CHAPTER VIII

PRE-BUDDHIST FERTILITY ELEMENTS
OF THE
CHARISMA OF BURMESE KINGSHIP

The very universality of the Buddhist Dhamma – of the ethical as well as cosmic law – made the ideal Dhamma-kingship the agent through which the cosmic order was to be fulfilled on earth by harmonizing human society with the forces of nature. A correlation of the natural and human orders centered representatively in the king as the essential coordinator of Nature’s and Humanity’s orders in society, in the institution of kingship and in the morality of the head of state.¹ Already classical Buddhist lore had inherited such ideas from pre-Buddhist India.² Through the king’s observation of the Dhamma, by ruling ethically, the earth of his realm was to produce good harvests. Injustice of kings (their non-observation of the Dhamma Law) was thought to cause even the fruits of the forest to become bitter and dry.³ According to the Bharu Jātaka, the unjust deeds of a king brought about a calamity of nature, a flood destroying all the inhabitants of the state.⁴ In accordance with pre-scientific notions of causality, neglect of the Buddhist ethical precepts and moral virtues was an infringement of cosmic Law and would thereby upset the cosmic harmony: Thus a famine caused by the absence of rain was in Buddhist legend thought to result from a king’s neglect to give alms, from his non-fulfillment of Buddhist precepts. But when his nature-stricken subjects persuaded him to do so, “then the king practiced the ... precepts and fulfilled the five virtues. And then in all the realm of Kāliṅga the rain fell, the land became prosperous and fertile.”⁵ In medieval Burma, king

¹ R. Gard, Buddhism and political authority, pp. 5–6; Paul Mus, pp. 794ff.
⁴ Cowell, Jātaka...translated, Vol. II (Cambridge, 1895), p. 120.

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Kyanzittha (1084–1112) of Pagan proclaimed in one of his inscriptions that under his rule “all the people . . . shall eat plenty of food, they shall enjoy happiness. In the realm . . . rain shall fall one hundred and twenty times and all the sap of this great earth shall come forth, all barns and granaries shall be full.” “Throughout the whole realm of king Sri Tribhûwanâdityadhammarâja [Kyanzittha] rain shall fall hundred and twenty times . . . At the time of king Sri Tribhûwanâdityadhammarâja all . . . fungi, sprouts, flowers and fruits of trees shall be very plentiful.” 1 On the other hand, it was still believed in eighteenth and nineteenth century Burma that “when princes are unjust and men observe not the Law . . . the sown lands will be dried up or yield fruit of pernicious quality.” 2 Without royal morality, foodstuffs together with medicinal herbs lose their nourishing power. The people are afflicted with severe diseases. 3 At the coronation ceremony of Mindon (1853–1878), the king was emphatically warned that infringing Morality would disastrously upset the cosmic harmony:

[If you] shall . . . break the Abhiseka [coronation] Ceremony oath agreed upon by the good kings, the noble kings, the world shall be distressed, the country darkened and dusky. The great Monster [nga-lyin] shall break the earth [through earthquakes] and the Hell’s fire flaming brightly, shall be flashing burning blazes, [making the earth] crumble to powder, destroying man, burning man. [Insubordination] and theft shall begin . . ., pestilence, base witches, magic beings [hpou: – Cornyn, Burmese glossary, p. 109], ghosts shall rise, dwell in the palace, stirring up, agitating, frightening [with] terrifying snakes, worms, serpents, and spiders rising up and devouring. 4

In contrast, “if kings are righteous, the whole country lives happily.” 5

The well-being of nature and the fertility of the fields was thus thought to depend upon the royal charisma. Such cosmo-magic ideas affected Burma – as other Southeast Asian areas – from India and apparently also from China. Similar to China, these were expressed in the ceremony of symbolic ploughing by the king, a tradition which