process characterizes each, but they differ in terms of the interior and/or exterior nature of the locus and scope of the creative process, and the degree to which reflexive self-awareness governs the agent of these creative processes. The ground is a hyper-interiority that is all self-contained without any exterior, and it lacks any reflexive self-awareness. The "nucleus" is interior and lacks reflexive self-understanding as well, but it generates an articulate and explicit exterior, namely the human body and mind. Finally, the realized Buddha is exterior to the ordinary individual and world, and contains articulate structures within its interior or on its surface; of particular note, it is thoroughly reflexive in self-understanding. In this way, the Reality Body is further identified with the Buddha nature, though there is an internal difference of reflexive self-awareness which accounts for the

24. Tb 1, pp. 54.6-57.3.

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difference between the latter’s function as the collective and personal ground of the being, and the former’s representation of that ground rendered reflexive in a Buddha’s enlightenment.

Throughout the three Bodies of a Buddha are used as the organizing template, but the key is the dyad of the Reality Body as an empty matrix of largely virtual reality, and the array of Enjoyment Body pure lands whose activity and unfolding is consistently described as effortless, spontaneous, unconditioned and luminous. Thus a Buddha’s activities are presented as spontaneous, effortless and beyond action (bya bral), which are presented as quite distinct from ordinary strenuous, and deliberate action (‘bad rtsol). Manifestation, then, and the primary creation of worlds, bodies, minds and structure, are associated with the Enjoyment Bodies. The Seminal Heart tradition is perhaps the most systematic and radical attempt to work out the implications of the gnostic model, utilizing the pure land and Buddha nature to articulate an inquiry into creativity and imagination which takes as its point of departure the gnosis of a Buddha as the primary dynamic. In particular, the Buddha nature is interpreted as a radically active agent within all ordinary living beings, and its activity is modeled after the unfolding of Enjoyment Body pure lands out of the Reality Body. This single process is at the heart of (i) an unusual divine cosmogony, (ii) a revision of Yogācāra and tantric psychology, (iii) a creative adaptation of late tantric contemplations involving spontaneous light images, and (iv) an innovative reformulation of Buddhist post-death presentations. The principle throughout is the same, namely that out of nothing - whether it be the cosmos’s origins, the emergence of vision from emptiness, or the re-manifestation out of death’s final collapse - vision emerges as impelled by gnosis.

In addition to the Seminal Heart’s critique of the karmic models of creation and structure building such as found in the Abhidharma corpus, it also links the karmic model to associated motifs: seeing the Buddha as a constructed rather than revealed, construing the soteriological path as a contrived and painstaking accumulation of provisions rather than a more spontaneous unfolding, and in general privileging directive and manipulative types of activity over surrender to non-rational processes. The Seminal Heart’s consistent theme of sameness, undifferentiated reality, and equality is thus riven by an equally consistent dyadic contrast between a series of terms describing contemplation, experience, psychology, epistemology and so on: phenomenal appearances (chos can) and reality (chos nyid), mind (sems) and mind-as-such (sems nyid), mind (sens) and primordial gnosis (ye shes), universal ground (kun gzhi) and Reality Body (chos sku), conceptual (rtog bcas) and non-conceptual (rtog med), contrived (bcos ma) and spontaneous (lhun grub), sentient beings (sems can) and Buddhas (sangs rgyas), elements (‘byung ba) and lights (‘od), and “intellects wrapped up in objective reference points” (dmigs pa yul gyi blo can) and “intellects to whom awareness is self-presencing” (rig pa rang snang ba’i blo can). The former terms in each dyad all belong to the karmic process of deliberate, routinized and directive activity of building and maintaining structures, while the latter terms in each dyad instead belong to the gnostic process of spontaneous, self-emergent and fluid generation of structure, itself modeled after the movement of a Buddha into activity or world-constitution. The relationship between these two poles is that gnosis is the primary and primordially operative generatrix, while karmic processes are derivative, secondary and contingent. Our world, body and mind all begin with the movement of gnosis, which thus constitutes their primordial and ongoing matrix, rather than the karmic processes which appear to be foregrounded. The contemplative path is thus understood as making the background processes of gnosis reflexively aware through release of
karmically modulated self-control and self-articulation, rather than painstakingly constructing a currently non-existent gnosis as the product of a programmatic series of directive karmic actions.

Body

The second major tension in Mahāyāna which the Seminal Heart discerns, and responds to, is that between the body being understood as passive template to be inscribed by the rational mind - individual or collective - or as an active and dynamic agent in its own right. This emerges most clearly in its stress on the Buddha nature as resident within the body, and its use of tantric subtle body ideology to account for how the Buddha nature’s gnosis can be constitutive of body and mind outside the reflexive field of awareness of ordinary consciousness. From The Tantra of Unimpeded Sound:25

Self-awareness' primordial gnosis abides within the body,
Like oil within a sesame seed;
The body's luster and radiant glow
Reflects its pervasion by the moisture of primordial gnosis.

We also find such comments in non-Nyingma Indian Tantric literature, such as the following famous line from The Hevajra Tantra says:26

This great primordial gnosis resides in the ordinary body,
Genuinely divested of all ideation;
As that which pervades all things,
It resides in the body, yet is not produced from the body.

Gnosis expresses itself as much or more in the vajra body, as it expresses itself in mental acts. This gnostic agency is even explained as active within embryogeny, where it guides the overall articulation of the human organism. The Seminal Heart articulates a complex system of thought and practice based on the belief that a Buddha nature is radically active within the human body, which entails that non-conceptual bodily-based processes are given priority as gnostic dynamics over the preeminently karmic processes that govern ordinary cognitive activity and constructions. The tension of contrasting views of the body is thus intimately linked to the above dyads - spontaneity and construction, and so forth - but it emphasizes that the gnostic model of creativity is closely linked to the body, while karmic creation tends to involve the rational mind’s directive control. Imagination is thus linked to the body, a motif we further see in the presentations of Buddhas’ bodies, which are the loci for the mysterious interpenetration of body and world, and self and other in those marvelous cosmological visions of so many of the Mahāyāna sūtras.

Agency

25. Thal ’Gyur (TB11 91.7; AB1 110.4).
26. Kye rdo rje; the Sanskrit title is Hevajra Tantra (Snellgrove's Hevajra Tantra II 2-3 has the Sanskrit and Tibetan; translation in Snellgrove's Hevajra Tantra I 48).

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The third major tension the Seminal Heart both articulates, and responds to, within Indian Mahāyāna is that between the Buddha as an individual or a field, as a subjectivity or an intersubjectivity. Only the Buddha as an intersubjective matrix or field can serve as the primordially active agent that the Seminal Heart portrays Buddha nature as, particularly with its complex traversal of registers of interiority and exteriority. This creative tension between an oscillating figure which both represents fields, and their emanation as discrete historical agents, is utilized within the Seminal Heart to rethink no-self and emptiness doctrines to articulate a model of subjectivity that views the individual self as the intersection of karmic and gnostic fields, as the nexus of exterior and interior patterns. The figure of the Buddha becomes an inquiry into the distinctness and interconnectivity of selves, as well as into the way in which those same selves both constitute intersubjective fields, and are themselves in turn constituted by them. In doing so, Buddhist idealism is rethought against the backdrop of a tantric revisioning of the nature and significance of visionary experience.

Conclusion

In these ways, the Seminal Heart constitutes a highly innovative interpretation of Mahāyāna Buddhism in India, against the backdrop of later Vajrayāna movements. Many of its key insights appear only in germinal fashion in these earlier materials, while in other cases its elaborate systematizations point to the significance of explicit doctrines or motifs which have often been marginalized in contemporary discussions of the philosophical significance of Mahāyāna literature. It is in fact a complex, architectonic philosophical and contemplative system ranging over such classical Buddhist philosophical topics such as the ontological status of external objects, the nature of emptiness, the nature of the mind, and so forth. It is as much based on sūtras and their exegetical literature as it is on tantras and their exegetical literature, such that it must be considered a central dialogical pole when evaluating Tibetan philosophical speculation during the eleventh to fourteenth centuries. One of its most distinctive achievements is to articulate a sophisticated philosophical discourse out of innovative treatments of central and implicit motifs of earlier Indian sūtras and tantras, though this process was perhaps only fully realized in the later fourteenth century corpus of Longchenpa. Its integration of tantric concepts with Mahāyāna doctrines involves a creative reinterpretation of the latter, and not simply a mere ritualization of earlier concepts and/or a sterile concordance that hermeneutically retrieves shocking tantric images back into a normative doctrinal framework.

We find an innovative and gnostic orientation in the Seminal Heart tradition that is eclectic in its ranging over a wide variety of Indian Buddhist materials, tantric and non-tantric. What binds them all together into a single integrated system is the radical emphasis on the prior, primary, and ongoing agency of gnosis and Buddhas as constitutive of being, of world, of body, of mind, and of development, and hence also in the ending of these same processes, mostly relevantly death and eschatology. This polyvalent focus on divine creation interweaves cosmology, embryology, psychology, soteriology, thanatology, and eschatology in a powerful blend operating on multiple interior and exterior registers, with the semantic fields of each doctrine in constant transformation mirroring the protean nature of its own primordial ground.

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