

# Conception and intrauterine life in the P \[amacr] li Canon

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This article is part of a major research effort to investigate childhood in Therav \[amacr] da Buddhism, in particular as represented in the P \[amacr] li Canon. The Buddhist tradition understands birth to be the emergence of the first thought, the first consciousness in the mother's womb (V.i,93)<sup>1</sup>; birth is therefore seen to take place at the time of conception. Since age is calculated from this moment, and not from the day of birth, as we understand it in the West, research into childhood in Buddhism cannot neglect conception and intrauterine life. By analyzing the various canonical and exegetical passages that refer to conception or to life in the womb, this article sheds light on how these stages of life were understood approximately 2,000 years ago and on how tradition tried to deal with incongruities. It is crucial to note, however, that the literary corpus we are working with is by no means of a medical nature (as is the Hindu *Ayurveda*, for example). As the P \[amacr] li canon is primarily concerned with monastic rules and Buddhist doctrine, it contains very little information about children, not to mention intrauterine life. Many of the references are from later literature or from texts of a primarily hagiographic nature, such as the *J \[amacr] takas*. Nevertheless, such information as is to be found is definitely surprising. We will be in a position to map out four different usages of the imagery associated with conception and intrauterine life: didactical, hagiographical, exegetical and ascetical. For the purposes of this article, I have decided to leave aside all references to the conception and intrauterine life of the Bodhisattva in his last life. In the Therav \[amacr] da tradition, a *bodhisattva* is one who has vowed to become a Buddha; the last life of a *bodhisattva* is therefore necessarily that of a *buddha*. As we can expect, these fall into a category of their own, and are endowed with many supernatural characteristics. For canonical references to these, see the *Mah \[amacr] pad \[amacr] nasutta* (D.ii,1ff.) and the *Acch \[amacr] riyabbh \[umacr] tadhammasutta* (M.iii,118ff.). For more elaborate reflections, the reader may turn to Bareau (1974) and Foucher (1987).

The words usually used for conception in the *sutta* literature are *gabbhassa avakkanti* or *gabbhassa okkanti*. The *Vinaya* also utilizes the expression *s \[amacr] gabbha \[modot] ga \[nudot] hi* ("she held a *gabbha*") to refer to a pregnant woman (V.iii,205). The expression *gabbho uppanno* is also quite current, and implies the arising of the *gabbha* (see, for example, DhA.iii,180); we also encounter *gabbho pati \[tudot] \[tudot] h \[amacr] si*, "the *gabbha* was established" (J.iv,378). The terms *avakkanti* and *okkanti* signify "coming down into" and "descent into." *Gabbha* has diverse meanings, as do many P \[amacr] li words. It can refer to an inner chamber, to a vessel or to a cavity. In the context that interests us, *gabbha* is usually defined as the maternal womb, where the embryo and foetus develop. Paradoxically, *gabbha* is also taken to signify the embryo or the foetus, the distinction between the two remaining unclear. The term is not easily defined, for the expression *gabbhassa avakkanti* implies something that "descends" or "comes down into"; the genitive relationship that unites the two words clearly indicates that *gabbha* is not the womb itself; it is, rather, that which descends into the womb. Whereas the womb is always present as an integral part of the woman's body, the *gabbha* inhabits the womb only when there has been fertilization. The *Papañcas \[umacr] dan \[imacr]* defines the term as "the living being that grows in the womb" (*Gabbhass \[amacr] ti*

*gabbhe nibbattanasattassa; Pp [i]macr ] , ii,310.); here, the word *gabbha* is used to indicate both the location where this being grows and the being itself. *Gabbha* can therefore be interpreted both as a "living being that grows in the womb and the receptacle where that being dwells." The first interpretation is supported by the *Vinaya*, which defines a "pregnant woman" as "one who is entered by" (*Gabbhin [i]macr ] n [a]macr ] ma [a]macr ] pannasatt [a]macr ] vuccati; V.iv,316*). However, the "location where the *gabbha* grows" is never described as belonging to the mother, as we would expect for the womb. When the texts explicitly refer to the mother's womb, the word *kucchi* is invariably used. This further stresses the independence of the *gabbha*; it does not belong to the mother as such, but has an autonomy of its own. Many passages of the *sutta* literature further stress the distinction between womb (*kucchi*) and *gabbha* by stating that "for nine to ten months, the mother nurtures the *gabbha* with her womb (*kucchi*)" (M.i,266; D.ii,14). Note that the term *kucchi* is in the instrumental case, stressing the distinction between *gabbha* and *kucchi*: the former is nurtured by the latter. To summarize, we could say that the *gabbha* arises whenever there is conception within a maternal matrix (*Mil.* 125).*

But what exactly are the conditions for becoming pregnant? The *sutta* literature is very clear as to the prerequisites for conception. The *Majjhimanik [a]macr ] ya* (M.i,266, M.ii,157) states that in order to have conception in the human realm, three things must invariably occur: there needs to be the union of the mother and the father, the mother must be in her season, and a *gandhabba* must be ready. As for the first condition (*m [a]macr ] t [a]macr ] pitaro sannipatit [a]macr ]*), we should note that *sannipatit [a]macr ]* comes from *sannipatati*, "to assemble, to come together." The author of the *sutta* avoids any direct sexual connotations. The commentator to this text, however, is more precise by defining *sannip [a]macr ] t [a]macr ]* as *samodh [a]macr ] nena pi [n]udot ] [n]udot ] [d]udot ] abh [a]macr ] vena*, "beings combined as one lump" (*Papañcas [u]macr ] dan [i]macr ]*, ii,310). As for the second condition (*m [a]macr ] t [a]macr ] utun [i]macr ] hoti*), the *P [a]macr ] li Text Society Dictionary* defines the term *utun [i]macr ]* as "a menstruating woman," which cannot be the case, for attaining pregnancy is uncommon during menstruation. *Utun [i]macr ]* should be read not just as menstruation, but as the fertile period following it as well. The *Papañcas [u]macr ] dan [i]macr ]* mention that in the "venerable" habitat of the mother's womb where the child arises, a small clot first develops, breaks up at a later time and then flows out; the ground is then purified (and ready to receive the *gabbha*). While the mother and the father are united, this purified ground becomes a [fertile] field for a period of seven days (*Papañcas [u]macr ] dan [i]macr ]*, ii,310). Finally, the third condition is the *gandhabba*, a being that is propelled by the mechanism of *kamma* into another birth (*Papañcas [u]macr ] dan [i]macr ]*, ii,310; for a more detailed explanation, see Wijesekera [1945]). If any of these three elements is lacking, conception cannot occur. The text is rather categorical about these three conditions.

Despite the fact that these three conditions are very clearly laid down, we encounter passages that do not respect these prerequisites and where pregnancy is achieved with only two of the conditions being met. One such episode is from the *Vinaya* itself; others are from texts of a more strongly hagiographic nature, the *J [a]macr ] taka* and the *Dhammapa [t]udot ] [t]udot ] hakath [a]macr ]*. The story put forth by the *Vinaya* is used to legitimize the monastic rule that a monk should not have his robe washed, dyed or beaten (to soften the tissue which had become stiff) by a nun who is not a relative. The former wife of Venerable Ud [a]macr ] yin had also become a nun. However, they continued to meet regularly in private. One day, Venerable Ud [a]macr ] yin revealed his sexual organ to the nun and sat down; the nun also revealed her sexual organ to the monk, and sat down (V.iii,205; the word *agaj [a]macr ] tam* is used for both the male and female sexual organs; literally, the term refers to the organ that characterizes the male or female body). Ud [a]macr ] yin, overwhelmed with passion, contemplated her sexual organ, and emitted semen (*Tassa asuci mucci; asuci* means impure, not clean; *mucci* is from *mucchati [m]uccat[i]* and means to curdle, to coagulate, to become stiff; this could therefore be translated as "his impurity coagulated"). Then he asked the nun to fetch water so that he could wash his robe, but she wanted to wash his robe herself. She seized the soiled portion of the robe with her mouth and inserted another soiled portion in her sexual organ. As a result, she became pregnant (V.iii,206). From this story, we may infer that the nun was in her season and that a *gandhabba* was ready to be born; but no actual physical contact occurred between Ud [a]macr ] yin and the nun, since both were seated at a distance. The contact, here, would be transposed, with the robe serving as a metaphorical bridge.

The next story comes out of *M [a]macr ] ta [n]odot ] gaj [a]macr ] taka*. The Bodhisatta M [a]macr ] ta [n]odot ] ga was a *ca [n]udot ] [d]udot ] [a]macr ] la*, a member of one of the lowest castes. One day, his path crossed that of the daughter of a B [a]macr ] r [a]macr ] [n]udot ] asi merchant, Di [t]udot ] [t]udot ] hama [n]odot ] galik [a]macr ] , who abused him because of his low birth. Her attendants beat him and he lost consciousness. When he awoke, he told himself that he would win Di [t]udot ] [t]udot ] hama [n]odot ] galik [a]macr ] as his wife. He did so by standing in front of her home for seven days.

Thereafter, they lived together for a while without ever transgressing the rules of caste (*j \[amacr] tisambhedav \[imacr] tikkama \[modot]* ), implying that they never had sexual relations. Then M \[amacr] ta \[nodot] ga realized that because he was a *ca \[nudot] \[dudot] \[amacr] la*, he could not bestow upon Di \[tudot] \[tudot] hama \[nodot] galik \[amacr] the highest honours and gifts that a merchant's daughter expected to receive from her husband. He therefore resolved to become an ascetic in order to develop the supernatural powers necessary to satisfy his wife. He acquired these supernatural powers and Di \[tudot] \[tudot] hama \[nodot] galik \[amacr] was honoured by the villagers. Later on in the story, during one of his visits to his wife, his thumb touches her navel, and she conceives. Then, M \[amacr] ta \[nodot] ga told her: "lady, you are pregnant, you will give birth to a son, and you both will receive the highest honour and tribute" (J.iv,378; it is interesting to note that the highest honours come to Di \[tudot] \[tudot] hama \[nodot] galik \[amacr] indirectly; she receives them through her son).

A very similar story is narrated in the *S \[amacr] maj \[amacr] taka*. Here, Duk \[umacr] laka and P \[amacr] rik \[amacr] are married by their parents against their own consent; neither had longed for a consort, and both would have preferred to strive for ascetic attainments. Nevertheless, as a married couple they remain celibate (J.vi,72.) and eventually become ascetics, both living in their respective huts by the Migasammat \[amacr] river. Sakka, king of the *devas*, becomes aware that a danger threatens them: they will become blind. So he approaches Duk \[umacr] laka and entices him to have a son. Duk \[umacr] laka answers that even when they lived as householders, they avoided the duties of the world (meaning, procreation) like a pile of excrement infested by worms (J.vi,73). Sakka's solution is that Duk \[umacr] laka should touch P \[amacr] rik \[amacr] 's navel with his hand when she is in her season (J.vi,73). And so, P \[amacr] rik \[amacr] becomes pregnant, and the Bodhisatta S \[amacr] ma is born. A similar episode occurs in *Kusaj \[amacr] taka* (J.v, 278 ff.), with the slight difference that, here, the queen becomes pregnant by the touch of Sakka himself; she later gives birth to the Bodhisatta.

These stories are more fantastic than the one from the *Vinaya* for this time, although there is actual contact between the couples, albeit minimal, there is no exchange of semen. Maybe the author frowned upon the idea of illegitimate sexual intercourse, whether due to caste restrictions (such as between a *ca \[nudot] \[dudot] \[amacr] la* and a rich merchant's daughter), or to the involvement of people who had previously made the vow of celibacy as ascetics. But these would leave out the *Kusaj \[amacr] taka* where the queen and the king most probably belonged to the same caste, and neither of them were ascetic. Alternatively, then, the hagiographic nature of these stories might be used to stress the purity and extraordinary character of the Bodhisatta, either as a being capable of procreating while maintaining his ascetic purity, as in the *M \[amacr] ta \[nodot] gaj \[amacr] taka*, or as a being born by conception without sexual intercourse, as in the *S \[amacr] maj \[amacr] taka* and the *Kusaj \[amacr] taka*. It is important to mention that through the course of his hundreds of births, the Bodhisatta is not always born by conception without sexual intercourse.

The *J \[amacr] takas* contain another plot, found in two distinct stories, the *Alambus \[amacr] j \[amacr] taka* and the *Na \[ludot] inik \[amacr] j \[amacr] taka* (*Alambus \[amacr] j \[amacr] taka & Na \[ludot] inik \[amacr] j \[amacr] taka*; J.v,152ff and J.v,193ff.). There, the ascetic Bodhisatta begets a son from a doe. A further study on the relationship of deer and ascetics is called for. Many elements suggest a strong bond between the two. Deer seem to be the only animals impregnated by ascetics (see also the story of *\[Rudot] si \[sacute] ringa* in the *R \[amacr] may \[amacr] na* I, 9). The two ascetics Duk \[umacr] laka and P \[amacr] rik \[amacr] that we discussed earlier curiously established their hermitage on the banks of Migasammat \[amacr] river, which literally means "honoured by the deer." The Buddha also gave his first discourse in a deer park (*migad \[amacr] ya*). But let us come back to our story, where the animal becomes pregnant simply by eating grass and drinking water mixed with the Bodhisatta's semen (J.v,152). How the semen got there, neither of the stories says. Here again, as in the case of the *Vinaya*'s story, there is no physical contact between father and mother. The mere absorption of semen triggers pregnancy. We also have to remember that sexual relations with a woman would have been illegitimate since the Bodhisatta is an ascetic in both of these stories; presumably though, the author could have resorted to the scheme utilized in the *S \[amacr] maj \[amacr] taka* and the *Kusaj \[amacr] taka*. However, the remaining portion of these two texts emphasizes the importance of not falling under the charms of women. In the *Alambus \[amacr] j \[amacr] taka*, for example, the Bodhisatta, father of Isisi \[nodot] ga, tells his son: "My dear boy, in this Himalaya country are women as fair as these flowers: they bring utter destruction on all that fall into their power: you must not come under their sway" (Francis 1981: 80). In the *Nalinik \[amacr] j \[amacr] taka*, however, Sakka is threatened by and jealous of the ascetic powers of Isisi \[nodot] ga and so convinces the king of Br \[amacr] \[nodot] asi to impair Isisi \[nodot] ga virtues and therefore to destroy his powers. The king sends his daughter Na \[ludot] inik \[amacr] to seduce Isisi \[nodot] ga. She is

successful and Isisi [nudo] ga loses his powers. Rhetorically speaking, it would have been misconstrued to have the Bodhisatta's son born of a woman.

These stories from the *J [amacr] taka* and the *Dhammapada [tudot] [tudot] hakath [amacr]* do not abide by the three requisites for pregnancy, as laid down in the *Majjhimanik [amacr] ya*. The *Milindapañha* is well aware of this breach and attempts to conciliate the differing points of view. It is interesting to note that Rhys Davids, in his translation of the *Milindapañha* did not translate this section; he simply stated that "this dilemma goes into details which can be best consulted in the P [amacr] li." Just as in 1938, I. B. Horner did not dare translate part of the *Vinaya* dealing explicitly with sexual offences, primarily *P [amacr] r [amacr] jika* I and *Sangh [amacr] nidesa* I. It is worth reading her comments in the introduction to the *Suttavibha [nodot] ga* where she tries to justify her choice and, at the same time, to legitimize the inclusion of such explicit matters in the *Vinaya*. The following gives some indication of her thoughts on the matter: "Such lack of restraint as is found may be embarrassing to us, but it must be remembered that early people are not so much afraid of plain speech as we are" (Horner 1982: I, xxxvii). King Milinda argues that either the Buddha's statement that the conjunction of three events is necessary for triggering pregnancy is false, or that *S [amacr] ma* and *Ma [nudo] [dudo] abya* were not born from the mere touching of the navel by the thumb or the hand. As counterclaim to the King's statement, the monk *N [amacr] gasena* summarizes many stories of "extraordinary birth" from the *J [amacr] takas* as well as the *Vinaya*, and argues that the three conditions were indeed present. Although examples are taken from all these birth stories, only that of *S [amacr] maj [amacr] taka* is dealt with in detail. Let us summarize his arguments. First of all the mother, whether human or doe, was always in her season. Secondly, a *gandhabba* was always ready to assume a new birth. For this second point, *N [amacr] gasena* goes into some detail in explaining the intervention of Sakka in enticing a particular *deva* to enter a womb again. He then explains that a *gandhabba* may enter a womb under four circumstances: (1) by means of *kamma* (where *kamma* determines the next birth; however, those who have plenty of wholesome roots can arise wherever they wish); (2) by means of mode of birth (*yonivasena*: this category explains the various means by which a being may descend into a matrix: chickens enter the *gabbha* by means of air; cranes, by means of the sound of clouds; *devas* are beings that do not lie in a *gabbha*; *Mil.* 128). In her translation of the text, I. B. Horner mentions that "there appears to be some traditional connection between cranes, *bal [amacr] k [amacr]*, and storm-clouds, *megha...*. This connection is not confined to India" (Horner 1969: I, 179). (3) By means of family (*kulavasena*; which we will soon discuss in greater detail); and, lastly (4) by means of entreaty. The intervention of Sakka falls into this last category, that of entreaty, since he requested the *deva* three times to do his bidding (*Mil.* 127).

Finally, as for the union of the parents (*sannipatit [amacr]*), *N [amacr] gasena* asks Milinda whether he believes the nun became pregnant by placing the soiled robe of *Ud [amacr] yin* into her genitals. The King replies positively, for "when that nun was in season, when her *kalala [modot]* was established, when the motion of her blood was cut, i.e., her periods terminated, when her condition was laid down, she seized the semen and placed it in that *kalala [modot]*; because of this, she became pregnant" (*Mil.* 125). *N [amacr] gasena* further argues that everything that is eaten, drunk, chewed or licked, and enters the *kalala [modot]* will produce a growth in that very place (*Mil.* 125). He then comes to the conclusion that what is drunk or eaten through the mouth (like the "fertile" urine, grass and water absorbed by the doe) occasions the union (*sannipatit [amacr]*) of the two (*Mil.* 125). Here, it would seem that the union of semen and *kalala [modot]* replaces the union of father and mother and, furthermore, that this conjunction can be made through the mouth.

But what exactly is this mysterious *kalala [modot]*? In the *sutta* literature, the *Yakkhasa [modot] yutta [modot]* classifies periods of gestation into five distinct stages: the *kalala [modot]*, the *abbuda [modot]*, *pes [imacr]*, *ghana* and *pas [amacr] kh [amacr]* (S.i,206; the English translation of this passage omits the fifth stage, *pas [amacr] kh [amacr]*; Rys Davids 1982: i.263). The same classification is enumerated in the *Kath [amacr] vatthu* as well (Kvu. 494.) where the text counters the argument of the *Puggalav [amacr] din* according to which the sense-mechanism enters into the womb all at once. The standpoint of the *Therav [amacr] din* is that human beings develop gradually in the womb, passing from one stage to another. According to the commentary of the *Kath [amacr] vatthu*, only the *man [amacr] yatana* (mental organ) and the *phass [amacr] yatana* (touch-organ) are present at the time of conception; the other four organs take 77 days before arising (Aung and Rys Davids 1979: 283-84). The *Mah [amacr] niddesa* also mentions these five stages in order to highlight the insignificance of life: the body will die within 100 years at the most, it could be within any of these five stages, or at any other time after birth (N<sup>1</sup>.120). But neither of these texts shed much light on the exact meaning of these stages. The commentary of the *Yakkhasamyutta [modot]* states that after seven days, the *kalala [modot]* passes away and yields its place to the *abudda [modot]*, which shares the same colour as the water used to rinse meat. After seven days, the *abbuda [modot]* yields its place to

the *pes* [imacr], then, after seven more days, to the *ghana*. The *ghana* is said to be, on account of *kamma*, round on all sides, just like a hen's egg. After seven days of existence, the *ghana* will yield to the last stage, that of *pas* [amacr] *kh* [amacr], wherein emerge the five *pi* [ludot] *akas*, the five extremities, consisting of the head, the two hands and the two feet. The text further states that during these 42 weeks of pregnancy, the hair, the nails and so on will arise. From the child's navel, the "rising stem" (umbilical cord; *u* [tudot] [tudot] *hahitan* [amacr] *lo*) is connected only at one place to the "membrane of the stomach of the mother (*m* [amacr] *tu-udara-pa* [tudot] *ala*)"; like a twig, it is hollow. With this umbilical cord, the essence of the food is enjoyed and the matter generated by food arises. Thus, on the 10th month, it is caused to move out (*S* [amacr] *ratthappak* [amacr] *sini*, i, 301). Here, the word *n* [amacr] *la*, usually referring to the hollow stalk of the water lily, refers to the umbilical cord.

We do have significant information here. On the one hand, the *kalala* [modot] is viewed as the first phase of biological development. The *Milindapañha* also uses the word *kalala* [modot] to refer to what is contained within the egg (*a* [nudot] [dudot] *a*) of a hen (Mil. 49). The *kalala* [modot] of a human would be the same, less the shell. The entire gestation period is seen as lasting approximately 42 weeks, with the first four stages (*kalala* [modot] ,*abbuda* [modot] ,*pes* [imacr] and *ghana*) lasting seven days each and the last stage (*pas* [imacr] *kh* [imacr] ) lasting 38 weeks. The first four stages would belong to the embryo whereas the last, the *pas* [amacr] *kh* [amacr], where a distinct human form arises, would be the foetus. The text also reveals an awareness of the umbilical cord rising from the navel of the child (which is hard not to notice at birth), and connected to a membrane attached to the stomach of the mother (*m* [imacr] *tu-udara-paala*); this membrane is the placenta.

Let us turn, for now, to the four types of matrices (*yonis*) that receive beings: *a* [nudot] [dudot] *aja*, *jal* [amacr] *buja*, *sa* [modot] *sedaja* and *opap* [amacr] *tika*, those referred to by the *Milindapañha* as *kulavasena* (Mil. 128-29). The *Majjhimanik* [amacr] *ya* states that "all beings that are born breaking through an egg-shell are called born from *a* [nudot] [dudot] *aja yoni*; all those produced from breaking through a *vatthikosa* are called *jal* [amacr] *buj* [amacr] *yonis*; all those produced in rotting fish, rotting corpses, rotting rice or in dirty pond, are called *sa* [modot] *sedaj* [amacr] *yonis*, born from moisture; and finally, *devas*, beings in Niraya Hell, some humans, and some in states of woe (*vinip* [amacr] *tika*), are born from *opap* [amacr] *tik* [amacr] *yonis*," without visible cause (M.i,73). A simple enumeration of these four *yonis* is found at D.iii,230. The first type of matrix is easily conceivable; birds and snakes, for example, arise from these. The second, I will soon discuss. The third is not at all clear; the commentary simply states that it is born of moisture, without engaging in any further details (*Papañcas* [umacr] *dan* [imacr] , ii, 36). The fourth category, *opap* [amacr] *tik* [amacr] is defined by the commentary as those beings that arise by other means (*Papañcas* [umacr] *dan* [imacr] , ii, 36).

The second category, that of *jal* [amacr] *buj* [amacr] *yonis*, would refer to the mode of birth of all mammals. I would argue, here, that the word *jal* [amacr] *bu* refers both to the placenta and to the amniotic sac, for the text defines beings born from *jal* [amacr] *bu* as breaking through some kind of membrane (*vatthikosa*). The placenta is part and parcel of the amniotic sac; it is the part that is directly attached to the mother's uterus. Moreover, the *jal* [amacr] *bu* membrane does not remain in the mother's womb after birth. This is evidenced by a passage from the *J* [amacr] *taka* where a woman is said to abandon her newborn child at the root of a tree; however, before doing so, she carefully covers him with the *jal* [amacr] *bu* and other "impurities" from the womb (*gabbhamala*; J.iv,38). As the membrane (*vatthikosa*) in which the foetus grows, and which comes out of the mother at the time of birth, the *jal* [amacr] *bu* can be understood to be a generic term referring to both the placenta and the amniotic sac. The word *m* [amacr] *tu-udara-pa* [tudot] *ala*, however, would refer exclusively to the placenta. According Rhys Davids and Stede, the word *udara* is used in the context of pregnancy; it also seems that it shares the same etymology as the Greek and Latin word for uterus (1986: 134).

As stated in the introduction to this article, the main purpose of the Canon was not to provide medical information, but rather to indicate the path, to clarify the teaching of the Buddha, and to motivate those who were already engaged in this spiritual venture. I would finally like to introduce Buddhaghosa, the fifth-century commentator who wrote the *Visuddhimagga* and translated many Sinhalese commentaries into P [amacr] li. His comment on intrauterine life finds meaning in this context, for it reminds the reader that *dukkha*, suffering, is present throughout (and Buddhaghosa certainly knows how to drive the point home).

Here the suffering classed as "rooted in the descent into the womb" and so on, is this: when this being is born in the mother's womb, he is not born inside a blue or red or white lotus, etc., but on the contrary, like a worm in rotting fish, rotting dough, cess-pools, etc., he is born in the belly in a position that is below the receptacle for undigested food (stomach), above the receptacle for digested food (rectum), between the belly-lining [The word used here is *udarapa* [tudot] *ala*; since the placenta is usually attached to the frontal portion of the uterus, the embryo or the foetus would therefore lie

between the vertebrae and the placenta] and the backbone, which is very cramped, quite dark, pervaded by very fetid draughts redolent of various smells of ordure, and exceptionally loathsome. And on being reborn there, for ten months he undergoes excessive suffering, being cooked like a pudding in a bag by the heat produced by the mother's womb, and steamed like a dumpling of dough, with no bending, stretching, and so on. So this, firstly, is the suffering rooted in the descent into the womb. (Buddhaghosa 1975: 569)

Regarding this passage, Eva K. Neumaier-Dargyay states that "[t]he author of the text, the celibate monk, has every reason to consider this place unpleasant because it is to him a territory that is off-limits. So what is inaccessible to him becomes devalued in universal terms" (1995: 150; see 147-51 for more complete discussion).

This article has shown that the *sutta* literature had a precise definition of conception. The *Vinaya* and the *J [amacr] takas*, both present stories of conception that do not respect the three rules laid down in the *sutta*. Then comes the *Milindapañha*, a later text, whose author is aware of these discrepancies and attempts to convince the reader (or at least, King Milinda) that they are not really inconsistencies. This, in itself, is interesting, for we see the tradition recognizing certain lacunas within its Canon, and trying to fill them. This survey of P [amacr] li literature related to conception and intrauterine life enables us to discern four distinct approaches to the subject:

(1) There is a didactical or physiological approach, where the three requisites for conception are stated as facts, thus gaining a traditional position on this matter. To this category could also be added the enumeration of the five intrauterine developmental phases. Many of these references come from the *sutta* literature.

(2) There is the hagiographical approach, where extraordinary incidents of conception are narrated. One of the three requisites is not present, and it is consistently that of the union of the father and the mother. Most of these occurrences appear in the *J [amacr] taka* and the *Dhammapada [tudot] [tudot] hakath [amacr]*, both sprouting from a pre-Buddhist folklore. The prime intention here seems to emphasize the extraordinary character of the individual concerned, usually a *bodhisattva* or his son.

(3) There is an exegetical approach, where texts of the two previous approaches are confronted. These usually belong to a later period, when commentators (like Buddhaghosa and the author of the *Milindapañha*) attempted to resolve apparent contradictions.

(4) There is an ascetical approach, where the texts use the image of intrauterine life to activate disdain towards life. The ascetic goal being *nibb [amacr] na*, as opposed to *sams [amacr] ra* the cycle of birth and rebirth, world-oriented values should not be encouraged; life in all its aspects is both suffering (the first noble truth) and "disgusting" (*asubha*, lit., "not beautiful"; on this matter, see Boisvert 1996). In this last category fall Buddhaghosa's comment regarding the "suffering rooted in the descent in the womb," the *Mah [amacr] niddeśa*'s statement highlighting the insignificance of life, as well as a range of other comments condemning sexual activity for monks and nuns. This last category is similar to the one that Alan Sponberg terms "ascetic misogyny" (1992) in that it symbolically deprives mothers from the powers of giving birth and life.

The various genres in P [amacr] li literature reveal several approaches to the imagery associated with conception and intrauterine life, approaches that may very well be evidences of different concerns in the various periods these genres were composed. Another aim of this article was to clarify certain terms related to conception and intrauterine life. We elucidated the meaning of important terms that had never so far been translated as such: *m [amacr] tu-udara-pa [tudot] ala* (placenta, exclusively), *jal [amacr] bu* (placenta and amniotic sac), *pas [amacr] kh [amacr]* (foetus; when the five extremities appear on the developing child), *u [tudot] [tudot] hahin [amacr] la* (umbilical cord), and the five intrauterine developmental phases of *kalala [modot]*, *abbuda [modot]*, *pes [imacr]*, *ghana* and *pas [amacr] kh [amacr]*.

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## Note

[1](#)

All Pali references quoted are from the Pali Text Society (London) edition.