

KAMEYAMA Takahiko 亀山隆彦

The Doctrinal Origins of Embryology in the Shingon School

In this article, I discuss the significance of embryological knowledge, such as the red and white drops and the five developmental stages of the embryo, in medieval Shingon esoteric Buddhism. Specifically, I examine the writings of Kakuban, an eminent Shingon Buddhist monk in early medieval Japan, and point out that, according to Kakuban, embryological knowledge was connected with the six elements, which were fundamental to Shingon conceptions of ontology. In other words, by constructing embryological theories, medieval Shingon monks such as Kakuban attempted to make a correlation between abstract and distant cosmologies and the life and death realities of their daily lives.

KEYWORDS: esoteric Buddhism—five stages within the womb—red and white drops—Kakuban—*Gorinkuji myō himitsu shaku*—embryology

KAMEYAMA Takahiko is a researcher at the Research Center for World Buddhist Cultures at Ryukoku University.

AS EARLY AS the twelfth century, esoteric Buddhist priests of both the Shingon and Tendai schools began to develop distinct ideas on the growth and maturation of fetuses in the female womb. Although based on passages in canonical Buddhist texts such as the *Mahāratnakūṭa-sūtra*, *Abhidharmakośa-bhāṣya*, *Abhidharma-mahāvibhāṣā-śāstra*, and *Mohezhiguan*, as well as esoteric scriptures such as the *Luqijing* and *Yuqijing*, Japanese Buddhist scholastics devised unique interpretations regarding the formation of the embryo. Scholars of medieval Japanese Buddhism such as ABE Yasurō (2017), OGAWA Toyoo (2014), and Lucia DOLCE (2010) have come to refer to these embryological theories as the “red and white drops” (*shakubyaku nitai* 赤白二滯) or the “five stages within the womb” (*tainai goi* 胎内五位). Due to their sexual connotation, these theories have been expunged from modern Japanese Buddhism and are often discredited as “heretical lineages” (*jaryū* 邪流) and “heretical interpretations” (*jagi* 邪義) (MORIYAMA 1965, 74–93, 126–155; KUSHIDA 1964, 329–408; MANABE 1999, 25–40). However, the discourse on the prenatal development of human life, which evolved from the twelfth to fifteenth centuries, exerted a considerable influence over the various components of Japanese esoteric Buddhism, ranging from ritual practice to scriptural hermeneutics.

As the title suggests, this article concerns embryological theories cultivated within Japanese esoteric Buddhism. Specifically, I focus on the writings of Kakuban 覚鑿 (1095–1144), who is traditionally held as a reformer of the Shingon school. Furthermore, I consider the theoretical significance of his musings on the development of embryology in medieval Japan.

Scholars active in the early to mid-twentieth century, such as MIZUHARA Gyōei (1923), MORIYAMA Shōshin (1965), and KUSHIDA Ryōkō (1964) discussed medieval embryological theories as the product of heretical teachings. More recent scholars such as OGAWA Toyoo (2014), Lucia DOLCE (2010), and James SANFORD (1997) have offered new insights into the relation between these embryological theories and the ontological significance of esoteric praxis, such as yoga (*yuga* 瑜伽) and mandala, as well as for maintaining belief in the principle that one’s own body is originally that of a buddha (*jishin honbutsu no dōri* 自身本仏之道理). This article builds on these recent studies by exploring key passages from Kakuban’s *Gorinkuji*, which have not been addressed in the previous

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scholarship, and discusses how this work represents early manifestations of Japanese Buddhist embryology. By doing so, I demonstrate that embryological theories regarding the red and white drops and of the five developmental stages of the embryo are intimately connected to the Shingon esoteric Buddhist ideal of obtaining buddhahood in this very body (*sokushin jōbutsu* 即身成仏) and the doctrine of dependent origination of the six elements (*rokudai engi* 六大緣起).

According to Nakamura Hajime, the Buddhist ideal of dependent origination proposes that it is possible to terminate our current “deluded existence as sentient beings” by “closely examining its constituent causes,” the reasons for our “deluded existence as sentient beings,” and then “eliminating these (pre)conditions that lay at its root” (NAKAMURA 1994, 435). Although previous studies of esoteric Buddhist embryology in Japan do not mention the doctrine of dependent origination, the correlation between theories of pregnancy and childbirth and this fundamental Buddhist doctrine can be found in many early Buddhist writings. Frances Garrett summarizes these sources as follows:

Buddhists throughout history have concerned themselves with describing how change and development occur in the various realms of human experience. Defining such metaphysical concepts and integrating them into systems of thought and practice is central to Buddhism from its earliest origins in India, and embryological narratives turned out to be a compelling means of expressing these difficult concepts. (GARRETT 2008, 127)

In the embryological knowledge of classical Buddhism, man and woman combine their ovum and sperm—the so-called “red and white drops”—through sexual intercourse. A zygote, which is called the “harmony” (*kararan* 羯羅藍, from the Sanskrit *kalala*), is formed in the womb of the woman as a result of this amalgam. The zygote is then imbued with a consciousness (*shiki* 識) that exists in the intermediate state (*chū u* 中有) between rebirths (T 1579, 30.283a1–20). Once imbued with consciousness, conception occurs. Next, the harmony-zygote goes through four phases: forming an embryo (*abudon* 額部曇, from the Sanskrit *arbuda*), producing flesh and blood (*heishi* 閉尸, from the Sanskrit *peśī*), obtaining a mass (*kennan* 健南, from the Sanskrit *ghana*), and developing joints and extremities (*harashakya* 鉢羅奢佉, from the Sanskrit *praśākhā*). Having completed the five stages within the womb, a fetus is formed. Finally, the birth of the fetus is referred to as the stage of leaving the womb (*taigaii* 胎外位) (T 1821, 41.164a8–14). According to Garrett, such embryological knowledge is not merely medical in nature but also functions as an indispensable means through which complex metaphysical concepts such as dependent origination—the “changes and developments” that occur in all sorts of forms “in the various realms of human experience”—can be “[clearly] defined” and, subsequently, “integrated into systems of thought and practice” (GARRETT 2008, 127).

Garrett does not discuss embryological theories in Japanese esoteric Buddhism in her study. However, in the embryology of the Shingon school, embryological narratives are likewise connected to the doctrine of dependent origination. Specifically, theories on the development of the embryo are situated within the doctrinal framework of the dependent origination of the six elements, a concept found in the writings of Shingon founder Kūkai 空海 (774–835). In the *Gorinkuji*, Kakuban offers examples of just how such connections were made. In this work, the three ingredients that come together to form the human body—the masculine white drop (sperm) of the father, the feminine red drop (ovum) of the mother, and the consciousness that exists in the intermediate state of rebirth—correspond to one of three groups in which the six elements (earth, water, fire, wind, space, and consciousness) constituting the cosmos are divided. Furthermore, when one looks at other texts such as the *Daikō*, it becomes apparent that Kakuban was not alone in positing such connections between the six elements and embryological theories; similar ideas were widely shared by Shingon monks from the twelfth century onward.

Kakuban's statements concerning conception and childbirth are recorded in two works, the *Gorinkuji* and *Uchigikishū*. In the following pages, I closely examine passages in these two works along with the *Daikō*, a twelfth- or thirteenth-century collection of oral commentary on esoteric teachings, to elucidate the precise connection between embryological thought and the theory of the six elements in Shingon esoteric Buddhism. In contrast to the presumptions of early twentieth-century scholars, a discourse on sexual reproduction was not an anomaly belonging to a heretical strain of esoteric Buddhism. On the contrary, the origins can be found in the recorded thoughts of Kakuban, a seminal figure in the Shingon school, and his interpretations of Kūkai's writings on esoteric Buddhist doctrine.

The Five Developmental Stages of the Embryo in the Uchigikishū

The *Uchigikishū* is a written account of Kakuban's *denbōe* 伝法会 lectures. From 1130 to 1143, Kakuban delivered approximately fifteen *denbōe* lectures both at Denbōin 伝法院 and Daidenbōin 大伝法院 on Mt. Kōya 高野, as well as at Bufukuji 豊福寺 on Mt. Negoro 根来. As one of Kakuban's senior disciples, Shōō 聖心 (d.u.) attended each of these lectures and took detailed notes regarding their content (FUJII 2008, 48–50). The collection of these notes eventually came to be referred to as the *Uchigikishū*.

As far as can be gleaned from Shōō's *Uchigikishū*, the lectures primarily seem to have been concerned with the major writings of Kūkai, such as the *Ben kenmitsu nikyō ron*, *Shōji jissōgi*, *Sokushin jōbutsugi*, and *Jūjūshinron*, as well as other texts such as the *Putixinlun* and *Shimoheyanlun* (FUJII 2008, 16). The

main subject matter of the *denbōe* lecture held on Mt. Kōya in the spring of 1139 was the content of the tenth chapter of Kūkai's *Jūjūshinron*, "The Mind of Secret Adornments" (*himitsu shōgon shin* 秘密莊嚴心). During this lecture, Kakuban posited an argument concerning embryological knowledge, mentioning details such as the harmony-zygote, the red and white drops, and the five developmental stages of the embryo (KDZ 1: 504–505).

To understand Kakuban's discussion of embryology in the *Uchigikishū*, it is necessary to consider the historical context of this lecture. According to a biography of Kakuban by his senior disciple Kenkai 兼海 (d.u.), the *Kakuban Shōnin no koto*, Kakuban resigned from his official duties in response to continuing disturbances on Mt. Kōya. Taking up residence in the upper hall of the Mitsugon'in 密嚴院, he cut off all exchanges with the outside world and concentrated on the "secret practice of becoming a buddha in one's own body" (*sokushin jōbutsu no mitsugyō* 即身成仏之密行), which involved a vow of silence (MIURA 1942, 1: 338). The date of this lecture (spring of 1139) corresponds exactly to the time when he would have just fulfilled this vow of completing three years of seclusion.¹

According to the analysis by Fujii Sami, the passage in the *Uchigikishū* invoking embryological terminology must have been recorded immediately following a series of oral transmissions (*kuketsu* 口訣) delivered on the seventh day of 1139. According to Fujii, these transmissions concerned the ritual procedure for protecting the body (*goshinbō* 護身法) and the bell-ringing empowerment (*shinrei kaji* 振鈴加持), both matters of ritual practice. In a statement attributed to Kakuban, the passage explains the process of transformation from a ritual visualization technique called "seed-symbol-sage" (*shusanzon* 種三尊)—whereby a "seed" (*shuji* 種子) is transformed into a "symbolic form" (*sanmaya gyō* 三昧耶形) and then into an anthropomorphic "full-body form" (*son gyō* 尊形) of a deity—to the five developmental stages of the embryo and its subsequent birth as a fully-formed human (FUJII 2008, 16, 26).

Ogawa Toyoo, however, characterizes the immediate context of the *Uchigikishū* passage as a lecture concerning the notion of generating the body through five aspects (*gosō jōjin* 五相成身) (OGAWA 2014, 448). It is indeed the case that the progression of seed-symbol-sage constitutes the principal object of visualization in a variety of esoteric meditation methods, including this

1. According to Kenkai's biography, it was sometime during Kakuban's four-year period of silence that a rumor began to spread that Kakuban had died and his disciples, including Kenkai, were keeping this fact hidden. It was at that time that Kakuban reappeared at the Daidenbōin and began organizing his lecture on the doctrinal study of esoteric Buddhism (MIURA 1942, 1: 338–339). Kushida speculates that Kakuban's reappearance "probably caused intense excitement and astonishment on Mt. Kōya. For people who had believed Kakuban to be dead, it was a shocking reality, like a lightning bolt from the sky" (KUSHIDA 1975, 359).

visualization (MIKKYŌ JITEN HENSANKAI 1983, 1083). If we also consider the fact that there are scattered references to the visualization of generating the body through five aspects proceeding and following the passage in the *Uchigikishū* (KDZ 1: 502–503, 505), it is all too tempting to agree with Ogawa’s observation. However, no immediate references to this visualization are found in the quoted passage itself, aside from the mention of the seed-symbol-sage progression. And there is the possibility that even this reference did not intend to explain the visualization but is simply a gloss on Kūkai’s use of the word “seed” in the tenth chapter of his *Jūjūshinron* (T 2425, 77.360a6–7).²

The passage in the *Uchigikishū* alluding to embryology does in fact mention the seed, which is the first of the three seed-symbol-sage stages. Through sexual intercourse, the male and female attain “union” (*wagō* 和合) and, accordingly, so do their respective white and red drops. Eventually, this union results in the formation of the harmony-zygote in the uterus, which is “round-shaped like a dewdrop.” The colors red and white symbolize anger and compassion respectively, and hence the union of the two drops presupposes that “intrinsically pure buddha-nature” is contained within “the unenlightened person as well as in their physical form.” In other words, “within our human bodies fettered” by afflictions, there resides “the seed of the Great Compassionate Tathāgata Vairocana.” According to Kakuban, this seed and the harmony-zygote are the same thing, which is signified by the Siddham syllable *vaṃ* (KDZ 1: 504–505).

This seed-cum-zygote in which the red and white drops have been united then develops through the subsequent four stages of the five developmental stages of the embryo: the embryo, flesh and blood, mass, and joints and extremities. During this process, ever more complex forms gradually transform out of the initially round shape, eventually becoming endowed with four limbs and all essential parts of a physical body. Kakuban likens this result to the symbolic form and bodily form that comes after the seed in the progression of the seed-symbol-sage visualization. Furthermore, he proposes that the Great Compassionate Tathāgata Vairocana is signified by the five-tiered stupa (*gorin sotoba* 五輪卒塔婆). This symbolic form of the five-tiered stupa becomes more elaborate, eventually resulting in the full-body form of Vairocana Tathāgata, which is the third and final stage of the seed-symbol-sage progression. This stage, the text explains, corresponds to the so-called stage of emerging from the womb when birth occurs after all five developmental stages within the womb have been completed. Therefore, one can clearly see from this passage in the *Uchigikishū* that, according to Kakuban, the successive transformations of the seed-symbol-sage

2. Even in this passage, the interpretation of the word “seed” has been derived based on the broader context of the text (KDZ 1: 494–497).

progression correspond directly to the process of the conception and maturation of the human body that takes place in the womb.³

Embryological Theory in the Gorinkuji

A distinct embryological theory can also be found in Kakuban's *Gorinkuji*. Although only briefly mentioned in this work, Kakuban's concept of the embryo and how it is formed is integral to the broader doctrinal issues addressed in the treatise. Specifically, Kakuban considered the formation of the embryo to be part of a broader discourse in the Shingon school on the possibility of attaining buddhahood within one's current body.

The date of composition for the *Gorinkuji* in relation to the *Uchigikishū* is a matter of debate among twentieth-century scholars. Nasu Seiryū has argued that based on the colophon it was written sometime between the third month of the first year of Eiji 永治 (1141) and the twelfth month of the second year of Kōji 康治 (1144) (NASU 1970, 4). Moreover, if we follow Kushida Ryōkō's suggestion that Kakuban devoted himself to the visual contemplation of the so-called "mandala of the five viscera" (*gozō mandara* 五藏曼荼羅) during his final years, then it is probable that the *Gorinkuji*—which expounds on this mandala in detail—was written shortly before his death in 1144.⁴ In other words, this work was probably composed four or five years after the *denbōe* lectures recorded in the *Uchigikishū*. Therefore, as previous studies have demonstrated, the *Gorinkuji* is not only the primary work outlining Kakuban's thought but it also represents his final efforts as an ascetic monk.

The main topic addressed in the *Gorinkuji* is apparent in the full title of the work: *A Secret Interpretation of the Five Cakras and the Nine-Syllable Incantation*. The aim of the *Gorinkuji* is to provide a secret interpretation of the five elemental cakras (*gorin* 五輪)—represented by the syllables *a*, *va*, *ra*, *ha*, and *kha*—and of the incantation in nine syllables (*kujimyō* 九字明)—*om a mṛ ta te se ha ra hūṃ*. Thus, Kakuban wrote the text primarily to clarify the so-called "secret interpretation" of these two mantras. The main discussion of this "secret interpretation" is found in the second chapter, "Correctly Entering the Gateway

3. Concerning the historical significance of this embryological teaching in the *Uchigikishū*, Ogawa has proposed that along with a passage from the *Ono ruihishō*, which is attributed to Kanjin 寛信 (1084–1153), Kakuban's lecture notes are the earliest instance in which the theory of the five developmental stages of the embryo was committed to writing in Japan (OGAWA 2014, 301–305, 477–481).

4. The Kanazawa Bunko repository possesses a drawing of a mandala thought to express the "mandala of the five viscera." Kushida suggests that Kakuban used this drawing as a "secret object of worship" (*hizō honzon* 秘藏本尊) while on his deathbed (KUSHIDA 1979, 842–844). For more details on the concept of the mandala of the five viscera as discussed in the *Gorinkuji*, see KAMEYAMA (2011; 2012).

of the Secret Mantra” (*shōnyū himitsu shingon mon* 正入秘密真言門), which also is where Kakuban posits a theory of embryology. As Nasu points out in his study of the text, Kakuban’s main objective for writing this chapter elucidating the secret interpretation was to propose a practice for the visualization of the five cakras and nine syllables as mandala. The significance of this portion of the text is evident by the fact that it takes up the greater half of the main body of the text (NASU 1970, 5).⁵

This visualization of the mandala of the five cakras is often referred to by scholars as “the mandala of the five viscera” (KURIYAMA 1966; TANAKA 1988; YORITOMI 1997). That mandala depicts the correspondences between different sets of five elements in the Buddhist teachings, such as the five viscera (*gozō* 五臟), five elemental cakras, and the five buddhas (*gobutsu* 五仏). The point of this, as Yoritomi Motohiro puts it, is that the mandala “schematizes the idea that there is a similarity between the macrocosm symbolized by the buddhas and the microcosmic body composed of the five viscera and the six organs” (*gozō roppu* 五臟六腑) (YORITOMI 1997, 83). Kakuban’s treatment of this mandala of the five viscera includes a rather idiosyncratic embryological theory. In other words, it appears that Kakuban’s embryological theory was a part of his visualization practice utilizing a mandala of the five elemental cakras.

According to NASU (1970, 2), Kakuban wrote the second chapter of the *Gorinkuji* and its discussion of the mandala of the five viscera as commentary on a ritual text attributed to Śubhakarasiṃha (637–735) called the *Podiyu yigui*. Yoshioka Yoshitoyo has made similar arguments concerning the close connections between the *Podiyu yigui* and the *Gorinkuji*. According to Yoshioka, other than a few minor modifications, the “visualization of the five viscera” (*gozōkan* 五臟觀) in the *Gorinkuji* is based on the *Podiyu yigui*. Based on the correlation between the two works, Yoshioka stresses that the practice for visualizing the

5. One of the main topics of the *Gorinkuji*, and arguably Kakuban’s reason for composing it, is the relationship between the two buddhas Amitābha and Mahāvairocana. From the eleventh century onward, there was an extensive debate in both Shingon and Tendai esoteric schools regarding the nature of these two buddhas (KUSHIDA 1964, 181–211; GORAI 1975). Kakuban’s view in the *Gorinkuji*, which later reflected the mainstream Shingon position, is that according to the esoteric teachings Mahāvairocana is the teacher (*kyōshu* 教主) in Amitābha’s Pure Land of Ultimate Bliss, and, therefore, all tathāgatas are Mahāvairocana. He further asserts that the two buddhas “Mahāvairocana and Amitābha are different names for the same essence” and their respective pure lands, Ultimate Bliss and Secret Adornment, “are different names for the same place” (KDZ 2: 1122). This understanding of Amitābha and his pure land differs from that of renowned Pure Land thinkers such as Genshin 源信 (942–1017), who predated Kakuban, Hōnen 法然 (1132–1212), and Shinran 親鸞 (1173–1263). Aside from his embryological theory, Kakuban’s idiosyncratic views on Amitābha and his pure land also had a considerable impact on later generations.

TABLE 1. Correspondence of the teachings in five divisions (*gobu hōmon* 五部法門) in the *Gorinkuji*.

five viscera (<i>gozō</i> 五臟)	liver 肝	lungs 肺	heart 心	kidneys 腎	spleen 脾
five cakras (<i>gorin</i> 五輪)	<i>a</i>	<i>va</i>	<i>ra</i>	<i>ha</i>	<i>kha</i>
five elements (<i>godai</i> 五大)	earth 地	water 水	fire 火	wind 風	space 空
five directions (<i>gohō</i> 五方)	east 東	west 西	south 南	north 北	center 中央
five viscera	liver	lungs	heart	kidneys	spleen
five phases (<i>gogyō</i> 五行)	wood 木	metal 金	fire 火	water 水	earth 土
five colors (<i>goshiki</i> 五色)	blue 青	white 白	red 赤	black 黑	yellow 黄
original enlightenment	<i>hūṃ</i>	<i>hrīḥ</i>	<i>trāḥ</i>	<i>aḥ</i>	<i>vaṃ</i>
negation of delusion (<i>nōha</i> 能破)	<i>hrīḥ</i>	<i>trāḥ</i>	<i>aḥ</i>	<i>vaṃ</i>	<i>hūṃ</i>
five buddhas (<i>gobutsu</i> 五仏)	Akṣobhya	Amitābha	Ratnasambhava	Amoghasiddhi	Mahāvairocana
five wisdoms (<i>gochi</i> 五智)	perfect mirror-like wisdom (<i>daien kyōchi</i> 大円鏡智)	wisdom of wondrous contemplation (<i>myōkan zacchi</i> 妙觀察智)	wisdom of essential identity (<i>byōdo shōchi</i> 平等性智)	unrestricted wisdom of activity (<i>jōsho sachi</i> 成所作智)	wisdom as the essence of the dharma realm (<i>hokkai tai shōchi</i> 法界体性智)

five viscera was incorporated into the esoteric teachings in China, and, therefore, it was not original to the writings of Kakuban (YOSHIOKA 1989, 136–137).⁶

If Yoshioka is correct, then it is possible that the embryological theory of the *Gorinkuji* comes from this Chinese ritual text and is not specific to the Japanese Shingon school. However, a close examination of the relevant passages in the two texts reveals that there are substantial differences. The embryological theory that is elucidated in *Gorinkuji* is certainly one component of the practice of visualizing the five viscera, but reference to the formation of the embryo appears to be Kakuban's addition to ritual text. Both texts prescribe how to contemplate the mandala and its deities arising from the primordial seed syllable represented by the Siddham script *a*. Kakuban, however, adds the following statement:

When applied to the impurity of the seeds, the earth element as cognition is aware of attachment and can arouse the desire to exist. The elements of wind and space are the body that penetrates (*nōbon* 能犯), whereas the elements of fire and earth are the gates that are penetrated (*shobon* 所犯). The elements of water and space are the seeds of the consciousness that descend to take up residence in the uterus, which eventually becomes the five viscera.

(KDZ 2: 1139; VAN DER VEERE 2000, 165)

The *Podiyu yigui* equates the earth element with cognition (*shikion* 識陰), the fifth classification of the five aggregates (*goon* 五陰). Kakuban builds on this statement by asserting that the presence of this element can “arouse the desire to exist,” which in turn leads to the formation of an embryo in the uterus. The corresponding passage in the *Podiyu yigui* lacks such references to seeds in the uterus and the formation of the five viscera (T 905, 18.909c). Thus, we can conclude that the embryological theory in the *Gorinkuji* was in fact Kakuban's innovation.

In the passage quoted above from the *Gorinkuji*, Kakuban explicates the secret interpretation of the Siddham syllable *a* that opens the mantra of the five

6. The origin of the mandala of the five viscera detailed in the *Podiyu yigui* as well as the provenance of the text itself are matters of debate. In his study of the *Gorinkuji*, Hendrik VAN DER VEERE (2000, 163–165) notes that the text was clearly not a translation as it claims to be, nor was it likely to have been written by Śubhakarasiṃha. Rather, he suggests that it may have been composed by Śubhakarasiṃha's disciples or compiled from various *dhāraṇī* texts. Jinhua CHEN (2009, 156–179) has argued that the version of the *Podiyu yigui* attributed to Śubhakarasiṃha in the *Taishō* (T 907) was in fact a Japanese apocrypha composed by the Tendai scholastic monk Annen 安然 (b. 841) in order to provide an authoritative source for previous claims made by the founder of the Tendai school, Saichō 最澄 (766–822), to have been initiated into an esoteric lineage. Whether Annen was familiar with this exact version of the text is uncertain. Although he describes the correspondence between the five sounds, five organs, and five phases and refers to the esoteric theory of the body and sexual discourse in his writings, he does not make a correlation between the five wheels, five buddhas, five organs, and so forth as found in the *Podiyu yigui*.

elemental cakras (*gorin shingon* 五輪真言). In doing so, he inserts terminology that hints at the process of conception and the formation of an embryo. It should be noted that Kakuban's objective is to expound on the passage in the *Podiyu yigui* regarding the practice of visualizing the mandala of the five viscera. Thus, based on this passage alone, it is difficult to specify an embryological theory. However, when considered in conjunction with the passage in the *Uchigikishū*, a clearer depiction of such a theory begins to come into view.

The Six Elements and Kakuban's Embryological Theory

The language of the *Gorinkuji* differs from that of the *Uchigikishū*. Terms such as the “red and white drops,” the harmony-zygote, or even the notion of the five developmental stages of the embryo do not appear in the *Gorinkuji*. At first glance, it is not even clear whether or not the passage in question actually concerns the conception and growth of a fetus at all. However, the *Shūyōki*, a nineteenth-century commentary on the text by the Shingon monk Ryūyu 隆瑜 (1773–1850) provides the following supplementary gloss on the passage in question:

Kakuban's intent in the above passage is clear. Due to the causes and conditions of intercourse (*kōe* 交会) between parents, the impure seeds descend into the uterus and become the five viscera. (FUKUDA 2006, 140)⁷

In other words, Ryūyu interprets the passage in the *Gorinkuji* as a statement concerning the process of impregnation, which is based on sexual intercourse between man and woman. Furthermore, he suggests that the correspondence between the six elements is equivalent to the process of conception and development of a fetus.

Nasu also proposes that the passage in the *Gorinkuji* references the earliest stages of gestation in the womb (*takutai* 託胎) and attempts to explain the development of a human body as the synthesis of form (*shiki* 色) and mind (*shin* 心). In his commentary on this passage, Nasu interprets the term “desire to exist” (*ai u* 愛有) to denote the process of transmigration in which consciousness (*shiki*), having entered into an intermediate existence (*chū u*) after the death of the body, is reborn through sexual intercourse between parents and the subsequent union of the white drop (sperm) and a red drop (ovum). Furthermore, “the body that penetrates” (*nōbon no tai* 能犯之体) in Kakuban's comment signifies the father's semen and the “gates that are penetrated” (*shobon no mon* 所犯之門) denotes the ova of the mother. Similarly, we can infer that “the elements of water and space are the seeds of consciousness” (*suikūshiki shuji* 水空識種子) refers to the intermediate existence of consciousness. The copulation of male and female

7. It should be noted that Ryūyu attributes this interpretation to an unknown monk he refers to as “Master Jaku” (*Jaku shi* 寂師).

give rise to the desire for rebirth (NASU 1970, 122–123).⁸ Then, the semen, ovum, and consciousness fuse into a single body, which descends into the uterus and becomes the harmony-zygote.

The passage from the *Gorinkuji* also refers to the six elements (*rokudai* 六大) of earth, water, fire, wind, space, and consciousness in relation to “the body that penetrates” and the “gates that are penetrated.” The most basic explanation of the six elements can be found in the *Sokushin jōbutsugi*. In this seminal work traditionally attributed to Kūkai, the six elements are considered to be the “foundation” (*tai* 体) for the doctrine of attaining buddhahood within this very body. In other words, all phenomena in this universe consists of the six elements without exception. Therefore, this cosmological theory posits that sentient beings are inherently equal to buddhas and, thus, able to rapidly attain buddhahood without further rebirth.

According to Shingon cosmology, which was rooted in this passage in the *Sokushin jōbutsugi*, the six elements are the “producers” (*nōshō* 能生) that generate the threefold world (*sanju seken* 三種世間) inhabited by all buddhas and sentient beings. Moreover, the cosmology of the six elements are identified with the ontology of the fourfold dharma body of the Buddha (*shishu hosshin* 四種法身) and the symbolism of the fourfold mandala (*shishu mandara* 四種曼荼羅). Because they are essentially the same as all phenomena in the dharma realm, the *Sokushin jōbutsugi* refers to the six elements as the “essence of the dharma realm” (*hokkai taishō* 法界体性; TKZ 3: 19–23).

In the *Gorinkuji*, Kakuban divides the six elements into three groups: the white drops of the “body that penetrates,” the red drops of the “gates that are penetrated,” and the “seed.” Each of these is associated with two elements: the white drops with wind and space, the red drops with fire and earth, and the seed as water and consciousness. Once these groups are united to form the harmony-zygote, the six elements likewise become a singularity. Subsequently, the zygote grows in the mother’s womb, developing the five viscera of liver, lungs, heart, kidneys, and spleen.

Following his discussion of these three groups and the formation of the zygote, Kakuban further elaborates on the development of the five viscera. He writes:

The real characteristic of the form and mind of all sentient beings is that they are the body of Vairocana that cognizes all things as equal, which is without

8. Nasu’s interpretation differs slightly from my own. He does not view the “body of that penetrates” to be the father or the male but interprets it as the consciousness in the intermediate state that is attempting to enter the mother’s uterus as an “arrow into the womb” (*taichūsen* 胎中箭). I do not adopt his interpretation because I think it is inconsistent with the understanding found in the *Shūyōki*.

beginning. “Form” is the aggregate of form, which unfolds as the five cakras. “Mind” is the element of consciousness, which unites the four aggregates. Form and mind are none other than the six elements as the dharma body of the Buddha and the cognition of the dharma realm’s essence.... If form is inseparable from mind, then the five elements are none other than the five kinds of cognition. If mind is inseparable from form, then the five kinds of cognition are none other than the five cakras.... Because form and mind are nondual, the five elements are none other than the five viscera and the five viscera are none other than the five kinds of cognition. (KDZ 2: 1134)

In other words, Kakuban establishes the five viscera as intermediate between physical and mental phenomena thus proclaiming the nonduality of body and mind, which signifies the highest ideals of Shingon esoteric Buddhism. Moreover, in doing so, he identifies the “six elements as the dharma body” with the “body of Vairocana that cognizes all things as equal” (*byōdō chishin* 平等智身), a phrase describing the activity of Vairocana in the *Commentary on Mahāvairocana Sūtra* (T 1976, 39.585b).

The correlation between the six elements and embryology also appears in the *Daikō*, a commentary on the *Yujijing*.⁹ The commentary briefly refers to embryology in a discussion on the seventh chapter of the *Yujijing* (T 867, 18.257c–258a). According to this passage, the six elements are first and foremost the “maternal essence” (*boshō* 母精), which is also labeled the “affliction of anger” (*shin bonnō* 瞋煩惱). Furthermore, the six elements themselves can be thought of as being the “essential nature of original enlightenment” (*hongakushō* 本覺性), and mental phenomena, which “are originally without essence” (*tai hon mu* 体本无), transmigrate along with the six elements. If the six elements are dispersed, so are mental phenomena. The *Daikō* also divides the six elements into groups. But, in contrast to the *Gorinkuji*, the oral transmission only stipulates that there are two categories: earth, fire, and wind as physical phenomena and water, space, and consciousness as mental phenomena. Moreover, the prior group is equated with the red drops from the mother (ova), which constitutes the flesh and blood of

9. A manuscript of this commentary is currently preserved at the Kanazawa Bunko Library that is thought to have been the annotated copy of the Shingon monk Kenna 劍阿 (1261–1338), second abbot of Shōmyōji 称名寺 that has historically been closely connected to the library. According to Kenna’s own annotations concerning the provenance of the work, the *Daikō* was initially a secret oral transmission from the monk Kōban 弘鑊 (d.u.) of Chisenbō 智泉房, who was a disciple of Keien 慶円 (1140–1223, also known as Hōkyō Shōnin 宝篋上人) from Mt. Miwa 三輪. Thus, it is certain that the work’s compilation dates to the Kamakura period (1185–1333) or later. Therefore, this theory of embryology was transmitted from Keien to his disciple Kōban and eventually to Kenna, whose record has survived to the present (KBSZ 6: 289).

the newly formed human. The white drops from the father (sperm) are paired with the latter group, which are the bones and marrow of the body (KBSZ 6: 124).

We may thus conclude that an oral transmission of theories concerning the six elements, the red and white drops, and the correspondence between these two conceptual frameworks were circulating among Shingon monks during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Kakuban's *Gorinkuji* similarly describes the correspondence between these two conceptual frameworks. Therefore, we can deduce two hypotheses regarding embryology in the medieval Shingon school: either the oral transmission in the *Daikō* was directly inspired by the passages in the *Gorinkuji*, or both texts reflect a broader discourse on the formation of the embryo but these theories are the only surviving records. Either way, based on the extant sources, we can conclude that there was a curiosity among Shingon monks during this period regarding the origin of life and how to account for this origin through orthodox doctrines.

Conclusion

In the preceding three sections I have investigated the various embryological theories that appear in the *Uchigikishū*, *Gorinkuji*, and *Daikō*. During a *denbōe* lecture on the tenth chapter of Kūkai's *Jūjūshinron* recorded in the *Uchigikishū*, Kakuban proposes that the five developmental stages of the embryo, from the harmony-zygote to the formation of the joints and extremities, correspond to the sequence of transformations progressing from a seed—represented by the Siddham *bija* syllable—into a symbol and finally a fully anthropomorphic entity. In other words, the seed is equivalent to the harmony-zygote, the joints and extremities are the symbols, and birth produces the bodily form.

In the *Gorinkuji*, Kakuban divides the six elements into three groups: wind and space, fire and earth, water and consciousness. These groups correspond to the white drop (sperm) of the father, the red drop (ovum) of the mother, and consciousness that temporarily exists in an intermediary state between rebirths. During the copulation of mother and father, these three groups merge to form the harmony-zygote, a process during which the six elements simultaneously form a single unit. From this zygote, a complete human body endowed with the five viscera subsequently takes shape. For this reason, Kakuban understands the five viscera as the “body of harmonious wisdom of Vairocana,” in which body and mind are non-dual, and the dharma body of the Buddha as the six elements (*rokudai hosshin* 六大法身).

In contrast to the *Gorinkuji*, the *Daikō* divides the six elements into two groups: earth, fire, wind; water, space, consciousness. The former group corresponds to the red drop of the mother and contains what are called physical phenomena, while the latter corresponds to the white drop of the father and

contains mental phenomena. Moreover, the elements of the first group form the skin, flesh, and circulatory system of the human body, while the latter group forms the skeleton.

These sources demonstrate that there existed an orally transmitted tradition of teachings within the Shingon lineages pertaining to the conception and birth of humans. These theories intimately connected the process of conception and birth to the doctrine of dependent origination as articulated in the theory of the six elements. To borrow Garrett's wording regarding this doctrine as the foundation of Buddhist embryology, the passages in the *Gorinkuji* and *Daikō* aim to "define clearly" an abstract philosophical concept—namely, Kūkai's interpretation of dependent origination in terms of the six elements—and to "integrate" that concept "into the system of theory and practice" of Shingon esoteric Buddhism. The brief reference to the six elements in the *Sokushin jōbutsugi* is probably an allusion to an advanced visualization practice as well as an idiosyncratic understanding of dependent origination. Therefore, it is difficult to envision this idea describing "how change and development" might "occur in the various realms of human experience," let alone the actual conception and birth of a human being (GARRETT 2008, 127).

Nonetheless, an accurate understanding of how the human body transforms, develops, and is born was strongly tied to devotion to the principle that one's own body is originally that of a buddha. In other words, it is intimately connected to the most central doctrine advocated by Shingon esoteric Buddhism, namely that "one becomes a buddha in this very body." Subsequent generations of Shingon monks, such as Kakuban, attempted to further explore the theoretical possibilities of this concept, interjecting their own musings on the formation of the embryo into this already abstract doctrine of dependent origination of the six elements. Thus, Kakuban's embryological theory is a mediation between a metaphysical existence and the everyday realities of corporeal existence.

[translated by Bruce Winkelman]

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- KDZ *Kōgyō Daishi zenshū* 興教大師全集. 2 vols. Ed. Tomita Kōjun 富田敦純. Tokyo: Sesōkan, 1935.
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