

Sapta Svapna Sutra, or the Seven Dream Discourse

Pathsplitter edition of parts of Chapter XI of an unpublished manuscript completed in 1988
entitled *The Shaman and the Khan*.
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Qajir is a minor Mongol shaman who studied Buddhism along the Silk Road in the early 13th century. He followed the Mongol armies to the Indus during their conquest of Persia (Khwarezm), and then embarked on a pilgrimage to Buddhist sites in India in 1222. Heading home via Tibet, he rejoined the Mongol armies during their destruction of the Tangut state. The year is 1227, the Khan is on his deathbed, at which Qajir dreams a sequence of seven visionary dreams, featuring the following dialogue between Chinggis Khan (World Conqueror; Temujin) and The Buddha (Self Conqueror; Gautama). Qajir has just asked the Khan's leave to use his given name, since that is how he appeared in his dreams...

Note: Teb Tengri is the name of the shaman who conferred the sanction of heaven upon Temujin's imperial ambitions.

Temujin: "We can dispense with the niceties. Feel free to use my proper name if that is how I figured in your dream," said the Khan, sounding stronger than the night before.

Qajir continued: "You were seated beneath a solitary willow tree on a hill overlooking a beautiful forested valley. The sun burned high in the heavens, and the shadows of clouds moved like speeding armies across the slopes of the mighty mountain facing you."

"That reminds me of the spot I've designated as my burial place. Do you bring dire omens?" interrupted the Khan.

"You were alive and deep in conversation with the teacher of the monks in yellow, Gautama the Buddha. You were speaking when I came upon you, and this is what I heard you say:

"Despite our noble births, our origins are different. I can still remember scrounging for berries to help feed my little sister as if it happened only yesterday. You however, were born a prince, in the lap of luxury, with all needs provided for. You never knew what it is to fend for oneself in this world full of treachery and want, and there we have a curious puzzle, Gautama: how can you be sure that your teaching is good for this world, if you have not tasted all this world has to offer?"

Gautama: But haven't you heard: I reduced myself to skin and bone in the most gruelling regimen of ascetic self-mortification undertaken by any mortal. I have tasted the extremes, the life of luxury and the life of utter deprivation. What more do you want?

Temujin: I have heard about your exploits on the path of austerities, but don't you see that to practice asceticism is not to suffer need? It is to set oneself a challenge and to persevere.

Compared to what this world has to offer, you led a thoroughly sheltered life. You went from the life of a pampered prince to that of an ascetic, and you did so among a people where ascetics and holy men have been worshipped and revered for thousands of years. You were never in real danger except that posed by your own enthusiasms and practices. I was nine when I was called to the deathbed of my father, who lay poisoned by our Tatar enemies. Soon my widowed mother with us little ones was abandoned by our clan, and I saw yet another man die a death of agony before me, his back a gaping wound. And why? He defended us by admonishing the clansmen who would leave us to the mercy of the mountains and the steppes. That was Old Man Qaraq. They speared him from behind, and we were left to perish.

This is the world, this is man, this is life as I found it, and in the face of its sufferings here is what I gave my men as the antidote to the agony of life, here is what I held up to them as the ideal, and here, my friend, is the ultimate challenge to any system of morality that would try to make a dent in the wretched misery of this world, because the likes of me exist, we are real, and we proclaim to our men that:

The greatest joy a man can know is to conquer his enemies and drive them before him, to ride their horses and take away their possessions, to see the faces of those who were dear to them bedewed with tears, and to clasp their wives and daughters in his arms!

Do you hear me, Gautama, joy, the greatest joy a man can know! Do you think my men thought me a liar? We tried out my doctrine. I led them on conquests the likes of which have never been equalled in all the ages that we know. They tested my doctrine and found it to their liking. We thrived on it. Our families prospered. Our children and grandchildren bustled about our legs with flushed cheeks and healthy laughter. Our women blossomed, ran to meet us with tears in their eyes when we returned to our tents loaded with glory and booty from defeating the empires of the world. They were proud to belong to us. We were proud to return to them, and I know little that compares to the ecstasies of the night-long writhing embraces that followed such a home-coming.

Now, what I am telling you is, that unless you figure me into your reckonings, they will come out wrong, because I am always a possibility.

That is also why I worry about the succession and the future of my empire as my days come to a close. I look at my sons and I ask myself: what if they came up against me? I know they would come up short, and that is when my heart became sad.

Gautama: And that sadness of your heart is all I ever claimed to understand. That is what my teaching is about. Tell me, Temujin, if you were pleased with your victory over those you call the hating Tatars who killed your father and reduced your mother to starvation?

Temujin: Oh yes, that was my first decisive victory, which turned many an eye my way and spread my name beyond the Great Khingan Mountains.

Gautama: and tell me, Temujin, were you likewise pleased with your victory over the Merkits, Kereits, and Naimans, and the spoils of Chung-tu, Bokhara, Samarkand, and Hsi Hsia?

Temujin: With all those successes I was mightily pleased, you bring them all before my mind's

eye. I hear again the bedlam of battle. I behold the plains we crossed, the armies we defeated, the ramparts we razed, the walls we scaled, the cities we sacked. I see the flags, the soldiers, the formations, the clash of armies and their flight! Yes, my chest swells with pride. Indeed, I am pleased and proud over having lived all that!

Gautama: And would one not think that such an unbroken string of victories, such a cascade of successes, would be enough to fill the pit of your heart, to put an end to its craving, to still its clamor for more?

Temujin: But if it does not last, it was all for naught! Should the fruits of all those struggles, exertions, cares, and sacrifices again fall into ruin and disappear? Don't you see, I must secure what I have won, the triumph must be forever, or it is not at all!

Gautama: And looking at your sons you see it crumble already. There is as good an example as any of the truth of suffering! No worldly accomplishment, of which there is none to rival yours - you are the World Conqueror, the only one there is - no worldly success, however great, suffices to still that craving. Having conquered, you want more. Having conquered all, you want it forever. Yet you must die. The time is now not far off. We are sitting here under the tree that once, returning from the banks of the Indus, you chose to be buried under. This is the appointed place, and the hour is drawing ever closer. So, do you see how in this world suffering is an inevitable fact, unmitigated by the greatest successes?

Temujin: I see it, but not how it could be otherwise... It seems to me the pain of living is not a reason to disparage life. Does one give up the hunt because it is fatiguing? Does one discard a fish because of bones? Our hopes and needs, our dreams and fancies are what keep us striving to eke out a life for ourselves in this uncertain world, to find a mate, to raise our little ones despite all the trouble they cause us. To imagine all this could be accomplished without the pain of disappointment, anger, grief, and failure seems to me a fancy greater than all others.

Gautama: Yet I attained a state without it.

Temujin: But is it wise to make a rare, exalted state the standard for the life from which it is so far removed? Don't you see that the very loves and longings from which you were released are fuel for the flame of life and that without them it must flicker and then die? What business has a world-renouncer preaching to the world, unless it be to help it live a little better than before? Living better means first and foremost living life rather than withdrawing from it. And this is true even if it should turn out that life is vain and futile, because in that case the best way to find out would seem to be to live it fully! What makes you think that dwelling on its dark side, its pains and agonies, and holding up withdrawal from the world as an ideal will help those who affirm this life to live it better? Forgive me, but somehow I sense the smell of death somewhere amongst your doctrines, and it may be as simple as I just suggested, that to abolish suffering you have to do away with life itself, since suffering is part of what sustains it.

Gautama: You charge me with promoting death, a curious accusation coming from the slayer of millions. Is teaching kindness and forbearance a disservice to a world as rife with cruelty and want as ours?

Temujin: That all depends on how that teaching is construed by those who take it to heart. The compassion that pardons an evil-doer who then goes out and kills is a mockery of virtue. I must admit to having trouble comprehending what the preachers of religion imagine they are doing with their sermons. Do they think their pious exhortations to kindness will convert this world to an abode of righteousness? They are of course quite clever when it comes to buttressing their admonitions with visions of future gain and loss in heaven and hell, in another round of transmigration, or at the judgement announced by trumpet blasts at the end of time. Yet the crux of morals is not to reach those of tender conscience, but those without one. The temptations to wrong-doing are concrete opportunities for tangible gain, and faced with those, reckonings in the beyond may appear a bit remote to ordinary mortals. Those temptations require certainty of punishment and loss in this life as a countermotive. The evil-doer has to see his punishment follow on his deed like thunder follows lightning: we shall find you out! We shall track you down! You shall pay for your transgressions! That is what I call the goodness of severity, which is the refrain of the Yasa, my Law. It seems to me a dangerous delusion that one can do without it. Even for your world-renouncing monks you had to institute a code of discipline with punishments and sanctions, so how much more then for the world! Once the Yasa is in place, restraining those who'd cut our throats, by all means teach us kindness, but don't pretend that that itself suffices to establish justice!

Gautama: You speak of justice, yet you are better known for the exercise of might than right.

Temujin: Then show me a realm under Law not born in strife! To found the law is something other than upholding it. You were once a prince, but not of a kingdom of your own making. You seem to take the peace in a realm of law for granted while forgetting the wars that ushered it in. The culture whose flower you represent is the child of conquest. A people of the steppe once fought its way across the Southern Mountains vanquishing the tribes and peoples it encountered. That was the bloody birth of the culture which in turn bore you. The Emperor Asoka, who converted to your faith, inherited a vast realm forged by force of arms. He saw fit to extend it further by conquering the Kalingas before he took your name. He did not relinquish what he conquered on converting, but the rule of Law which he promoted flourished in his dominions, as did your faith, of which he was a patron.

The rule of law is not produced by proclamation. It must be wrested from the claws of chaos in a bitter struggle. The enemies arrayed against it both from without and from within are armed, and have to be defeated before the rule of law prevails. We lived in anarchy before I set my people straight. Vengeance and feuding, ambush and abduction, treason and treachery were our lot. One rode with every sense alert to trouble, casting glances left and right, and slept uneasily beneath one's blanket not knowing when the next attack would come. Broken pledges, double-crosses, murder, theft and looting were our lot. Who was worth trust and who betrayal? Whom should one lend one's strength? There was no telling who one's friends were from one day to the next.

We fought our way out of that wretchedness in battle after battle with our foes. Our first step on the path to Law as well as greatness was our pledge to keep our word and to expel from our ranks those who would break it. Next came the three Great Principles for which I raised my banner: Reward for merit; Loyalty to Khan; and Sharing of spoils. The first speaks for itself; the second spelled doom to traitors, even those who served my cause by treason to my enemies; the third put an end to the horsemen's practice of guarding their booty in battle. I made all spoils the Khan's

until the battle had been won. That gave every man a stake in the final outcome, harnessing self-interest to a larger aim. Those were the first beginnings of the law which rules our realm today. They were the longest steps of my career, those to the founding of the Yasa.

Gautama: Yet to the world at large you appear to be no different than your enemies of yore. There is no escape from wretchedness by working on a grand scale that which on the small scale you have condemned. The two arch-enemies of justice are predator and parasite. The Yasa gave the Mongols strength, but Mongol strength is now the scourge of those you conquered. The Yasa brings no justice to the peoples you enslaved. To secure for themselves the justice now denied them they will have to rise against you, shattering the might which holds them captive in oppression. That's how the seeds of endless strife lie buried in your rule and law, which ought to be the bulwark of the peace of the realm. The Yasa served to set your people straight for conquest, but how is it to grant them peace?

The day is drawing ever closer when you must live with what you've conquered, if not before then when your armies subjugate the last unconquered tribe on earth. Then you will either have to keep the conquered in perpetual subjugation in a state resembling war, or you will have to let them breathe and tread the paths of their own destinies. And then, why would they do your bidding and serve you as now they do? What then, world-conqueror? Will you fight them once again, or how do you propose to secure what you have conquered? Today your grandchildren bustle about your legs, yet tomorrow they, or those they father in their turn, may hide in fear of crazed assassins stalking the land to avenge their dear ones, or they may run afoul of armies of rebellion bristling with skills learned in your grim school and galvanized to fierce resistance by your tyranny. Have you really left your wretchedness behind, or have you simply pushed it from the threshold to have it reappear behind the tent in new and frightful guises?

Temujin: I am not one to deny that many unknowns shroud the future in uncertainty, but that is not to say that nothing was accomplished when I led my people from misery to might, nor that the worries that furrow my brow in my dying days make me regret what's done. Without the courage to go on despite adversities and vagaries we might still be guarding our horses against thieves along the Kerulen River. I see that profit goes with risks, accomplishment requires effort, and life can disappoint our highest hopes, yet that is not for me a reason to complain. I do not ask for final certainty, nor for an end to suffering. In that regard at least I may be just a bit more modest than you are, Gautama.

Gautama: What was it then you fought for, world-conqueror? What was the goal of all your struggles and exertions?

Temujin: The goal was vague, a distant gleam on the horizon, a longing in my breast. Pursuing it, I yoked intelligence, organization, and discipline to the fortunes of my people. I made of the possible a vehicle on which it rides into the unknown future with vastly greater power, wealth, and knowledge than it had when I was born. Perhaps that's all we can accomplish in this uncertain world where empires rise and crumble in never-ending succession.

Gautama: Yet there are structures shaped by men which persist throughout millennia: the tribes themselves, their tongues, and then their faiths outlast many an empire. The faith that I once founded has lasted one thousand and seven hundred years by now, and no one knows when it will

cease to stir the minds of men. It does not pass the centuries unchanged, of that I'm painfully aware, but it exhibits a continuity of thought and culture few empires can equal. That is the other order that informs the lives of men, the order of the sacred, realm of meaning and of purpose. It lodges in men's hearts and minds alongside the order over which you preside, the secular, realm of ability and action.

Temujin: This other order of which you speak, why have I done so well without it?

Gautama: My answer is that you have not. Your rise to fame and power was roundly aided by the proclamation of the will of heaven by Kokochu Teb-Tengri, that ambitious, scheming shaman. My bet is that he thought he helped himself in conferring upon you the mandate of heaven, and that you were not averse to encouraging him in his belief. Then you discovered that what he thus had given, he could also take away. His ambition was about to get the better of you when you disposed of him. How far would you have risen, world-conqueror, had the tribesmen known the truth?

Temujin: He schemed to gain the lordship of the tribes, which was not his.

Gautama: And you adorned yourself with heaven's sanction, which was not yours. In your collusion with Teb Tengri you set your feet on the path of iniquity. No realm of righteousness can grow from such beginnings. In it you lost the sanction of integrity, fount of the kind of authority which rests on the record of its dealings and never imposes. The ultimate questions are moral. They do not permit themselves to be made an afterthought.

Temujin: I have wrought what I have wrought. Why search the past, when nothing we might do can alter it?

Gautama: Yet we might learn from it, not least of all about ourselves, because that is where our character lies open for inspection: in the record of our deeds in this world.

Temujin: And where do you suppose that record to be kept?

Gautama: There is an ever present witness to your every deed and act down to the smallest secret doing, a witness who never sleeps while you are awake and never looks the other way however much you'd wish that his attention be diverted. That witness is yourself. To see what kind of man you are, you only have to look at what you know so well: what you did, and how, and why; not by bits and pieces, but in the whole. Every lie belongs to that inspection as well as every act of generosity. Your good opinion of yourself may not survive such gapless self-examination.

Temujin: And then?

Gautama: In the end it is yourself you have to live with. There is no companion as close to us as we are to ourselves. When that companion is found wanting, stands tainted and discredited beside us, there is no more escape in blame and smug excuses, because he is you yourself. He then robs us of our peace of mind, of the essentials of enjoyment, because to live with him is living with someone we do not like nor can respect yet cannot flee from. If seeing this we yearn to live with someone better, we have set our feet upon the path of righteousness.

Temujin: Your words remind me of Jamuqa with whom I entered blood brotherhood in my youth. His face has sought me out in dreams of late, and nothing makes me sadder than to think that all through our feuding he never lost his love for me. Others came between us. I'll never know what he was up to that Red Circle Day when our paths diverged. I now see more clearly than ever that in all the fighting which then followed his heart was not in victory, and when he finally was delivered into my hands he requested to be put to death to spare me the suspicions of potential rivalry. What else than deepfelt loyalty and love would move a man to ask for such a favor? I am afraid he always loved me but I was blinded by ambition.

Gautama: You had a choice to be a loyal friend or to be Khan and chose the latter.

Temujin: As you abandoned wife and child to search for answers to your questions. Yet our similarity in that regard is no great consolation in the sadness which Jamuqa's memory evokes in me across these many years. It makes me ask if it was worth it. I wish that we had had this conversation long ago, when it might have made a difference.

Gautama: If you had met me in your youth along the Kerulen River, would you have understood my words? How would you have responded?

Temujin: It is quite possible I would have laughed you in the face and told you that what counts in this world is success, and not the way in which it is achieved.

Gautama: Yet as you sow so you shall reap, a truth that's far from obvious until the final harvest has been gathered. We are born in ignorance, and stumbling on our way through life we may attain a bit of wisdom, but it does not come easily. The most important lessons are also the hardest to learn. In retrospect not all that one was capable of doing was worth the effort, and some things left undone would have served one's weal far better than some goals one did pursue. "What should one want to want" is a question no one can fully answer on his own till at the end of his days, but then the deeds that shaped his life have already been done, and the answer can not affect them in the slightest. Few questions rival that of purpose in importance, since our goals affect all that we do by standing as the why and wherefore of a myriad lesser acts and choices. Our sense of who we are and who we can become is linked to our goals, and that in turn affects our standards of integrity. In fact, identity, integrity and purpose determine one another in a mutual relation. The three together represent the true and deepest content of the realm of the sacred, whose highest task is the probing of ultimate purpose. That is why we cannot do without it. You, of course, availed yourself of its offices at, shall we say, a less exalted level. It took a mandate from heaven as ultimate purpose to justify your boundless ambition to rule and conquer. It made you more than just one of many nomad nobles vying for power over the clans and tribes. It made you a son of heaven, Qajir Chinggis Tengri, an instrument of heaven's will. That was Teb Tengri's two-faced gift to you and his curse on those you vanquished.

Temujin: Would you be willing to abide by the penalty of death for using the sanction of the sacred in order to gain worldly power?

Gautama: I have no trouble with such a proposition, provided you are willing to forfeit the legitimacy of your rule for hindering a functionary of the sacred in the exercise of his duties for

any other reason.

Temujin: I do not see that that should be a problem. You may be aware of the protection and the tax exemptions I have extended to men of religion of the several faiths in the conquered territories.

Gautama: I have in fact been curious about your motives for showing such solicitude. Prudence alone might have told you not to raise unnecessary animosities amongs those you meant to conquer, though there may be subtler reasons as well. Let me suggest that by your execution of Teb Tengri you had deprived yourself of the positive source of the sanction which you claimed. You sensed the truth that one can not oneself be the source of both one's acts and their justification. Legitimacy requires a standard, a standard that is not a product of our whim and fancy, but which stands above it as an arbiter and touchstone. "It must not be up to us," that is the principle of legitimacy and justification. Moreover, once vast new kingdoms came beneath your sway, the rites and trances of your shamans may have appeared somewhat inadequate to meet the challenge of ancient cultures with elaborate religions. Not only that: the diversity of peoples, tongues, and faiths that you now rule would need a higher unifying framework in order to be forged into a coherent entity, yet where is such a framework to be found? The higher you ascended on the path Teb Tengri opened up to you the greater was your need for a legitimating sanction once you had disposed of him.

Temujin: And till I find it I will rely upon the strength I've gathered through my conquests. I do not discount the importance of the matters which you raise, but to move them from the realm of speculation requires giving them a concrete shape. I have to rule. I have to judge. I have to organize the empire and administer the realm. In doing so I have before me two disparate conceptions of the state and accordingly two different ways of exercising power. The first sees the state as an instrument through which the ruler marshals the efforts of the ruled for the glory of the state, specifically through wars of conquest. Here the ruled are treated as a resource to be utilized in the interest of the state, which sets itself to steer their productive activity to ensure the channelling of every surplus to itself without regard to the consequences for the ruled except insofar as it affects the revenues. There is a lucid exposition of this doctrine in "The Book of Lord Shang" which I had read to me during my campaign in northern China. "A weak people means a strong state and a strong state means a weak people" it proclaims, and continues: "Therefore a country which has the right way is concerned with weakening the people."

To ensure a population obediently engaged in producing agricultural surpluses for the support of expansionist warfare, it advocates a draconian order of death penalties for minor offences in order to make grave ones unthinkable, the abolition of all private avenues for gratifying ambition and their replacement by a single gate of advancement consisting of public rewards, offices, and honors promoting agriculture, army, and state. Slated for abolition according to this view are merchants, shopkeepers and all manner of clever folk, trade in grain, the hiring of servants, hostelries for travellers, unauthorized change of abode, music and odes, history, fine clothing, virtue, filial piety, faith, chastity, benevolence, private opinions of one's duty, private reputations, private notions of virtue, criticism of the army, and being ashamed of fighting, to give a sample of what that document lists as impediments to the order it advocates.

Now, against this conception of the state there stands another, of which I learned from Yeh-lu

Ch'u-ts'ai. It holds that the purpose of the state is to provide for the ruled. Accordingly the ruler channels resources to fill the needs of the populace through a wide range of undertakings extending from defense of the realm to care of the needy. Yeh-lu is fond of quoting one of the Chinese statesmen of old, Wang An-Shih, to the effect that "The state should take the entire management of commerce, industry, and agriculture into its own hand, with a view to succoring the working classes and preventing them from being ground into the dust by the rich." This concept receives praise for its benevolence, yet I fail to grasp why the impediments which according to Lord Shang stand in the way of the state's efforts to raise surpluses for war would not hinder it in raising them for other purposes as well. Would not a state which set out to serve the people on a grand scale end up oppressing it to raise the necessary revenues? I find the whole concept puzzling.

Gautama: Then let me suggest a third concept of the state for your consideration. Against the first it holds that the state is not an instrument of a ruler, but an agency of the members of the populace in which the office of the ruler is endowed with authority to rule. This is the Mahasammata doctrine of the "Discourse on Knowledge Regarding the Beginning" in the Agganna Sutta of the canon of my faith. Against the second let me propose that the proper function of the state is not to fill the varied needs of the members of the populace, but to secure conditions in which they can go about providing for their needs by their own efforts and according to their own lights. To do so they require security from external attack through provisions for defense of the realm, as well as security from predation and parasitism at one another's hands through administration of a code of justice. In the scripture I just cited, the ruler functions as the agent of justice, specifically charged with intervening against crime. Such a state adds no purpose of its own to the pursuits of men. It only holds them to the law they must observe to keep from being violated and from violating.

Temujin: It does not leave much room for maneuver, but I am pleased to note the role it gives to the two fields in which I pride myself on expertise: the military and the legal. Perhaps we have some common ground to stand on after all, despite the chasm that seems to yawn between us.

Gautama: As long as you are willing to leave the realm of the sacred free of interference...

Temujin: as you leave the secular alone?

Gautama: You can do as you please, except to prevent me from proclaiming what is moral and immoral, right and wrong, sanctioned and not sanctioned by sacred canon...

Temujin: You drive a hard bargain, recluse, but what you propose is worth considering.

Gautama: Then let us do so till we meet again..."