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PREDECESSORS AND PROTOTYPES:
TOWARDS A CONCEPTUAL HISTORY OF THE BUDDHIST
ANTARĀBHAVA*

BRYAN JARÉ CUEVAS

Summary

The Buddhist Sanskrit term *antarābhava* refers quite literally to existence (*bhava*) in an interval (*antarā*) and designates the temporal space between death and subsequent rebirth. It is apparent that, among the early schools of Buddhism in India, the status of this intermediate existence inspired considerable controversy. However, in spite of its controversial beginnings, the concept of the *antarābhava* continued to flourish and to exert a significant force upon the theories and practices of the later Northern Buddhist traditions. Questions concerning the conceptual origins of this notion and its theoretical connections with earlier Indian systems of thought have received little scholarly attention, despite a growing popularity of literature on the subject of death in Buddhist traditions. In this essay the possible links between the early conceptual systems of Hinduism (the Vedic and Upaniṣadic traditions) and Buddhism are examined to determine whether certain theoretical developments in Hinduism may have contributed to the emergence of the Buddhist notion of a post-mortem intermediate period. The conclusion is drawn that the early Buddhists, in formulating a concept of the *antarābhava*, borrowed and reinterpreted elements from Hindu cosmography and mythology surrounding the issue of postmortem transition.

Death is perhaps best understood as the interval between dying and being dead, between a process and a condition.¹ In this sense death is an intervening moment and, in many cases, construed as a transition, a passage between states rather than a mere cessation or an 'experiential blank'.² As a transitional event (the most dramatic of its kind), death has "all the properties of the threshold, the boundary between two spaces, where the antagonistic principles confront one another and the world is reversed".³ The threshold marks the border between two territories, between two worlds; the point of passage from the familiar to the foreign, from inside to outside, or from outside to inside. To cross the threshold is, therefore, to enter a new

space, a new state or condition. It is often said that in passing over the boundary one wavers for a length of time between the two spaces, captured in a 'limbo', unfixed and vague. This moment of ambiguity together with its obscure symbolic and spatial dimensions defines the 'liminal' experience⁴ and best characterizes the event of death. Indeed, in many societies death is understood as a transition from one state to another and is often associated with beliefs concerning the existence of a prolonged postmortem intermediary period.⁵ Such notions are certainly found in early Indian Buddhist literature,⁶ and traces of related notions can be uncovered in the numerous texts that make up the vast corpus of Brāhmaṇic and Post-Brāhmaṇic Hinduism.

In early Buddhism, the temporal space between death and the next birth is given the name '*antarābhava*' and is believed to be inhabited by ethereal beings composed of subtle types of the five aggregates (*skandhas*).⁷ These transitional beings, called *gandharvas*, are said to wander for several weeks in search of their next place of birth. Often, the term *antarābhava* is used interchangeably to refer both to the postmortem state of transition and to the subtle entity that exists in such a state. Although the status of the *antarābhava*, as Wayman has demonstrated, inspired considerable controversy among the early schools of Buddhism in India,⁸ it apparently did not even exist as a concept in the Hinduism of that period (first century CE). Does this fact suggest that the *antarābhava* notion was a uniquely Buddhist innovation, that such a concept emerged and flourished in isolation within the theoretical confines of Buddhist cosmology? If so, how might one explain Buddhism's appropriation of the Hindu *gandharva* as its postmortem transitional entity? I am willing to accept that the term *antarābhava* was perhaps a Sanskritic neologism coined by the Buddhists to refer quite literally to an existence (*bhava*) in between (*antarā*), but I am not as willing to concede that the concept behind the term was not already prepared for by the earlier Vedic and Upaniṣadic traditions.⁹ In this paper I will attempt to locate and highlight those specific conceptual developments in Hinduism that may have contributed to the formation of the Buddhist notion of *antarābhava* as both a state and an entity, here identified as a

gandharva. In the process, my focus will be concentrated around Vedic and Upaniṣadic notions of the manes (*pitr*), specifically their spatial positioning within two distinct cosmological schemes and their symbolic associations with the moon, Soma and (re)birth/fertility—elements that also correspond to various mythic representations of the Hindu *gandharva*. As a point of departure we must first consider the role of sacrifice and its symbolism within the Vedic and Brāhmaṇic ritual traditions as detailed in the early textual sources.

Bodies, Vehicles, and Pathways: The Vedic Sacrificial Model

As a literary corpus, the Vedas are traditionally understood to be ‘collections’ (*saṃhitās*) of ancient revelatory knowledge, initially transmitted orally and later in written form. The oldest collection of these wisdom verses is the *Ṛg Veda* (*RV*), composed *ca.* 1400-1200 BCE and consisting of ten ‘books’ (*maṇḍalas*)—six ‘family books’ (books 2-7), containing hymns collected and transmitted by a different lineage of ‘seers’ (*ṛṣi*), and four later books, including both the collection devoted entirely to Soma (book 9) and the book of esoteric and philosophical speculation (book 10).¹⁰ It is this latter cycle which provides us with specific insight into the Vedic conceptions of death and the potential destinies of the dead. In order to gain an understanding of the conceptual dynamics fueling these early speculations, it is crucial to review the essential components of the Vedic world view.

The Vedas operate within a sphere of reality organized into three distinct planes: the macrocosmic realm of divinity (*adhidevatā*), the mesocosmic realm of the ‘sacrifice’ (*adhiyajña*), and the microcosmic realm of the individual (*adhyātman*).¹¹ The intervening level, the ‘sacrificial’ plane, constitutes the realm of ritual activity, the fulcrum of the entire Vedic system. The ‘sacrifice’ is, therefore, the threshold event, the pivotal moment, between cosmos and human being; it connects the disconnected, orders chaos, and integrates the disintegrated.

As a result of its symbolic and spatial positioning, the sacrifice can be understood from either a macro- or microcosmic point of

view. From the former standpoint, the sacrifice is Puruṣa, the cosmic being, who is also known in later Vedic sources as Prajāpati. This primordial giant (*Rg Veda* 10.90) is both the victim of sacrifice and the deity to whom the sacrifice is dedicated. The dismemberment of the cosmic Puruṣa/Prajāpati effects the creation of the universe, which is to say that through the primordial sacrifice ‘matter’ passes from macrocosm to microcosm, from cosmos to human being; it is, thus, an anthropogonic event.¹²

From the viewpoint of microcosm the sacrifice, as ritual act, is the human individual. Through his ‘death’ (either real or simulated via substitution), cosmic unity and order (disrupted as a consequence of Puruṣa’s sacrificed body) is created and sustained; a movement in reverse from microcosm to macrocosm—the true cosmogonic act.¹³ However, because the creation of one always requires the disintegration of the other, the sacrifice must be forever re-enacted. In other words, each sacrifice repeats every other sacrifice; a perpetual cycle that when projecting forward always reflects back to the first sacrifice. The myth of Puruṣa’s dismemberment announces what was done in the beginning; the ritual repeated by the individual assumes responsibility for reconstituting the primordially fragmented universe. “With the sacrifice the gods sacrificed to the sacrifice. These were the first ritual laws”.¹⁴

The Vedic understanding of ‘natural’ death, as Lincoln has so carefully demonstrated, involves the idea of a transmutation of matter from bodily to cosmic form; the life-breath (*ásu*) ‘entering’ the wind, the body ‘entering’ the earth.¹⁵ This “material translation from microcosm to macrocosm” is viewed as a “last sacrifice that all human beings perform, in which their very bodies are offered up to ensure the continued existence of the universe”.¹⁶ However, in the cremation hymn (*RV* 10.16), Agni is asked *not* to consume the body entirely, but rather to convey the deceased to his paternal ancestors (*pitṛ*) after the flames have done their work: “When you cook him perfectly, O knower of creatures, then give him over to the fathers. When he goes on the path that leads away the breath of life, then he will be led by the will of the gods”.¹⁷ The implication is that something other

than the body is led by Agni to the realm of the fathers (*pitṛloka*). Is a vague distinction being made here between body and ‘soul’? Perhaps, but as Keith has rightly observed, “it is not altogether easy to derive from the *Rg Veda* a precise conception of the nature which was attributed to the spirits of the dead”.¹⁸ Nonetheless, I do feel that the existence of a ‘soul’ or ‘spirit’ is indeed being hinted at in these verses,¹⁹ especially in light of a later passage which states that the deceased will assume a new (ethereal) body presumably in order to join his ancestors: “Let him reach his descendants, dressing himself in a life-span. O knower of creatures, let him join with a body”.²⁰ And, in an earlier hymn, we read: “Unite with the fathers, with Yama, with the rewards of your sacrifices and good deeds, in the highest heaven. Leaving behind all imperfections, go back home again; *merge with a glorious body*”.²¹

This notion of a separation from the material body and the adoption of a new ‘body’, with which the deceased ‘travels’ to the sphere of the manes, introduces an early variation of a theme present in later (Buddhist) concepts of postmortem transitional experience—that at death the ‘soul’, ‘spirit’, or ‘mind’ of the deceased (termed *gandharva* in some contexts) acquires a subtle body, and with it moves through an intermediate space between his/her former and future condition. In the context of Vedic presentations, this ‘liminal’ body is given no distinct features; yet we can surmise that it is at least associated with, if not entirely composed of, wind/air.²²

The two expressions met with most frequently in the *Rg Veda* concerning the deceased’s ‘spirit’ and, by direct connection, his/her subtle body are *ásu* (life, breath) and *manas* (mind). The latter term, despite frequent references in Vedic sources,²³ did not achieve conceptual maturity until it was further developed in the Upaniṣads. In light of this, the significance of *manas*, mind, will not be considered at this point. Here, we are interested, however, in the term *ásu*. Keith suggests that the *ásu*, though not explicitly identified with the breath, seems to have been based on the notion of the breath as the clearest and most “visible sign of life and intellect”.²⁴ The *ásu* is what separates from the material body at death and enters the wind

(the breath's macrocosmic alloform): "May your eye go to the sun, your life's breath to the wind".²⁵ Later, the term *ātman* (breath) is the more common expression of the 'spirit/soul',²⁶ as in *Atharva Veda* 8.2.7: "Go thou to the sun with thine eye, to the wind with thy soul (*ātman*)".²⁷ Based on the homologous relationship between the breath and air,²⁸ it is not difficult to see how the 'spirit' (*āsu*, *ātman*) of the deceased, and his/her transitional body, might be understood as being both composed of and contained within the wind itself. It might also help to recall that in traditional Indian cosmology the wind is believed to occupy the mid-space between earth and heaven, the intermediate atmospheric realm (*antarikṣa*). The scenario can thus be summarized in the following manner: due to certain homologous associations, the 'spirit' and the breath are collapsed into a more or less impalpable substance, which is then conceived of as some 'entity' that, having left the material body, assumes an ethereal body and 'travels' the intermediate space between earth and the realm of the fathers.

It is true, as Knipe observes, that these early Vedic models do not offer concrete notions of a full-fledged postmortem intermediate being, since the belief is that "a complete new body awaits the deceased in heaven".²⁹ Evidence of disembodied 'souls' (*preta*) and transitional journeys through dangerous liminal realms does not appear significantly until rather late in the Vedic period, when such ideas begin to fully emerge in the ritual texts (*kalpasūtras*).³⁰ However, the language of some of these early Vedic hymns cannot be so easily ignored. In these hymns, we find explicit references to such 'threshold' notions as passage along death's 'highway',³¹ union with bodies that travel,³² or wandering 'spirits'.³³ Perhaps O'Flaherty is correct when she suggests that, in this formative period, the poets were simply trying out various notions of an afterlife.³⁴ At any rate, it is important to understand that the Vedas do provide a model, though often vague and ill-defined, of postmortem transition, of the deceased's passage from this world to one beyond; this transit is effected via the mechanics of sacrifice (cremation), a topic to which we must now return.

At the heart of the Vedic sacrificial system lie the extensive ritual discourses known as the *Brāhmaṇas*. Composed in the early

centuries of the first millennium BCE, these texts interpret and explain the underlying significance of ritual performance. They do not, however, describe what occurs in the ritual. Rather, they provide commentary on the reasons for, and specific consequences of, the proper performance of ritual activity and speech. Central to these explanations is the doctrine of symbolic and numerical equivalence (*sampad*, *saṁkhyāna*); that is, the sacrifice is understood in light of an elaborate system of homologies (*bandhu*) between all the components of the universe. Through knowledge of these correspondences, the sacrificer is capable of ritually controlling the cosmos. Such a principle is mythically substantiated in the story of Prajāpati's victory over Death, described in the *Jaiminīya Brāhmaṇa* 2.69-70.³⁵ I bring up this notion of equivalence and control only to point out the substantial role attributed in the Brāhmaṇas to ritual sacrifice as an effective 'instrument' of power for those who know its complex mechanics. Indeed, with the sacrifice, the ritualist is able to achieve extraordinary and dramatic results, including, for example, the ability to ascend to heaven.

Frequently, the Brāhmaṇas declare that it is the sacrifice itself which carries the ritualist upward to 'yonder world': "The Agnihotra,³⁶ truly, is the ship (that sails) heavenwards";³⁷ indeed, "every sacrifice is a ship bound heavenwards".³⁸ Relying on passages from the *Kauṣītaki*, *Aitareya*, and *Pañcaviṃśa Brāhmaṇas*, Smith demonstrates that it is more common for the sacrifice to be compared to a chariot than it is to a ship:

The introductory and concluding rites are likened to the two sides of the chariot and should be symmetrical: "He who makes them equal to one another safely reaches the world of heaven, just as one takes any desired journey by driving a chariot with two sides." [*KB* 7.7] Similarly, another text argues that the Agnihotra should be performed after sunrise so that it will be like a chariot with both wheels: "Day and night are the wheels of the year; truly, with them he goes through the year. If he offers before sunrise, it is as if one were to go with [a chariot with] one wheel. But if he offers after sunrise, it is as if one were swiftly to make a journey with [a chariot having] both wheels." [*AitB* 5.30] In other texts, other components of the ritual are connected to the parts of the chariot—the sacrificial fees are the internal fastenings [*PB* 16.1.13]; the chants

are the reins [*PB* 8.5.16]; and the recitations are said to be the “inner reins.” [*AitB* 2.37]³⁹

We may recall that, in Vedic cosmology, the sacrifice occupies the mid-space between the human and divine realms; in fact, this intermediate level, this mesocosm, is identified as the sacrifice itself and called *adhiyajña* (‘relating to the sacrifice’). As chariot of death, the sacrifice is what transports the sacrificer (the deceased) from the earthly to the heavenly realm. What is interesting about this is the relationship between the sacrifice as intermediary, the chariot as vehicle of travel, and the deceased as passenger; all three are marked under the sign of transition. In a system supposedly devoid of any explicit references to a postmortem intermediate ‘existence’, notions of postmortem travel should certainly look out of place. But, perhaps it is the case that such references actually indicate a pre-existing system of belief in which death is viewed as a gradual process, whereby the deceased is unable to immediately secure his/her place in the afterworld, but must exist, for a period, on the threshold between the two worlds. This is certainly the view held in the later period of the ritual sūtras, where, for example, we find descriptions of *piṇḍadāna* and *sapiṇḍikarāna* as ritual means for insuring the deceased’s safe passage from the dangerous condition of *preta* to the realm of the fathers.⁴⁰ It may be of interest, at this point in our discussion, to examine earlier descriptions of the deceased’s journey to that world beyond.

A theme central to all Vedic accounts of the postmortem event, and, as we shall soon see, one that continues to exert its presence throughout Upaniṣadic literature, is that of the path by which the deceased travels. Perhaps the earliest mention of a pathway leading to the gods (*devaloka*) occurs in *Rg Veda* 1.72.7, where Agni, the deity of the sacrificial fire and hence the intermediary between earth and heaven, is addressed as follows: “Knowing the ways by which the gods go, thou (Agni) hast become the unwearied messenger, the bearer of oblations.”⁴¹ Later, the path is said to have been made by Yama, the lord of the dead and the first mortal to have reached the ‘other side’: “Yama was the first to find the way for us, this pasture

that shall not be taken away. Where our ancient fathers passed beyond, there everyone who is born follows, each on his own path".⁴² Several verses later, the deceased is addressed directly: "Go forth, go forth on those ancient paths on which our ancient fathers passed beyond. There you shall see the two kings, Yama and Varuṇa, rejoicing in the sacrificial drink. . . . Run on the right path, past the two brindled, four-eyed dogs, the sons of Saramā, and then approach the fathers, who are easy to reach and who rejoice at the same feast as Yama".⁴³ It should not go unnoticed that these verses give some indication of what the deceased may actually *experience* along the way and in the realm of the dead. More elaborate descriptions of the world beyond can be found in *R̥g Veda* 9.113.7-11:

Where the inextinguishable light shines, the world where the sun was placed, in that immortal, unfading world, O Purifier, place me. . . . Where Vivasvan's son is king, where heaven is enclosed, where those young waters are—there make me immortal. . . . Where they move as they will, in the triple dome, in the third heaven, where the worlds are made of light, there make me immortal. . . . Where there are desires and longings, at the sun's zenith, where the dead are fed and satisfied, there make me immortal. . . . Where there are joys and pleasures, gladness and delight, where the desires of desire are fulfilled, there make me immortal. . . .

In the context of the Vedic period, the question of experience is an intriguing one. Fully developed accounts of an individual's experiences in the after-death state do not appear until at least the period of the early Upaniṣads. It is, however, quite interesting to consider the passages above in light of later descriptions of postmortem encounters. Take for instance these verses from the *Garuḍa Purāṇa*:

On the thirteenth day, the soul of the dead is taken to the High Way. Now, he assumes a body born of the piṇḍa and feels hungry by day and night. . . . In the path beset with trees, with their leaves as sharp as swords, such tortures are usual. He suffers from hunger and thirst, tortured by the messengers of Yama. The departed soul traverses two hundred and forty-seven Yojanas in twenty-four hours. He is bound by the noose of Yama. He weeps as he leaves the house for the city of Yama. . . . In his upward journey he passes over the best of cities. . . . On the thirteenth day seized by the servants of Yama, and all alone, the departed soul traverses the path like a monkey led by the juggler. As he goes along the

path, he cries aloud repeating: “O my son, O my son, I am undone, alas, I am undone. I did not act well.”⁴⁴

As seen here in this passage, the transition from this life to the next is not always a pleasant one. Symbolic forms of manifest anxiety often assert themselves in threshold situations, when a gap between categorical boundaries opens wide to expose raw and unwieldy realities. Indeed, that which falls between well-defined boundaries is almost everywhere regarded as dangerous.⁴⁵ In the Vedic texts as well, the path to heaven is envisioned as being quite perilous. “‘Dangerous indeed are the paths that lie between heaven and earth’ [ŚB 2.3.4.37]; for on either side of these roadways are eternally burning flames which ‘scorch him who deserves to be scorched and allow him to pass who deserves to pass’ [ŚB 1.9.3.2].”⁴⁶ The idea, expressed throughout the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*,⁴⁷ that the dead are punished or rewarded according to their (ritual) deeds indicates, perhaps, the presence of an early form of the notion of moral retribution. However, we should not be fooled into asserting that such ideas were prevalent at the time of the Brāhmaṇas. As Keith presents it, the more characteristic attitude of the Vedic world view, including the Brāhmaṇas, is “that it is a good thing to behold the light of the sun, and to live a hundred years, for which prayers and spells alike are earnestly resorted to, and that, at the end of the life one attains, there will be another, if different yet analogous, life in the world to come with the same pleasures as on earth, but without the disadvantages of human imperfection”.⁴⁸

As early as the *Ṛg Veda*, the road travelled by the dead is separated into two distinct paths:⁴⁹ one leading to the gods and another to the fathers—“Go away, death, by another path that is your own, different from the road of the gods”.⁵⁰ In this early period, however, the distinction between the two realms is rather vague. It is not until the early Upaniṣads that we begin seeing a clear division, in which the world of the ancestors is said to be associated with the moon, darkness, sacrificial activity, and rebirth; the heavenly realm with the sun, light, knowledge, and immortality.⁵¹ The *pitṛloka*, as conceived in the Vedas and Brāhmaṇas, is frequently evoked as the prime goal of the sacrificer (the deceased). Yet, at this stage, both the divine

realm (*devaloka*) and the world of the fathers often appear somehow to co-exist, which is to say that there seems to have been a confusion regarding their exact location. At some point (perhaps prior to, but certainly by the time of, the first Upaniṣads), the realm of the fathers became associated with the atmospheric mid-space between earth and heaven.⁵² The path that the deceased previously used to reach this obscure realm beyond later developed a fork and branched off into two directions; one road led directly to heaven, the other crossed over into a murky intermediate realm. This transitional space, we are told, is reached by those who have ‘conquered the world’ by “sacrificial offerings, charity and austerity”;⁵³ that is, by those who have diligently followed, throughout their lives, the laws of the Vedic sacrificial system. What had happened was that the ritual models of the Brāhmaṇas had lost their hold and a new paradigm emerged, in which knowledge became the premier instrument of power and control.⁵⁴ With this new model came the concept of ‘self’, and from this, the notion that each ‘self’ (person) lives a series of lives (*saṃsāra*); that the moral quality of the person’s actions performed previously determines the quality of experience in the next life (*karma*); and that the person who possesses the correct knowledge can escape the cycle of rebirth and achieve some ill-defined ultimate state (*mokṣa*).

Olivelle has argued that this great paradigm shift occurred as a result of significant socioeconomic changes in sixth century India, most notably the growth of urban centers.⁵⁵ The rise of urbanization contributed to the emergence of individualist ideologies that “permitted the creation of the first voluntary religious organizations in India”⁵⁶ and set the stage for the development of religious ideas distinct from those of the Brāhmaṇic sacrificial hegemony. It was from within this diversifying religiocultural climate that Buddhism arose as an alternative tradition competing with Brāhmaṇism for the role of the ultimate legitimating religious ideology. This detail may help us appreciate that the “new” traditions that emerged during this period, and particularly the religion of the Upaniṣads and of the early Buddhists, shared similar sociohistorical backgrounds and the common thoughts and values explicit in those sources. The issue of shared traditions

is significant if we are to better understand the specific concepts that the later Buddhist traditions developed from these earlier models.

In summarizing, the point that must be stressed here in the context of our specific interest is that, within the Brāhmaṇic tradition up through the sixth century BCE, we do find notions of death as a transitional event and of postmortem travel along a pathway to a world beyond, a world inhabited both by gods and by recently deceased relatives. These notions are maintained into the period of the Upaniṣads where they are reformulated in light of the new paradigms that had begun to take root. In the next section, we shall consider these same ideas as they are expressed in the earliest Upaniṣadic sources, focusing primarily on the shifting cosmological position of the *pitṛloka* and the symbolism associated with this realm's falling fathers.

Shifting Ideologies, Falling Fathers: The Upaniṣadic Model

The classic Upaniṣads represent the culmination of Vedic revelatory wisdom (*śruti*). As a corpus of speculative theory, they rely upon the preceding portions of the Veda to which they belong, and yet maintain total independence and freedom from Brāhmaṇic ritual ideology. Central to the Upaniṣads is the notion of the nonduality of self (*ātman*) and absolute (*Braman*) and the significance of profound insight (gnosis) into the nature of this identity. The emphasis placed on knowledge in the Upaniṣads stands in stark contrast to the Vedic stress on meticulous execution of ritual without gnosis. In fact, the Upaniṣads stand against and devalue 'ritual' (a broad label specifying the central Vedic activity of offering sacrifice), reducing the whole of Vedic religious activity to an inferior position within its broader soteriological scheme while elevating its own gnoseological project.⁵⁷ For our purposes, it is important to note here that the Upaniṣads separate the 'path of works' (sacrificial activity) from the 'path of knowledge'. The former, it is believed, results in a lengthy life on earth and, at death, leads to a heavenly world beyond in the company of gods and fathers. Inasmuch as it requires sacrifice—understood in the Upaniṣads as being a principal cause of human

bondage and suffering—the ritual path represents an obstacle to liberation (*mokṣa*). The path of knowledge, on the other hand, leads to the highest goal, unity with Brahman and deliverance from the ongoing cycle of earthly existence (*saṃsāra*). When considered in light of the Upaniṣadic notion of death and rebirth, we find that the two paths correspond to the ascent and descent of the soul, respectively. Given that the fate of the soul is conditioned and determined by either the deceased’s knowledge (*vidyā*) or conduct (*karma*) in his/her previous existence, those who do good become good and those who do evil become evil.⁵⁸ The individual who has sacrificed and performed works of public service (i.e., the good Brahmin ritualist) attains the heavenly realm of the manes (*pitṛloka*) and then returns to this world, while the one who knows the nondual nature of self and Brahman attains the realm of the gods (*devaloka*) and deliverance from repeated birth. With this split between *pitṛloka* and *devaloka*/liberation, the former relegated to a position below the latter, we arrive at the core of what I would now like to explore in more detail; namely, the significance of the Upaniṣadic displacement of the ancestors (exemplars of the Vedic world) and their symbolic relationship to the moon, darkness, and rebirth. To begin, let us consider one of the earliest, and most famous, formulations of the doctrine of the transmigration of souls from the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*:

Those who know this, and those who worship in the forest, concentrating on faith and asceticism, they are born into the flame, and from the flame into the day, and from the day into the fortnight of the waxing moon, and from the fortnight of the waxing moon into the six months during which the sun moves north; from these months, into the year; from the year into the sun; from the sun into the moon; from the moon into lightning. There a Person who is not human leads them to the ultimate reality. This is the path that the gods go on.

But those who worship in the village, concentrating on sacrifices and good works and charity, they are born into the smoke, and from the smoke into the night, and from the night into the other fortnight [the dark half of the month], and from the other fortnight into the six months when the sun moves south. They do not reach the year. From these months they go to the world of the fathers, and from the world of the fathers to space, and from space to the moon. That is king Soma. That is the food of the gods. The gods eat that.

When they have dwelt there for as long as there is a remnant (of their merit), then they return along that very same road that they came along, back into space; but from space they go to wind, and when one has become wind he becomes smoke, and when he has become smoke he becomes mist; when he has become mist, he becomes a cloud, and when he has become a cloud, he rains. These are then born here as rice, barley, plants, trees, sesame plants, and beans. It is difficult to move forth out of this condition; for only if someone eats him as food and then emits him as semen, he becomes that creature's semen and is born.⁵⁹

In considering this passage, I want to narrow the focus and concentrate primarily on the descriptive components of the path that leads to the realm of the fathers (*pitryāna*). Those verses concerning the path of the gods (*devāyana*) have been quoted simply in order that the latter material might be viewed within its proper context. Let us start by extracting the elements that will drive the remainder of this discussion.

Contained within the *Chāndogya*'s description of the *pitryāna*, we encounter several significant signs, each corresponding to one another and possessing an intuitive cogency. In order of occurrence, they are sacrifice, smoke, night, fathers, space, moon, Soma, wind, mist, cloud, rain, vegetation, and semen. If we then arrange these components according to their associative content into five categories, we have the following: Vedic ritual (sacrifice, smoke), darkness (night, moon, and by connection, Soma), atmosphere (space, wind), moisture (mist, cloud, rain), and fertility/growth (fathers, semen, vegetation). As discussed briefly above, a connection is drawn in the Upaniṣads between Vedic sacrificial activity and the path of the paternal ancestors. Indeed, despite the emergence of radically new conceptual paradigms, the belief that the performance of ritual sacrifice leads to the world of the fathers is never abandoned in these early Upaniṣadic sources. 'Sacrifice', therefore, can be understood as an alloform, so to speak, of both Vedism and the manes. In the context of the physical dynamics of the sacrifice, we can extend the association to include fire and smoke. Transformed by fire (*agni*),⁶⁰ the sacrificial oblation—*soma* in life, the body at death—passes into the 'smoke',

and from the smoke into the 'night'. From these associations, we are lead into our second category, 'darkness'.

We have already noted in some detail that, in Vedic cosmology, the chief place of the dead is the heavenly abode, a realm inhabited by gods and fathers. At death, the 'soul' exits the body and, by the fathers' path, arrives in a divine world pervaded by the lustre of the gods. Heaven, the transcendent goal of the Brāhmaṇic ritualist, is always associated with light and the sun's brilliance.⁶¹ However, in the later Upaniṣadic conceptions, the move toward a radical separation of the realm of the gods from that of the fathers, seen here in the above quote from the *Chāndogya*, redefines the symbolism of the two worlds and introduces into its doctrine of the transmigration of souls the central dichotomy of light and darkness. The *devaloka*, inasmuch as it represents the purity of Brahman, the absolute, continues to be associated with radiant light; the realm of the *pitāras*, falling to an inferior position, becomes the intermediary world of darkness. The *pitṛloka*, at once the pure goal of those seeking immortality, has now become the "way station in the recycling of souls".⁶²

In keeping with this theme of darkness, we see that the soul, *en route* to the world of the paternal ancestors, travels by way of the moon. The moon, an ever-present motif in Indian mythology, is often a symbol both of death and regeneration; its periodic waxing, waning, and disappearance can very easily be understood in light of "the universal law of becoming, of birth, death and rebirth".⁶³ And, as Eliade has observed, "the moon is the first of the dead. For three nights the sky is dark; but as the moon is reborn on the fourth night, so shall the dead achieve a new sort of existence".⁶⁴ These 'dead' who are destined to achieve a new life on earth are none other than the souls of those who, having diligently performed sacrifice and good works in the previous life, but have not gained the 'light' of knowledge, travel the darkened path of the fathers; a path conceived in the Upaniṣads as being the lunar journey of the soul during the "dark half of the month" when the celestial body is periodically 'dying'.⁶⁵ The moon is thus the door to the paternal realm of the dead and, because it is forever renewed, it gives second birth "back to those

who come to it and address it properly” by nourishing them with its divine nectar (*soma*).⁶⁶

In consideration of its nourishing capacity, we should take note of the moon’s connections to moisture (rain), vegetation, and fertility. Gonda suggests that these connections

supposed by many peoples to exist between the moon, rain (*candramaso vai vr̥ṣṭir jāyate* “rain comes from the moon” AiB. 8, 28, 15) and plant life were deduced from their being subject to recurring cycles which were held to be governed by the movements of the celestial body which in ‘primitive’ and archaic thought stands for perpetual renewal, from the influence on the growth of living beings attributed to it, and from the conviction that the moon has control of all water and moisture.⁶⁷

We have already seen that the soul, following the path of the fathers, travels to the moon, and from the moon falls back down upon the earth as rain to be (re)born again in plant form. But how to interpret the moon’s fertilizing power? The answer lies in the associated symbolism of the moon’s vitalizing substance, Soma.

This Soma, which in the Vedas denotes not only the fluid draught of immortality but also the juice of a plant offered in libations to the deities of the sacrifice, comes explicitly, in the post-Vedic period, to be a name of the moon.⁶⁸ It is true, nevertheless, that Soma’s connection to the moon had already been foreseen in the early Brāhmaṇas. In this context, Soma was considered to be of heavenly origin and identified as a lunar deity.⁶⁹ As a substance, it became seen as the moon’s nectar (*amṛta*), and by extension the vital juice (*rasa*) of life, both animal and vegetable.⁷⁰ Soma’s identification with the ‘sap of life’ is linked to that aspect of the moon’s symbolism whereby the celestial body is seen as having control over all water and life-bearing moisture. “Being of heavenly descent”, the moon’s *rasa* (Soma) “makes its presence felt in all plants, animals and human beings”.⁷¹ But, Soma is not only the essential life-bearing moisture of the heavens, it is also “the generative force of all male beings”, or rather, semen (*Taittirīya Saṃhitā* 7.4.18.2).⁷² In this connection, we discover an associative link between the moon and fertility; the final link in our

chain of discussion concerning the Upaniṣadic network of symbols surrounding the soul's journey to the realm of the fathers.

To summarize thus far: In the early Vedic period, a lengthy and blissful existence in the radiant divine realm of the fathers (*deva-/pitṛloka*) was the ultimate goal of the Brahmin sacrificial ritualist. When, as a result of various ideological shifts, the nondualist gno-seological project of the Upaniṣads emerged in the sixth century BCE, the ritual mechanics of the Brāhmanic world was relegated to an inferior position within the larger Upaniṣadic soteriological scheme, organized around the central concepts of rebirth and final deliverance. Following the movement of this paradigm shift, the cosmological position of the *pitṛloka* (representing the entire Brāhmanic universe) fell and the *pitaras* became, in some sense, the intermediaries between heaven (*Brahmaloka*, formerly the *devaloka*) and earth. In the process, the soul's journey to the world of the fathers became associated with darkness and was described in terms of the moon's course during its periodic 'death'. Once connected to the moon, this journey of the soul was seen to culminate in rebirth on earth, first in the form of moisture (rain), then in the form of plants and trees, and then, having been consumed by animals, in the form of male semen to be finally (re)born a human being, but only to start the cycle all over again. Having established connections between the moon, which governs the waters and sponsors the growth of living beings, the Soma that is these waters as well as the essential power behind the cyclical processes of fertility, and the dead, particularly those souls traveling the shadowy path of the fathers and fated to return, we can now widen our focus and explore how these connections may have influenced the early Buddhist notion of the state of postmortem transition (*antarābhava*) and the beings that are said to be its subjects, the *gandharvas*.

Spirits in the Space Between: The Vedic Gandharva

In the Vedas and Brāhmaṇas, *gandharvas* are said to be semi-divine beings who dwell in the atmospheric mid-space (*antarīkṣa*) between

earth and heaven.⁷³ They are affiliated with Soma whose home, as we have noted, is in the heavens; he “guards his home”⁷⁴; “he rises high to the heaven’s fault, beholding all his (Soma’s) varied forms”.⁷⁵ The *gandharvas* are renowned for protecting this divine drink, which, together with Parjanya, the rain-god, and the daughter of the Sun, they stole from the gods.⁷⁶ The Brāhmaṇic sources recount how Soma remained with the *gandharvas*, and how the *gandharva* Vivāsvant (the Vedic father of Yama and Yamī) had stolen the vital juice. At that point the gods and ṛṣis desired the Soma for themselves, and knowing that the *gandharvas* covet women,⁷⁷ they bought the sap from them for the price of a divine woman, the goddess Vāc (speech).⁷⁸ No doubt, as a consequence of their associations with Soma, the *gandharvas* are also described as “knowing plants”.⁷⁹ Recall that Soma is, among other things, the essential vital fluid present in all forms of life, both vegetable and animal.

In a similar vein, the *gandharvas* are occasionally associated with the waters. The *gandharva* as ‘divine youth’ and the nymph of the waters are alluded to as the parents of Yama and Yami (*RV* 10.10.4). MacDonnell notes that, in the *Ṛg Veda* (9.86.36), Soma poured into water is called “the *gandharva* of the waters”, and also in the *Atharva Veda* (2.2.3 and 4.37.12), the *gandharvas*, together with the *apsarases*, are said to dwell in the waters.⁸⁰ Perhaps, to respond to Oldenberg, the *gandharva* may indeed be linked (in part due to his connection with the fertilizing Soma) to both the celestial water of the clouds and the waters of the earth.⁸¹ In fact, Sāyaṇa, glossing *Ṛg Veda* 8.77.5 in which Indra is said to have cut down the *gandharva* from the celestial region so as to protect the Brāhmaṇas, takes the word ‘*gandharva*’ to mean ‘cloud’ (*gāmudakaṃ dhārathatīti gandharvo meghaḥ*).⁸² From these connections, we can suggest that the *gandharva*’s affiliation with Soma as life-bearing moisture should also include the divine sap’s secondary identity as generative fluid, related intimately to sexuality and fertility.

As attractive semi-divine youths, the *gandharvas* are the natural lovers of the graceful and aquatic *apsarases*.⁸³ In this amorous capacity, the *gandharva* is affiliated with the wedding ceremony, and

the unmarried bride is said to be possessed by him as well as by Soma and Agni.⁸⁴ Consequently, the *gandharva* (Viśvāvasu), during the first few days of marriage, is regarded as the irritating rival of the jealous husband: “Go away from here! For this woman has a husband. . . . Go away from here, Viśvāvasu, we implore you as we bow. Look for another girl, willing and ready. Leave the wife to unite with her husband”.⁸⁵ Lovers and seducers of women, the *gandharvas* are often described as enjoying an active sex life.⁸⁶ It is in this context, I suppose, that the *Śāṅkhāyana Gṛhyasūtra* (1.19.2) identifies the female genitals as the mouth of the *gandharva* Viśvāvasu. Moreover, always given over to pleasure, they are fond of scents (*gandha*)⁸⁷ and scented objects and are described as wearing fragrant (*surabhi*) garments; hence the name *gandharva*, “eaters of scent”.⁸⁸ As sexually virile beings, the *gandharvas*, together with their female companions, the *apsarases*, are believed to preside over fertility and are petitioned by those desiring progeny.⁸⁹ Following the trajectory of this theme, the Buddhists, in a later period, name that being *gandharva* (Pali, *gandhabba*) who, upon departing from its previous existence, enters the womb and becomes an embryo at the moment of conception; its passage recognized as an autonomous transitional period (*antarābhava*) between the end of one life and the beginning of the next.

Intermediate States, Transitional Beings: The Buddhist Antarābhava

The concept of an autonomous postmortem intermediate period between lives can be found in both the Hīnayāna and Mahāyāna sūtras and their commentaries.⁹⁰ Unfortunately, it has been the case that research in Buddhist studies devoted to these textual sources has failed to creatively engage the issue, and thus has contributed very little to our understanding about the historical transformations of this uniquely Buddhist concept.⁹¹ To begin to unravel the theoretical complexities involved in the Indian (and Tibetan) Buddhist texts that deal with postmortem transition, it is necessary first to begin to examine the historical movement of ideas—steps that, in my opinion, have been

taken much too tentatively. That being said, let us return to the matter at hand.

Early on, some schools of Buddhism in India recognized four stages in the life cycle of a sentient being: birth, the period between birth and death, death, and the period between death and the next birth (*antarābhava*). During the intervening period between death and rebirth, as we have previously noted, a being is said to ‘exist’ as a spirit called *gandharva*, composed of subtle aspects of the five aggregates (*skandhas*). Wayman notes that the theory of such ethereal spirits and of the status of their transitional autonomy inspired considerable controversy among the early Buddhist sects.⁹² He lists a number of Buddhist schools that either accepted or rejected the notion. Among those that asserted the existence of the *antarābhava*, were the Sarvāstivādins, Vātsīputrīyas, Sammatīyas, and Pūrvaśailas. The schools that disputed the idea included the Theravādins, Vibhajyavādins, Mahāsāṅghikas, and Mahīśāsakas.⁹³ The details surrounding both the acceptance and the rejection of such a theory are intricately woven throughout a complex fabric of rigorous philosophical argument and speculation. As a consequence, we cannot delve too deeply into the debate, or otherwise we risk veering far off course. We can, however, provide a working outline of the basic assumptions, privileging the ideas of those schools that did accept the notion of *antarābhava*.

According to the *Assalāyanasutta* of the *Majjhima-nikāya* (a Pali Theravāda source), it is said that the conjunction of three factors is necessary for conception to take place: there must be sexual intercourse between the parents, the mother must be in the proper phase of her menstrual cycle (her ‘season’), and a *gandhabba* (Skt., *gandharva*) must be present.⁹⁴ In his commentary on this passage, the pre-eminent fourth century scholar of the Theravāda school, Buddhaghosa interpreted *gandhabba* as the entity that is just about to enter the womb (*tatrūpakasatta*), that is prepared to exist (*paccupaṭṭhito hoti*), and that is propelled by its *kamma* (Skt., *karma*).⁹⁵ As a proponent of Theravāda tenets, Buddhaghosa did not accept that his interpretation implied the existence of an intermediate state (*antarābhava*). On this

topic, he was simply stating a point consistent with the philosophical position of his school; a point briefly argued in the *Kathā-vatthu* of the *Abhidhamma-piṭaka* (8.2).⁹⁶

In opposition to this Theravādin interpretation, the Sarvāstivāda sect, among others, supported the notion that the transitional period did indeed exist. In his *Abhidharmakośa* (a masterful fourth century exposition of the Sarvāstivāda position), Vasubandhu argued the case in some detail. As he defined it, the intermediate being and its state of existence are to be located between the moment of death and the moment of (re)birth.⁹⁷ Quoting a passage similar to the one we noted above, Vasubandhu writes:

We read in the Sūtra, “Three conditions are necessary for an embryo to descend: the woman must be in good health and fertile, the pair must be united, and a Gandharva must be ready.” What is the Gandharva if not an intermediate being?⁹⁸

This *gandharva* is said to be composed of the five aggregates which proceed to the place of rebirth,⁹⁹ and to possess the configuration of what is to be the form of the future being after conception.¹⁰⁰ Moreover, he is “seen by the creatures of his class . . . by the divine eye. His organs are complete. No one can resist him. He cannot be turned away”.¹⁰¹ Concerning the name ‘*gandharva*’, Vasubandhu explains

[The intermediate being] eats odors. From whence it gets its name of Gandharva, “he who eats (*arvati*) odors (*gandham*).” The meanings of the roots are multiple: *arv*, if one takes it in the sense of “to go,” justifies “he who goes to eat odors” (*arvati gacchati bhoktum*). We have *gandharva*, and not *gandhārva*, as we have *śakandhu*, or *karkandhu*. A Gandharva of low rank eats unpleasant odors; a Gandharva of high rank eats pleasant odors.¹⁰²

In addition to the answer Vasubandhu offers, it is certainly possible that the *gandharva* became identified in some Buddhist traditions as the being of the intermediate state not only because of its etymological associations, but also more importantly because of its cosmographic connection in the Vedas to the atmospheric mid-space between earth and heaven, its relationship to Soma, and its affiliations with fertility and conception. The *gandharva* is thus the means, or access

(*sagamana*), through which a being, emerging from its previous life, reaches its new proper existential course (*gati*).¹⁰³ Moreover, in considering other possible symbolic associations, we should not ignore the intriguing passage from the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* (4.4.4) in which the *gandharva*'s body is likened to the 'body' achieved after death: "And as a goldsmith, taking a piece of gold turns it into another, newer and more beautiful shape, even so does this self, after having thrown away this body and dispelled its ignorance, make unto himself another, newer and more beautiful shape like that of the fathers or of the *gandharvas*...". We should be cautious, however, in drawing firm conclusions from statements that appear, or are implied, only once in the text, as is the case with this particular passage. In almost every instance, *gandharvas* (if even mentioned at all) are not identified in the early Upaniṣads as transitional beings.

To help strengthen his argument for the existence of intermediate state beings, Vasubandhu introduces statements by the Buddha concerning the five types of non-returners (*anāgāmin*)—those individuals who, having died in this world, are reborn in a heaven where they will achieve liberation.¹⁰⁴

The Blessed One teaches that there are five types of Anāgāmins: one who obtains Nirvāṇa in an intermediate existence (*antarāparinirvāyin*), one who obtains Nirvāṇa as soon as he is reborn (*upapadyaparinirvāyin*), one who obtains Nirvāṇa without effort (*anabhisamṣkāraparinirvāyin*), one who obtains Nirvāṇa by means of effort (*anabhisamṣkāraparinirvāyin*), and one who obtains Nirvāṇa by going higher (*ūrdvasrotas*).¹⁰⁵

In commenting on the first type of non-returner (that individual who achieves enlightenment in the intermediate state), Vasubandhu offers the following summary of the teachings found in the *Satpuruṣaḡatis-sūtra*:

This Sūtra teaches that one should distinguish three types of *antarāparinirvāyins* on the basis of their differences of duration and place: the first is similar to a spark that is extinguished as soon as it arises; the second to a fragment of reddened metal which enlarges in its flight; the third to a fragment of reddened metal which enlarges in its flights, but later, and without falling back into the sun. . . . Or rather, the first *antarāparinirvāyin* obtains Nirvāṇa as soon as

he has taken possession of a certain divine existence; the second after having experienced a heavenly bliss; and the third, after having entered into company or conversation with the gods. . . . We say that, for the masters who admit these Sūtras, the existence of an intermediate being or the “*skandhas* in the interval” is proved both by Scripture and reasoning.¹⁰⁶

For our purposes, the crucial point in all of this is that, for those Buddhists who accepted the theory of an intermediate state, a being emerging from its previous existence could either return by way of reconception in the form of a *gandharva* or escape rebirth by never returning, and thus achieve *nirvāṇa*. Nevertheless, in both instances the being would have to pass through an intervening (*antarā*) moment of existence (*bhava*) between either of the two future conditions. We should now consider how the former entity, the *gandharva*, is said to enter the womb and develop as an embryo upon conception.

Having fully substantiated his claim for the existence of the intermediate state, Vasubandhu proceeds to explain how rebirth (*pratisaṃdhi*) takes place:

An intermediate being is produced with a view to going to the place of its realm of rebirth where it should go. It possesses, by virtue of its actions, the divine eye. Even though distant he sees the place of his rebirth. There he sees his father and mother united. His mind is troubled by the effects of sex and hostility. When the intermediate being is male, it is gripped by a male desire with regard to the mother; when it is female, it is gripped by a female desire with regard to the father; and, inversely, it hates either the father, or the mother, whom it regards as either a male or a female rival. As it is said in the Prajñāpti, “Then either a mind of lust, or a mind of hatred is produced in the Gandharva.”

When the mind is thus troubled by these two erroneous thoughts, it attaches itself through the desire for sex to the place where the organs are joined together, imagining that it is he with whom they unite. Then the impurities of semen and blood are found in the womb; the intermediate being, enjoying its pleasures, installs itself there. Then the *skandhas* harden; the intermediate being perishes; and birth arises that is called “reincarnation” (*pratisaṃdhi*).¹⁰⁷

Even without making obvious comparisons to Freud’s Oedipus, this passage is of particular interest to us if we consider it in light of the Vedic notion of the *gandharva*. We should remember that in the Vedas the *gandharva* is famous for his beauty and seductive power.

His passionate love for women often put him in compromising positions, especially when seen by others as an annoying rival of the young bride's new husband. It would appear then that, in the minds of the early Buddhists, the *gandharva's* amorous and sordid nature became the source of an uncontrollable lust that prevented him from achieving loftier goals. Clearly, we see reason to identify the *gandharva* with that being who, obscured by passion, is on the recycling path far from Buddhist enlightenment.

By the sixth century CE, Buddhist descriptions of the intermediate state had solidified, following a standardized model first established by the earlier schools.¹⁰⁸ Further transformations and amendments to this model would not occur until Tantrism began its vast sweep across Northern India in the seventh and eighth century. The Buddhist Siddha cults of this period reinterpreted, elaborated, and embellished the *antarābhava* theory in the context of their specific metaphysical and soteriological projects. These systems were then introduced to Tibet, where theories of transitional states (*bar do*) achieved unprecedented rank among the essential teachings of Buddhism.¹⁰⁹ It is important to realize that, despite its controversial beginnings, the concept of the *antarābhava* continued to flourish and to exert a significant force upon the theories and practices of the later (Northern) Buddhist traditions. We should now summarize the major points discussed above in order to clear a path for our closing argument.

The early Buddhist sects were divided over whether or not an intermediate state between lives should be recognized. Those schools that rejected the notion did, however, accept the name '*gandharva*' (Pali, *gandhabba*) for that which enters the womb upon conception. It was argued that this '*gandharva*' was simply a term for the particular consciousness that linked one existence to another (*paṭisandhi viññāna*) and was not a discarnate spirit of any kind.¹¹⁰ On the other hand, those schools that accepted the *antarābhava* theory advanced the notion that the *gandharva* was in fact an actual disembodied transitional being wandering in search of its next place of birth. A being in the intervening state had two possible paths before it: (1) as a *gandharva* driven by the *karma* of its previous existence, the being

could be reborn in this world, in which case it would have to eventually enter the womb of its future mother, but only if conditions were right (i.e., if the parents were engaged in sexual intercourse, the mother was in her 'season', and the *gandharva* was present); or, (2) if particularly advanced along the Buddhist path, the being could opt out of existence, so to speak, and, in the period of transition, achieve final liberation (*parinirvāna*) from the ongoing cycles of birth and death (*samsāra*). Here we simply encounter a version of the basic Buddhist teaching of moral retribution—those who follow the righteous path set forth by the Buddha achieve the highest goal, while those who blindly follow the whims of passion and desire are swept up by the fierce winds of *karma* and driven back down into another existence, only to begin the cycle all over again.

Synthesis and Conclusion

I would like now to adopt a comparative approach and examine the three models presented above in terms of their relationship to one another. It is my contention that these apparently distinct models actually form part of a conceptual continuum, but are not necessarily linked by direct causal development. Let me illustrate my point. The Vedic model can be represented by two poles that, when arranged spatially, are aligned along a vertical axis. The upper pole corresponds to the heavenly realm of the fathers (*devaloka/pitrloka*)—recall that in this period the two realms are not clearly distinguished; the lower pole corresponds to the earthly realm. Placed in the interval between the two is the sacrifice, the fulcrum of the entire Vedic system and the link that connects earth to the heavenly world above (fig. 1). More specifically, in terms of the system's mechanics, an individual, via the sacrificial act, passes from the microcosmic plane (*adhyātman*) to the macrocosmic realm of divinity (*adhidevatā*), here identified as either *devaloka* or *pitrloka*. At death, this transition from microcosm to macrocosm is a material one and is understood quite literally as a final sacrifice to be performed by every human being.

As a result of various ideological shifts that had taken place in India around the sixth century BCE, the Vedic model was redefined

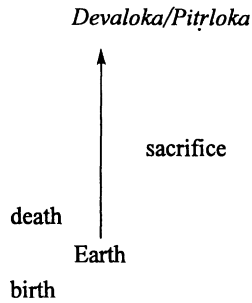


Figure 1. The Vedic model.

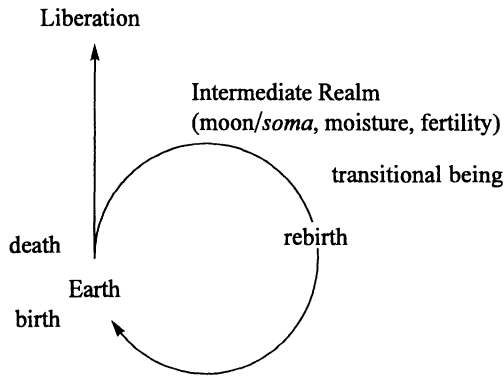


Figure 2. The general post-Vedic model.

and hence spatially rearranged (fig. 2). In the Upaniṣadic model, we still have a basic vertical polarity, only now the *pitrloka* has been separated from the *devaloka* and situated in the space between heaven and earth (fig. 3). This shifting of the father's realm to an intermediary level occurred in part because of the ancestor's intimate relationship to the Vedic sacrifice (it should not go unnoticed that in the Vedic model this ritual activity occupies the intervening space between earth and heaven). In the Upaniṣads, the ritual system of the Brāhmaṇas had lost its preminent position, displaced by a new paradigm in which knowledge assumed supremacy. With this new paradigm came the notion that each person lives a series of lives (*samsāra*); that the moral quality of the person's previous actions

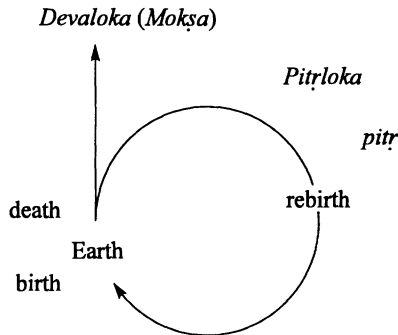


Figure 3. The Upaniṣadic model.

(*karma*) determines the quality of existence in the next life; and, that the person who possesses the correct knowledge of the nonduality of self and Absolute (*Brahman*) can forever escape (*mokṣa*) the ongoing cycles of birth and death. In the Upaniṣadic model, final deliverance is identified as *devaloka* (or *Brahmaloka*) and corresponds to the upper pole on the vertical axis. At death, the soul's journey follows one of two distinct paths: one leading to the 'gods' (and liberation), another to the fathers (and rebirth). The latter path is followed by those who have 'conquered the world' through a lifetime of sacrificial offerings and public service. In other words, the realm of the fathers is reached via ritual activity and good works, and without supreme gnosis. For the Upaniṣads, knowledge is what liberates the soul and 'sends' it to the world above. The heavenly realm is associated with the sun and its radiant light (knowledge and immortality), the paternal realm with the moon and darkness (ignorance and death).

The moon itself being periodically 'dead' becomes the prototype of the deceased's passage and return to life. The life cycle of the soul, subject to alternate periods of birth and death, is regarded in the Upaniṣads as being governed by the cycle of the moon; and because this cycle demonstrates that there is life in death, the dead are said to go to the moon to be regenerated and transformed, all in preparation for a return to a new life on earth. It was believed that the journey back followed the descent of the divine life-bearing essence, or Soma, the vitalizing moisture that manifests itself in the cyclical

processes of fertility. This Soma was associated in Vedic mythology with its protector, the semi-divine *gandharva*. Occupying the mid-space between heaven and earth, the atmospheric realm (*antarikṣa*) of clouds, moisture and rain, the *gandharva* took over the attributes of the divine Soma and became affiliated with the powers of fecundity and reproduction. The Buddhists, appropriating the concept of this intermediary being, maintained that the *gandharva* was that entity who, upon emerging from its previous existence, eventually enters the womb and becomes an embryo at the moment of conception.

The Buddhist model can also be represented as a vertical polarity with an intermediate zone. Although structurally consistent with the Upaniṣadic model, it replaces that system's concept of *mokṣa* (*devaloka*) with its own *nirvāṇa* and the *pitṛloka* with its *antarābhava* (fig. 4). Emerging from within the same conceptual environment that gave rise to the soteriological project of the Upaniṣads, Buddhism also presented its own version of the doctrines of *samsāra*, *karma* and liberation from the cycles of birth and death. Similarly, the Buddhists argued that, at death, a being could travel one of two paths. If, in his/her previous life, the individual had performed good works, diligently practiced the Buddha's teachings, and had gained as a result the proper wisdom, s/he would travel the straight path upward and, from within the intervening state, achieve the final goal, emancipation (*nirvāṇa*) from the ongoing cycles of existence. If, on the other hand,

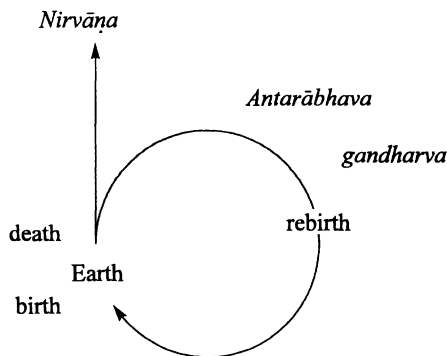


Figure 4. The Buddhist model.

the individual had failed in the prior life to perform many virtuous deeds and had not gained the wisdom of the Buddha's teachings, s/he would be caught in the recycling process and as a *gandharva*—the intermediate state being—descend into a womb to be born again.

In the final analysis we see that, structurally speaking, the Buddhist and Upaniṣadic models, proceeding from the vertical polarity of the earlier Vedic model, correspond to one another and together exhibit a more generalized pattern like that diagrammed in figure 2. In terms of the conceptual history of the idea of a postmortem transitional period, we can argue that the Buddhist *antarābhava* is conceptually linked to the Upaniṣadic *pitṛloka* and that notions surrounding the latter may have, in some sense, provided the cosmographic and symbolic components for the development of the intermediate state concept in Buddhism. The argument is made clearer if we consider the correspondences between the two systems. In the Upaniṣads, the paternal realm is spatially positioned between earth and 'heaven', the state of final liberation (*mokṣa*) as well as between death and rebirth. The fathers and the path to their abode are associated with ritual activity, the moon, Soma, life-bearing moisture, and rebirth. Like the *pitṛloka*, the Buddhist *antarābhava* is also placed between earth and the liberated state (*nirvāṇa*) as well as between death and rebirth. The inhabitants of this intermediate realm are called *gandharvas*—semi-divine liminal beings closely associated with Soma, life-bearing moisture and fertility. As disembodied transitional beings, *gandharvas* travel the intervening space and, upon conception, enter a womb; the first moment of a new existence.¹¹¹

The conclusion that I would like to draw out from the argument above is that the Buddhists, in formulating their notion of the intermediate state, may have borrowed elements from Vedic and Upaniṣadic theories of postmortem transition. Sharing similar ideological assumptions, the symbol systems operating in both Buddhism and the early Upaniṣads allowed for a certain amount of cross-fertilization. From the Buddhist side, it appears that the *antarābhava* theory is either partially or entirely the result of the fusion of Upaniṣadic cosmography (*pitṛloka*) and Vedic mythology (*gandharva*), transposed

on a grid that is structurally, but not conceptually, identical to that of its Upaniṣadic rival.

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¹ John Martin Fischer, *The Metaphysics of Death* (California: Stanford University Press, 1993), 4.

² *Ibid.*, 4.

³ Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice* (California: Stanford University Press, 1990), 228.

⁴ See Victor Turner, *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1967) and *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1969).

⁵ For examples, see Maurice Bloch and Jonathan Parry, *Death & the Regeneration of Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982); Richard Huntington and Peter Metcalf, *Celebrations of Death* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979 & 1991); James L. Watson and Evelyn S. Rawski, *Death Ritual in Late Imperial and Modern China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988); Robert Hertz, *Death & the Right Hand* (New York: Free Press, 1960); Stan Royal Mumford, *Himalayan Dialogue* (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989); and Glenn H. Mullin, *Death and Dying: The Tibetan Tradition* (Boston: Arkana Paperbacks, 1986).

⁶ See, for instance, *Mahāvvyutpatti* 1015, 7680; *Lankāvatāra-sūtra* 160.5, 177.4, 370.14; *Dharmasaṃgraha* 103; *Mahāvastu* 1.33.6; Vasubandhu's *Abhidharmakośa* 3.10-15; Asanga's *Bodhisattvabhūmi* 390.19 and *Yogācārābhūmi* 1.20.4-13. Of the early schools of Indian Buddhism, the Theravādins contested the notion of a post-mortem intermediate period (*antarābhava*). I will consider in more detail the issue of Buddhist postmortem states in the latter part of this paper.

⁷ These are: form (*rūpa*), sensation (*vedanā*), perception (*saṃjñā*), mental formations (*saṃskāra*), and consciousness (*viññāna*).

⁸ For details see Alex Wayman, "The Intermediate-State Dispute in Buddhism". In *Buddhist Studies in Honour of I.B. Horner*, L. Cousins, ed. (Holland: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1974), 227-239.

⁹ At this point, I have been unable to locate the use of the term *antarābhava* in any Vedic or Post-Vedic textual source. The term, however, does appear in Amarasimha's *Amarakośa* (3.4.135), dating sometime between the sixth and eighth

centuries CE. This find is not tremendously significant since Amarasimha was supposedly a Buddhist, but it is interesting to note that he identifies the *antarābhava* entity as a *gandharva* (*antarābhavasattve gandharvo divyagāyane//bar do bar srid sems can dang rta dang lha yi glu gandharva*). See *Amarakośa and Its Tibetan Translation* ('*Chi Med mDzod*), M.M. Satis Chandra Vidyābhūṣaṇa, ed. Gangtok, 1984, 833.

¹⁰ This information has been gathered from David M. Knipe, *Hinduism* and Stephanie Jamison, *The Ravenous Hyenas and the Wounded Sun* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 11.

¹¹ Brian K. Smith, *Reflections on Resemblance, Ritual, and Religion* (New York, 1989), 46.

¹² Bruce Lincoln, *Myth, Cosmos, and Society: Indo-European Themes of Creation and Destruction* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1986), 139.

¹³ Brian K. Smith, *Reflections on Resemblance, Ritual, and Religion*, 50.

¹⁴ RV 10.90.16; unless otherwise noted, all translations from the *Ṛg Veda* are O'Flaherty's (New York: Penguin Books, 1981).

¹⁵ Bruce Lincoln, *Myth, Cosmos, and Society*, 127.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 127.

¹⁷ RV 10.16.2. For an intriguing analysis of cremation/sacrifice as primarily an act of cooking that both feeds the god Agni and preserves that part of the deceased which is to be conveyed to the world beyond see Charles Malamoud, "Cuire le monde". In *Cuire le monde: rite et pensée dans l'inde ancienne* (Paris: Editions de la Découverte, 1989).

¹⁸ Arthur Berriedale Keith, *The Religion and Philosophy of the Vedas and Upaniṣads* (Cambridge, Mass., 1925; reprint Delhi, 1970), 403.

¹⁹ See also RV 10.58.

²⁰ RV 10.16.5.

²¹ RV 10.14.8 (emphasis added).

²² Perhaps to a lesser degree, this 'subtle' body is also composed of light. A rather peculiar reference to light and the intermediate body is found in *Ṛg Veda* 10.56.1: "This is your one light, and there beyond is your other; merge with the third light. By merging with a body, grow lovely, dear to the gods in the highest birthplace". O'Flaherty interprets the light 'beyond' as a reference to the sun, the 'one light' to the funeral pyre, and the 'third light' to the realm of the dead (O'Flaherty, *Rig Veda*, 94). I must admit, the result of O'Flaherty's educated effort to make sense of this intriguing passage is quite plausible, even though she offers no documented evidence for her position. However, I would prefer that the 'third light' represent the sun or a similar source of intense radiance, rather than the 'light beyond', which could just as easily be thought of as the realm of the dead. The reason for this switch is dependent upon my reading of several passages from the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, where the sun

is understood as death. It is here also that reference is made to a 'glowing light', a 'lotus-leaf', and an 'immortal element', all of which are homologous and related intimately with death. The key is contained in the following verse: "... after laying down the *lotus-leaf*, it is on that *immortal element* that he builds for himself a body ... and he becomes immortal" (ŚB 10.4.5.2; Julius Eggeling's translation). Concerning this 'immortal element', we find: "And that man in yonder (sun's) orb is no other than Death; and that *glowing light* is that *immortal element*..." (ŚB 10.5.2.3). And, "that *glowing light* is the same as this *lotus-leaf*..." (ŚB 10.5.2.6).

Now, amid the confusion, I would like to construct a coherent picture of what all this might mean. The 'one light' is indeed the fire of cremation. The 'light beyond' is the realm of death—"yonder (sun's) orb is no other than Death". At some level, O'Flaherty may be correct in identifying this light with the sun, but clearly the essential point is that the 'yonder orb' is linked to death itself. The 'third light', or rather 'the glowing light', is the 'immortal element' out of which arises the subtle body; hence, to "merge with the third light" is just another way of saying "merging with a body". And, having "putteth on the radiant" (ŚB 10.5.2.4), the deceased joins "the gods in the highest birthplace".

²³ See for example RV 10.58 and AV 6.18.

²⁴ Arthur B. Keith, *The Religion and Philosophy of the Vedas and Upaniṣads*, 403.

²⁵ RV 10.16.3.

²⁶ The *ātman*, together with the breaths (*prāṇas*), becomes in the Upaniṣads a topic of considerable importance, and one that succeeds in generating potentially endless speculation.

²⁷ Unless otherwise noted, all translations from *Atharva Veda* (AV) are William Dwight Whitney's (Cambridge, Mass., 1905; reprint Delhi, 1962).

²⁸ For a detailed discussion of this relationship consult Bruce Lincoln, *Myth, Cosmos, and Society*, specifically pp. 119-140.

²⁹ David M. Knipe, "*Sapīṇḍikaraṇa*: The Hindu Rite of Entry into Heaven", in *Religious Encounters with Death*, ed. Frank Reynolds and Earle Waugh (Pennsylvania State University, 1977), 114.

³⁰ See for example, *Śāṅkhāyana Gṛhyasūtra* (3.5, 6; 4.2.7), *Pāraskara Gṛhyasūtra* (3.10.49), *Baudhāyana Gṛhyasūtra* (3.12.14), and *Bhāradvāja Gṛhyasūtra* (3.17). In this later literature, a clear distinction is made between the recently deceased, called *preta*, and the distantly deceased, the fathers (*pitaras*). Elaborate funerary rituals (*śrāddha*) are prescribed for the purposes of enabling the *preta* to join the company of its ancestors. It is believed that failure to perform the rites may result in the *preta* becoming angry. In thinking of *pretas* as vengeful spirits, we may be reminded of the so-called 'hungry ghost' (also referred to as *preta*) in Buddhist literature. The relationship between Hindu and Buddhist conceptions of *preta* is a fascinating and complex issue that has received little scholarly attention—the details remain to be

sorted and examined. I have not included a discussion on this topic because the Buddhist notion of *preta* rests firmly within a specific cosmological framework (e.g., the six realms of existence) distinct from notions of *antarābhava*. Unlike the Hindu *preta* of the ritual sūtras, its Buddhist counterpart is rarely, if ever, identified as a postmortem transitional entity; hence, the issue is not particularly relevant at this stage in our examination of intermediate-state theories.

Nonetheless, for comparative analyses of Hindu and Buddhist notions of *preta* within the broader context of merit transfer, see John C. Holt, "Assisting the Dead By Venerating the Living: Merit Transfer in the Early Buddhist Tradition," *Numen* 28, no. 1 (1981): 1-28; and David G. White, "Dakṣiṇa and Agnicayana: An Extended Application of Paul Mus's Typology," *History of Religions* (1986): 188-213.

³¹ RV 1.72.7; 10.14.1; 10.14.2; 10.14.7; 10.14.10; 10.164.30-31; 10.88.15.

³² RV 10.56.1; 10.56.5; 10.56.7.

³³ RV 10.164.30; 10.58.

³⁴ O'Flaherty, *The Rig Veda*, 48.

³⁵ J.C. Heesterman, *The Inner Conflict of Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 32-33. Heesterman discusses this myth in the context of a much broader argument; namely, that, with the elimination of Death as a participant in the ritual, the rival was likewise eliminated and thus "the single yajamāna was enabled to deal ritually with death without incurring the risk involved in the ambivalent cooperation with the others" (32). This moment marked the beginning of Heesterman's so-called "classical period" in Vedic India.

³⁶ The daily morning and evening fire sacrifice.

³⁷ ŚB 2.3.3.15.

³⁸ ŚB 4.2.5.10 (emphasis added).

³⁹ Brian K. Smith, *Reflections on Resemblance, Ritual, and Religion*, 106. For a discussion of the correlation between sunlight and the fires of the *agnihotra* ritual, consult H.W. Bodewitz, *The Daily Evening and Morning Offering (Agnihotra) according to the Brāhmaṇas* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1976).

⁴⁰ For actual details concerning these rites, consult David Knipe, "Sapīṇḍikaraṇa: The Hindu Rite of Entry into Heaven"; Pandurang Vaman Kane, *History of Dharmaśāstra: Ancient and Medieval Religious and Civil Law* (Poona, 1968-1975), vol. IV, 220-240 & 520-525; Veena Das, "The Uses of Liminality: Society and Cosmos in Hinduism", *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 10, no. 2 (1976): 245-263; and Meena Kaushik, "The Symbolic Representation of Death", *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 10, no. 2 (1976): 265-292.

⁴¹ Translation by S. Radhakrishnan, *The Principal Upaniṣads* (London, 1953; reprint Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1992), 432.

⁴² RV 10.14.2.

⁴³ RV 10.14.7, 10; also AV 8.2.11.

⁴⁴ *Garuḍa Purāṇa (pretakāṇḍa)* 2.15.72, 76, 78-82, 84-85. Translation in *Ancient Indian Tradition & Mythology* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1979), vol. 13, 812-813. See also Emil Abegg, *Der Pretakalpa des Garuḍa Purāṇa (Naunidhirāma's Sāroddhāra): Eine Darstellung des hinduistischen Totenkultes und Jenseitsglaubens* (Berlin and Leipzig: Walter de Gruyter & Co., 1921), 44-58.

⁴⁵ Issues related to death, impurity, and danger are, by now, quite overworked clichés. Nonetheless, the classic studies on the topic are still Hertz's "A Contribution to the Study of the Collective Representation of Death" in *Death and the Right Hand*, trans. R. & C. Needham (New York: Free Press, 1960), 27-86; Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (1966; reprint, New York: Ark Paperbacks, 1989); and, more recently, Maurice Bloch and Jonathan Parry, ed. *Death and the Regeneration of Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

⁴⁶ Brian K. Smith, *Reflections on Resemblance, Ritual, and Religion*, 108.

⁴⁷ See for example ŚB 11.2.7.33.

⁴⁸ Arthur B. Keith, *The Religion and Philosophy of the Vedas and Upaniṣads*, 410.

⁴⁹ Lincoln has shown that the image of a bifurcated path on which the dead travel has its roots in a common mythic motif found throughout various Indo-European 'funerary geographies', ranging from the earliest hymns of the *Ṛg Veda* to nineteenth century Russian folklore. See his *Death, War, and Sacrifice: Studies in Ideology and Practice* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 119-127.

⁵⁰ RV 10.18.1.

⁵¹ See *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* (BĀU) 6.2.15-16; *Chandogya Upaniṣad* (ChU) 4.15.5, 5.10.1-2.

⁵² Brian K. Smith, *Reflections on Resemblance, Ritual, and Religion*, 115n.185.

⁵³ BĀU 6.2.16.

⁵⁴ See for example BĀU 1.5.16.

⁵⁵ Patrick Olivelle. *Samnyāsa Upaniṣads: Hindu Scriptures on Asceticism and Renunciation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 19-57.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 33.

⁵⁷ See for example BĀU 4.4.22; ChU 1.12 and 5.24.4; and *Taittirīya Upaniṣad* (TaitU) 2.3.

⁵⁸ BĀU 4.4.5.

⁵⁹ ChU 5.10.1-6 (brackets added), translation by Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty in *Textual Sources for the Study of Hinduism* (Totowa, New Jersey: Barnes & Noble Books, 1988), 36-37. For alternative passages, compare BĀU 6.2.15-16; ChU 4.15.5-6; and *Kauṣītaki-Brāhmaṇa Upaniṣad* (KBU) 1.2.

⁶⁰ RV 1.72.7; 2.2.4; 10.16.2.

⁶¹ RV 1.109.7; 1.125.6; 10.56.1; 10.58.6; 10.107.2; 10.154.5; 27.21; AV 3.29.3; 4.34.2-6; 6.120.3; 11.4; ŚB 11.5.6.4; 14.7.1.32-33.

- ⁶² Brian K. Smith, *Reflections on Resemblance, Ritual, and Religion*, 115n.185.
- ⁶³ Jan Gonda, "Soma, Amṛta and the Moon" in *Change and Continuity in Indian Religion* (London: Mouton & Co., 1965), 40.
- ⁶⁴ Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion* (New York: New American Library, 1958), 171.
- ⁶⁵ For information concerning lunar symbolism and the prognostic and diagnostic significance of the moon's periodic cycle in Indian medicine, consult Francis Zimmermann's "Ṛtu-Sāmya: The Seasonal Cycle and the Principle of Appropriateness", *Social Science & Medicine* 14B (1980): 99-106.
- ⁶⁶ Gonda, "Soma, Amṛta and the Moon", 44. Gonda's statement comes as a response to a passage he had earlier quoted from the *Jaiminiya Upaniṣad* (JU) 3.27.17.
- ⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 42.
- ⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 38.
- ⁶⁹ See ŚB 1.6.4.5; 7.3.1.46; 11.2.5.3.
- ⁷⁰ ŚB 6.2.2.6. Reference from David White, *The Alchemical Body* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, forthcoming), 21n.35.
- ⁷¹ Gonda, "Soma, Amṛta and the Moon", 46.
- ⁷² *Ibid.*, 48.
- ⁷³ RV 1.22.14; 8.66.5; 10.39.5.
- ⁷⁴ RV 9.83.4; translation by Ralph T.H. Griffith in *Hinduism: The Rig Veda* (1889; reprint, New York: Quality Paperback Book Club, 1992).
- ⁷⁵ RV 9.85.12; translation by Griffith.
- ⁷⁶ RV 9.113.3.
- ⁷⁷ RV 10.85.21-22; ŚB 3.2.4.3; *Maitrāyaṇi Saṃhitā* (MS) 3.7.3; *Pañcaviṃśa Brāhmaṇa* (PB) 19.3.2.
- ⁷⁸ *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa* (AB) 1.1.27; ŚB 3.2.4; *Taittirīya Saṃhitā* (TaitS) 6.1.6.5; MS 3.7.3.
- ⁷⁹ AV 4.4.1.
- ⁸⁰ A.A. MacDonell, *The Vedic Mythology* (Varanasi: Indological Book House, n.d), 137.
- ⁸¹ Hermann Oldenberg, *The Religion of the Veda*, trans. Shridhar B. Shrotri (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1988), 125.
- ⁸² Referenced and quoted in R.S. Panchamukhi, *Gandharvas & Kinnaras in Indian Iconography* (Dharwar: Kannada Research Institute, 1951), 3.
- ⁸³ AV 2.2.5; PB 12.11.10.
- ⁸⁴ RV 10.85.40-41.
- ⁸⁵ RV 10.85.21-22; translation by O'Flaherty.
- ⁸⁶ AV 4.34.2-3.
- ⁸⁷ AV 12.1.23.
- ⁸⁸ RV 10.123.7.

⁸⁹ PB 19.3.2.

⁹⁰ Principal exegetical sources for the Hinayāna may be found in Vasubandhu's *Abhidharmakośa* (*Kośa*) 3.10-16; 3.40; 4.53; 6.34, 39, and like sources for the Mahāyāna are Asanga's *Abhidharmasamuccaya* and the *Bhūmivastu* section of his *Yogacaryābhūmi* 1.20.4-13.

⁹¹ I know of only one article in English devoted entirely to this issue, and that is Alex Wayman's "The Intermediate-State Dispute in Buddhism" in *Buddhist Studies in Honour of I.B. Horner*, ed. L. Cousins (Holland: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1974), 227-239. The topic is discussed by Shōku Bando in his "Antarābhava", *Indogaku Bukkyōgaku Kenkyū* (*Journal of Indian and Buddhist Studies*) 27, no. 2 (1979): 182-183, but unfortunately this work has not been translated. Dieter Michael Back's philological analysis of the so-called *Tibetan Book of the Dead* is perhaps the first study that genuinely attempts to move beyond the psychological, devotional, and/or sectarian biases of the vast majority of scholars working in this particular area. See his *Eine buddhistische Jenseitsreise: Das sogenannte "Totenbuch der Tibeter" aus philologischer Sicht* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1979).

⁹² Alex Wayman, "The Intermediate-State Dispute in Buddhism", 227.

⁹³ Wayman, 227. These schools developed approximately a century after the Buddha's death as a result of certain schisms that had taken place in the Buddhist Order. The initial split occurred during the famed Second Council (c. 383 BCE), which was held over the issue of whether or not certain practices adopted by the monks of Vaiśālī were in violation of the monastic precepts (*vinaya*). The verdict resulted in the formation of two schools: the Mahāsaṅghika and the Sthaviravāda. Many more schools eventually split away from these original two. The Sarvāstivāda, the Vātsīputriya, the Sammatiya, the Theravāda, and the Vibhajjavāda were all descendants of the Sthaviravāda lineage. It is not known from where the Pūrvaśāila sect arose. For an elaborate account of the historical development of the early Buddhist sects, consult Hirakawa Akira, *A History of Indian Buddhism*, trans. Paul Groner (University of Hawaii Press, 1990), 77-126.

⁹⁴ *Majjhima-Nikāya* 2.157, also see 1.265-266.

⁹⁵ *Papañcasūdanī Majjhimanakāyaṭṭhakathā* 2.310; reference taken from James P. McDermott, "Karma and Rebirth in Early Buddhism" in *Karma and Rebirth in Classical Indian Traditions*, ed. Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 170.

⁹⁶ For a translation, see Shwe Zan Aung and Rhys Davids, *Points of Controversy or Subjects of Discourse* (London: Luzac & Company, Ltd.; Pali Text Society, 1969), 212-213. The argument centers around divergent interpretations of the Sūtra phrase "completed existence within the interval". The disputed point revolves around the notion that there exists an intermediate period of a week or longer during which a being awaits a new conception. The counter-argument bases itself on the Buddha's statement that there are no more than three states of existence—desire (*kāma*), form

(*rūpa*), and the formless (*arūpa*). Since the intervening state is not included in any of these three, the conclusion must be that such a state does not exist.

⁹⁷ *Kośa* 3.10.

⁹⁸ *Kośa* 3.12; unless otherwise noted all translations from Vasubandhu's text are by Leo M. Pruden from Louis de La Vallée Poussin's French translation of the *Abhidharmakośabhāṣyam* (Berkeley, California: Asian Humanities Press, 1988).

⁹⁹ *Kośa* 3.10.

¹⁰⁰ *Kośa* 3.13.

¹⁰¹ *Kośa* 3.14.

¹⁰² *Kośa* 3.14.

¹⁰³ *Kośa* 3.4.

¹⁰⁴ *Samyuktāgama-sūtra* 37.20; *Dīgha-nikāya* 3.237.

¹⁰⁵ *Kośa* 3.12.

¹⁰⁶ *Kośa* 3.12.

¹⁰⁷ *Kośa* 3.15.

¹⁰⁸ Compare Vasubandhu's account, for example, to that found in the *Saddharma-smṛty-upasthāna-sūtra* 34.

¹⁰⁹ In Tibet, such notions became an essential component in a highly developed and extensive soteriological system involving the radical manipulation of psycho-physical energies to bring about transformative nonordinary states of consciousness (in many instances, said to be identical with the experiences of dying). See for example Lati Rinpoche and Jeffrey Hopkins, *Death, Intermediate State and Rebirth* (New York: Snow Lion Publications, 1979); Geshe Kelsang Gyatso, *Clear Light of Bliss: Mahamudra in Vajrayana Buddhism* (London: Wisdom Publications, 1982); and Giacomella Orofino, *Sacred Tibetan Teachings on Death and Liberation* (Great Britain: Prism Press, 1990).

¹¹⁰ McDermott, "Karma and Rebirth in Early Buddhism", 170.

¹¹¹ The corresponding links can be strung together in the following manner:

pitṛloka = intermediary realm

the moon = death

pitāras = the moon = Soma

Soma = moisture = fertility = *gandharva*

gandharva = *antarikṣa* = disembodied spirit = *antarābhava*

antarābhava = intermediary realm

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