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'Wishing You a Speedy Termination of Existence'

Aleister Crowley's Views on Buddhism and Its Relationship with the Doctrine of Thelema

Gordan Djurdjevic
Independent scholar
gordan.djurdjevic@gmail.com

Abstract

Aleister Crowley was considerably influenced by the doctrines of Theravāda Buddhism, which he studied in his youth, both theoretically and practically. He correlated its principles to the principles of scientific agnosticism and considered that its objectives could also be achieved through the practice of ceremonial magic. His eventual acceptance of Thelema's religious philosophy led to his ultimate renunciation of Buddhism as a worldview. This essay examines Crowley's early writings on the subject of Buddhism and suggests that the presence of Buddhist theories remains quite significant in his formulation of the doctrine of Thelema.

Keywords

Crowley – Buddhism – Thelema

Aleister Crowley (1875–1947) maintained a lifelong interest in Asian spiritual traditions of Daoism, Hinduism, and Buddhism, which he typically correlated with the tenets of Western esotericism and his own doctrine of Thelema. On the subject of Daoism, Crowley produced inspired 'translations' of *Yijing, Daodejing*, and *Qingjing Jing*.[1] He believed himself a reincarnation of the Daoist adept Ge Xuan (164–244) and considered Laozi as one of the seven historical Magi.[2]

1 See Crowley, *The Chinese Texts of Magick and Mysticism*, and *Tao Te Ching: Liber CLVII: Translated with an Introduction and Commentary by Ko Hsüan* (*Aleister Crowley*).

2 See 'Κεφαλη Z: The Dinosaurs', in Crowley, *The Book of Lies*, and 'De Magis Temporis Antiqui Imprimis de Lao-Tze' in *Liber Aleph: The Book of Wisdom or Folly*. In *The Book of* Lies, 25, Crow-

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Deeply immersed in divinatory work with the *Yijing*, he furthermore employed its hexagrams as astral doorways, which method he also taught his students—among others, the renowned Argentinian artist Xul Solar (Oscar Agustín Alejandro Schulz Solari, 1887–1963).[3] In addition, one of *The Holy Books of Thelema*, 'Liber Trigrammaton', is replete with the vocabulary of Daoism, as is already evident from its subtitle: 'The Book of the Trigrams of the Mutations of the Tao with the Yin and the Yang'. As Johan Nilsson argued, Crowley interpreted Daoism 'as an expression of a universal religious mystical truth. In a climate largely skeptical to Chinese religion, Crowley praised Laozi and the wisdom he believed could be found in the *Daodejing*'.[4] Hugh Urban[5] and the present author[6] have explored Crowley's interest in Indian Tantra and Yoga. This essay focuses on his views on Buddhism.[7] I suggest that despite the fact that he ceased to self-identify as a Buddhist, throughout his life Crowley upheld some important ideological and methodological views and convictions that have either their origin in, or commonality with, the teachings of the Buddha and his followers.

After the initial exposure to an eclectic system of Western esotericism through his brief membership in the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, Crowley lost interest in magic and embraced agnostic skepticism of a Huxleyan variety and, through his mentor Allan Bennett (1872–1923), Theravāda Buddhism (he considered these two worldviews mutually compatible).[8] Bennett himself was thoroughly immersed in the study of Buddhism and became one of the first British converts to that religion. Robert Bluck, in his study of British Buddhism, noted that Bennett 'explained Buddhism as based on reason rather than faith',[9] which coincided with Crowley's views and approach to the

ley defines these Magi as 'special messengers who initiate periods'. He believed himself to be one of them as the 'Great Beast', To Mega Therion.

3 See Artundo, 'With the Eyes of the Spirit'.

4 Nilsson, 'Defending Paper Gods', 124–125.

5 See Urban, *Magia Sexualis*.

6 See Djurdjevic, *India and the Occult*.

7 On a few occasions, it was practically impossible to neglect a mention of other forms of Asian spiritual traditions, in particular Yoga and Hinduism in general.

8 Crowley's eventual criticisms of Buddhism for the most part concern only the ideological positions of Theravāda Buddhism. We can only speculate what would be his opinion of Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna forms of Buddhism, had he deeper knowledge of them.

9 Bluck, *British Buddhism*, 7. On Bennett, see Harris, *Ananda Metteyya*, and Crow, 'The White Knight in the Yellow Robe'. Harris remarks pertinently that science 'meant far more [to Bennett] than technical knowledge. He linked it with the search for truth about the human being and human consciousness' (*Ananda Metteyya*, 4).

subject. Crowley traveled to India and Ceylon and practiced both yogic and Buddhist forms of meditation with Bennett, now a Buddhist monk Ananda Metteya. It is of some relevance to note an entry in his Diary for June 17th 1901, where he mentioned that he '[w]ent to Daibutsu [in Kamakura, Japan] and took my refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha'. He also wrote several early essays on the subject of Buddhism, incorporating them eventually in the notes and as appendices to his long poem *The Sword of Song* (1904). Crowley maintained his adherence to rational skepticism and Buddhist persuasion for several years, both prior to and after the pivotal occasion of the reception of *The Book of the Law* in Cairo in 1904. As he wrote about it in one of his last works, a (posthumously published) collection of epistolary essays, *Magick Without Tears* (1954): 'At that time I was a hard-shell Buddhist, sent out a New Year's Card "wishing you a speedy termination of existence!"' I will contextualize my analysis of Crowley's early views on the subject by focusing for a moment on the already mentioned early essays: 'Berashith', 'Science and Buddhism', and 'Pansil'.

Crowley's earliest published prose work, a slim volume titled *Berashith: An Essay in Ontology with Some Remarks on Ceremonial Magic*,[10] already contains a discussion of the important areas of inquiry—the theory and practice of Yoga, Buddhism, and Western esotericism, all pursued in a scientific manner—that also, and arguably, remain constitutive of his general interest and worldview throughout his career. Coincidentally, the essay was written in India, in Delhi, and less coincidentally, he signed it using a nom de plume—something he would do very frequently—that clearly expressed his, at the time quite strong, Buddhist leanings: Abhavananda [Abhāvānanda], meaning 'He who rejoices in non-being'.[11] This Buddhist orientation was also underscored by the information on the title page, which stated that the book was 'privately published for the Sangha [i.e. Buddhist community] of the West'.

10 Subsequently incorporated into *The Sword of Song*. My references are to the revised edition included in Crowley, *The Collected Works of Aleister Crowley*, vol. 11, 233–243 (hence my subsequent references to it as a chapter in an anthology, rather than a monograph). In his notes, Crowley provides the following details: '"Berashith" was written at Delhi, March 20 and 21, 1902. Its original title was "Crowleymas Day". It was issued privately in Paris in January 1903.'

11 At the turn of the last century, it was not uncommon in the West to associate the Buddhist goal of *nirvāṇa* with non-being or nothingness. In addition, as McMohan asserts, 'Buddhism itself was often characterized in nineteenth-century Western literature as pessimistic, nihilistic, devoid of any power for promoting goodness, and in a state of degradation and decline' (*The Making of Buddhist Modernism*, 94). It is worth noting that Bennet was opposed to such nihilistic interpretations of Buddhism; see Harris, *Ananda Metteyya*, 20–23.

Crowley introduces the topic by declaring that this is an essay on ontology and ceremonial magic that attempts to harmonize the teachings of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Christianity by 'adapting them to ontological science by conclusions not mystical but mathematical'.[12] (I do not intend to either summarize or comment on the full body of the essay.) The ontological theories addressed in the text are narrowed down to three varieties, three basic propositions, termed Nihilism, Advaitism [i.e. non-Duality], and Dvaitism [i.e. Duality]. It is significant to note that Crowley *continued* to present ontological theories as explicated in this early text. For example, they are again referred to in the chapter on 'The Magical Theory of the Universe' in *Magick in Theory and Practice*, published more than a quarter of a century later (1929), and also in the chapter on 'Universe: The 0 = 2 Equation' in his last major work, *Magick Without Tears*. Even more significant is the fact that, in *Magick in Theory and Practice*, the three ontological theories (here simply termed Dualism, Monism, and Nihilism) are mentioned as being reconciled in the philosophy based on *The Book of the Law*, while the basis of this reconciliation is given precisely in the text under discussion, the 'Berashith'. The obvious conclusion is that Crowley did not significantly alter his basic ontological worldview even after the reception of the foundational text of Thelema.

The analysis of Crowley's employment of mathematical concepts as an illustration of his ontological theories in the 'Berashith' is beyond the scope of this essay. For the present purposes, what needs pointing out is that he rejects absoluteness (or unity, and hence monism) that could be ascribed to any aspect of phenomenal existence. He attributes the quality of absoluteness only to the mathematical concept of zero, which he also sees present in some kabbalistic theories of emanation, as well as in Buddhist philosophy. Being persuaded by not only Buddhism but also by Schopenhauer (and as we will see later, by Thomas Henry Huxley) of the fact that suffering is inherent in existence,[13] his task is how to reduce or revert existence back to zero from which it sprang, and to achieve the state of *nirvāṇa* (understood as an extinction, annihilation). In other words, his proposal is that the riddle of existence does not require an explanatory theory but a methodology of liberation. In his own words:

> Let there be hereafter no discussion of the classical problems of philosophy and religion! In the light of this exposition the antitheses of noumenon and phenomenon, unity and multiplicity, and their kind, are

12 Crowley, 'Berashith', 233.
13 Crowley, 'Berashith', 238.

> all reconciled, and the only question that remains is that of finding the most satisfactory means of attaining *nirvāṇa*—extinction of all that exists, knows or feels; extinction final and complete, utter and absolute extinction.[14]

Crowley is eclectic in his suggestion of the kind of methodology required to accomplish this goal. He states that his 'solution of the Great Problem permits the coexistence of an indefinite number of means; they need not even be compatible: karma, rebirth, Providence, prayer, sacrifice, baptism, there is room for all'.[15] More specifically, he admits two primary means of accomplishment, two 'weapons', in his own choice of vocabulary. On the one hand, there is the ceremonial approach (ecclesiastic or magical—it is not specified), which, as he asserts, is often discarded and which he thinks only the advanced yogis should safely attempt to do.[16] On the other hand, there is meditation, which Crowley emphasizes as the means, 'but only the supreme means'.[17] He explains why: 'Meditation is not within the reach of everyone; not all possess the ability; very few indeed (in the West at least) have the opportunity'.[18]

At this juncture, Crowley introduces one of the most important and original propositions, which will again remain a constant throughout his writings: the equivalence between meditation and ritual. The link between the two lies in the requirement for the one-pointedness of attention that is of equal importance in both disciplines. Crowley defines meditation as 'the absolute restraint of the mind to the contemplation of a single object, whether gross, fine, or altogether spiritual' and argues that 'true magical ceremonial is entirely directed to attain this end, and forms a magnificent gymnasium for those who are not already finished mental athletes'.[19] Being convinced of this mutual commonality, Crowley advances what many would probably perceive as a rather unorthodox claim, and argues that magic represents 'a capital training ground for the Arahat [Buddhist saint]'.[20] The essay concludes with an appraisal of the eight-limbed Yoga as the path that makes possible the annihilation of the causes that lead to continuing existence, in other words, as the path to *nirvāṇa*. The very last words of the essay consist of the famous mantra, typically employed in the

14 Crowley, 'Berashith', 241.
15 Ibid.
16 Ibid.
17 Crowley, 'Berashith', 242.
18 Ibid.
19 Ibid.
20 Ibid.

Tibetan *Vajrayāna* Buddhism and associated with the bodhisattva of compassion, Avalokiteśvara: Auṃ Maṇi Padme Hūṃ, usually translated as 'Hail to the Jewel in the Lotus' or some other comparable phrase.

It is thus evident that already by the Spring of 1902, while he was still only 26 years old, and two years prior to his reception of *The Book of the Law* (in April of 1904), in his first published prose work, Crowley proposed ontological theories and a methodological program that did not significantly change for the remainder of his life. His gradual acceptance of the Thelemic worldview announced in *The Book of the Law* did have a profound effect on his outlook, but I would suggest only to the effect that it provided *specific* infrastructure in terms of theology and its attendant practice (still understood as a pursuit of spirituality through scientific methods). Thus we see, in the already mentioned chapter on the 'Magical Theory of the Universe' in *Magick in Theory and Practice* that the position of nihilism, represented by the mathematical and kabbalistic zero in 'Berashith' and associated with the essence of Buddhist ontology, is now symbolized by the goddess Nuit; the principle of unity (without negative associations that he ordinarily attributes to monism) is now represented by the god Ra-Hoor-Khuit (more properly, Heru-Ra-Ha), who is also a Son; and the principle of dualism is now exemplified by Chaos and Babalon, who are also Father and Mother. The methodology came to be designated as magick, its program of achievement given organizational shape in the structure of A.˙. A.˙., where the various steps on the path imply mastery in both meditation and ceremonial magick. The details and specifics have become fine-tuned, elaborated, and sophisticated, but in their essence they do not truly differ from the worldview promoted in 'Berashith'.

Crowley's admiration of Buddhism is even more evident in his 1903 essay 'Science and Buddhism', also included in *The Sword of Song* (published in 1904).[21] The essay is dedicated to Thomas Henry Huxley (1825–1895), the British agnostic and early supporter of Darwin. The intention was to demonstrate that Buddhism was, both in theory and practice, a scientific religion, 'a logical superstructure on a basis of experimentally verifiable truth',[22] and that even its methods are scientific.[23] As it was typical of him, Crowley was criti-

21 My notes are to Crowley, 'Science and Buddhism' in *Collected Works*, vol. II, 244–261.

22 Crowley, 'Science and Buddhism', 244.

23 Crowley's understanding of Buddhism as a 'scientific religion' was in sync with the general attitude adopted by both the contemporary Western enthusiasts and the Asian proponents of the *dharma*, and was a crucial aspect of what McMahan dubbed 'Buddhist modernism'. He notes that 'Modernizers from Japan and Ceylon, as well as promoters in

cal of Theosophy—despite his admiration for Madame Blavatsky—to which he referred as a mud that was still sticking to the chariot of Buddhism.[24] He also displays criticism of the supernatural and fantastic passages that could be found in the Buddhist canon, but states that he accepts as valid the basic fundamentals of the religion: the Four Noble Truths, the notion of Three Characteristics of Existence, the Ten Fetters, and adds that 'there is clearly a definite theory in the idea of *karma*'.[25] Later in the text, he will identify the concept of *karma* with the law of causation,[26] which correctly ascertains both scientific and Buddhist adherence to this law as a fundamental operative force in the universe.

In order to illustrate his thesis of the commonality between basic principles of Buddhism and science, Crowley quotes Huxley and suggest that his ideas confirm both the First Noble Truth, which states that suffering is inherent in existence, and what the Buddhist call the First Characteristic of reality, which suggests that all phenomena are impermanent and subject to change. He even goes so far as to qualify Huxley's thoughts on the subject as 'an admirable summary of the Buddhist doctrine'.[27] Given such views on the matter, it comes as no surprise that he defines Buddhism as agnosticism, a scientific religion whose cornerstone is the anxiety to learn. As a matter of fact, according to Crowley, Buddhism is the most important branch of science, 'since its promise is to break down the wall at which all Science stops'.[28] He does not make explicit what the wall is that he has in mind here, but it is safe to conjecture that he is referring to the mystical and magical phenomena that obtain in the practice of meditation and ceremonial magic, and in particular those whose experiential aspects imply logical contradictions and apparent breakdown of the regular laws of physics.[29]

Despite his obvious admiration for both the theory and practice of Buddhism, Crowley is simultaneously critical of some of its aspects: although its truth is untarnished, 'its methods, its organisation are sadly in need of repair;

Europe and North America, presented Buddhism in the early decades of its encounter with the West as a religion uniquely harmonious with both the scientific method and the startling new scientific discoveries and theories of the time'. McMahan, *Making of Buddhist Modernism*, 63–64.

24 See ibid.

25 Crowley, 'Science and Buddhism', 245.

26 See Crowley, 'Science and Buddhism', 249.

27 Crowley, 'Science and Buddhism', 246.

28 Crowley, 'Science and Buddhism', 260.

29 Hence his interest in speculative science that attempts to explicate the paradoxical aspects of reality, such as the works on the fourth dimension by Charles Howard Hinton.

research must be done, men must be perfected, error must be fought'.[30] He is calling for a reform, which was to be spearheaded by the International Buddhist Society, founded by his friend and spiritual tutor Allan Bennett in 1903, and which appeals to 'men of independent thought, of keen ecstasy of love of knowledge, of practical training'.[31] He is convinced (and engages in the familiar colonialist tropes in his exposition) that if persons of great intellect join this Buddhist *sangha* of the West, 'there is then an awakening, a true redemption, of the weary and forgetful Empires of the East'.[32] And the principal methodology that was to be at the forefront of this Western Buddhist society lies in scientific research: 'What I require is an advance in the Knowledge of the Great Problem, derived no longer from hearsay revelation, from exalted fanaticism, from hysteria and intoxication, but from method and research. Shut the temple; open the laboratory!'[33]

A brief mention should also be made of the essay 'Pansil', which was included in the revised (but not in the first) edition of 'The Sword of Song', published in the 2nd volume of Crowley's *Collected Works* (1906, 192–195). As its title suggests, the text addresses the subject of the 'five precepts', traditionally observed by the Theravāda Buddhists. Crowley is critical of their validity and proposes instead to interpret them as 'sarcastic and biting criticisms on existence, illustrations of the First Noble Truth [of suffering]; *reasons*, as it were, for the apotheosis of annihilation'.[34] He takes up each of the five precepts—against killing, theft, lying, intoxication, and sexual misconduct—and engages in demonstration of the impossibility of their literal and absolute observance. It is somewhat ironic and disingenuous that a person who was to claim that '[o]nly those are happy who have desired the unattainable'[35] is here ridiculing a prospect of attempting precisely the same. It is also a flawed logic to argue that since absolute moral perfection is impossible, no effort should be wasted on it at all. Nevertheless, that being said, the real objection that Crowley levels against religious ethics, or rather, and to be more precise, against moralizing, concerns his conviction that it is unequal with and unsuited to the task. His conclusion is that moral precepts cannot uproot the cause of sorrow that is inherent in existence as such: 'Do not mop up the Ganges with a duster, nor stop the revolution

30 Crowley, 'Science and Buddhism', 256.
31 Ibid.
32 Ibid.
33 Crowley, 'Science and Buddhism', 258.
34 Crowley, 'Pansil', 192.
35 Crowley, *Liber IV*, Part Two, in *Magick: Liber ABA, Book Four, Parts I–IV*, 67.

of the stars with a lever of lath'.[36] The truly essential thing to do is to awake: 'Awake, awake only! let there be ever the remembrance that Existence is sorrow: sorrow by the inherent necessity of the way it is made; sorrow not by volition, not by malice, not by carelessness, but by nature'.[37] And the root of the sorrow, as declared by the Second Noble Truth, lies in desire, and its uprooting cannot be accomplished 'by any threepenny-bit-in-the-plate-on-Sunday morality—[…]—but by the severe roads of austere self-mastery, of arduous scientific research, which constitute the Noble Eightfold Path'.[38]

To summarize Crowley's views on the subject, prior to the reception of *The Book of the Law*: Crowley's early writings on Buddhist (as well as Hindu) teachings and practices reflect a worldview that in many respects remain unchanged throughout his career. Aside from his lifelong pursuit of poetry, as a young man he passionately embraced what are at a superficial glance often thought of as incongruent pursuits, namely science and magic, and he remained faithful and true in his continuous adherence to the principles of those disciplines and their ideals. Academic studies of the turn-of-the-century occultism, such as Alex Owen's *The Place of Enchantment: British Occultism and the Culture of the Modern*, Corinna Treitel's *A Science for the Soul: Occultism and the Genesis of the German Modern*, and Mark Morrison's *Modern Alchemy: Occultism and the Emergence of Atomic Theory*, in fact convincingly demonstrate that individuals and groups engaged in esoteric and occult pursuits were not divorced from the social, cultural, and scientific concerns of their time. In that sense, and to simplify the argument, it is not surprising just as it not incongruous that people like Crowley combined a keen interest in both science and spirituality. Crowley expressed this particular attitude in a nutshell with the chosen motto of his journal of scientific illuminism, *The Equinox*, which succinctly stated: 'The Method of Science—the Aim of Religion'. And while the employment of scientific vocabulary in esoteric discourse may be interpreted as nothing more than a validating strategy,[39] I would argue that it is much more advantageous to see it as an expression of the Zeitgeist. All people are children of their time and the occultists are not an exception. In Crowley's case, as suggested by Egil Asprem, what is taking place is an attempt to bring the study of magic and related disciplines under the umbrella and methodology of scientific naturalism.[40]

36 Crowley, 'Pansil', 195.
37 Ibid.
38 Ibid.
39 See Hammer, *Claiming Knowledge*.
40 See Asprem, 'Magic Naturalized?'. Crowley's position that magical and mystical pursuits

The formative impact that his academic and magical studies, at Cambridge and in the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn respectively, had on Crowley did not result in the decision to keep these interests separate; quite the contrary, his decision was to combine them, to study magical phenomena in the spirit of scientific experiments. His exposure to Asian spirituality resulted in his making a claim of the mutual compatibility between Yoga and magic (both of which were predicated on the discipline of mental focus), and in his conviction that Buddhism is a scientific religion. Given his admiration for the work of Thomas Huxley, it is not surprising that Crowley understood and approached Buddhism as a historical example of enlightened agnosticism, just as he was convinced that the methods of Kabbalah were 'compatible with the agnosticism of Huxley'.[41] The most important event that took place after Crowley's early engagement with Buddhism and Yoga, was his reception and gradual acceptance of the message of *The Book of the Law*. It is of some interest to interrogate to what degree the ideology of Thelema impacted Crowley views on these Asian spiritual systems.

Crowley incorporated major aspects of Yoga into his teaching Order A.˙A.˙., in such a way that the successful accomplishment of the required tasks within the system implies a full mastery of the classical Patañjali-based Yoga.[42] Since

need to be undertaken in a scientific manner was probably, and perhaps fundamentally, influenced by his exposure to the methods of the Society for Psychical Research (SPR), established at the University of Cambridge where he spent three years as an undergraduate student. See Asprem, 'Magic Naturalzed?', 145, 148–149, and Pasi, 'Varieties of Magical Experience', 56–57. SPR was founded in 1882; Crowley was acquainted with at least two prominent members of the Society, Everard Feilding and Hereward Carrington. Kaczynski notes that Feilding, who was the Society's secretary between 1903 and 1920, signed the Oath of the Probationer in Crowley's A.˙A.˙. on August 21, 1909. See Pasi, 'Varieties', 56, and Kaczynski, *Perdurabo*, 188.

41 Crowley, *Confessions of Aleister Crowley*, 511. See Asprem, 'Magic Naturalized?', 162 and ibid. n. 97. It is highly significant that in the chapter titled 'De Arte Kabbalistica' in *Liber Aleph*, Crowley suggests that the task of the adept is to reduce all conception to numbers and in such manner become aware of the structure of the mind, which then makes possible the uprooting of hidden tendencies, which must be brought to zero. Here is a very succinct formulation of the essential spiritual practice, which combines elements of science (mathematics), Western esotericism (Kabbalah), and Buddhism (the uprooting of tendencies which govern the operations of the mind).

42 One exception is the requirement of the preliminary moral training, which in the classical Yoga concerns the pursuit of *yama a*nd *niyama*. Crowley argued that these are accidental and not essential aspects of Yoga and that they are replaced and made obsolete by the fundamental Thelemic ethical precept, which is "Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the Law." It needs to be said that among various traditions of Yoga in India, there are also those, for example the Nāth yogis, who similarly focus on only six "limbs" of Yoga and which also exclude *yama* and *niyama* from their program.

the other practices taught in the Order fall squarely within the category of Western Esotericism, it may be argued that the structure of A.˙.A.˙. represents a vivid illustration of Crowley's view on the mutual compatibility of Yoga and magick. Similarly, the 'Manifesto of the O.T.O.' declared that the Order teaches all major branches of Yoga. Crowley's organizational structure of the O.T.O. never actually incorporated this type of training within its syllabus, nevertheless, he remarked that the successful performance of the particular type of magick that the Order teaches necessitates a mastery in yogic concentration. The inevitable conclusion is that the practice of Yoga occupies an important place in Crowley's system of spiritual self-mastery. To a lesser degree, much less overtly, but nevertheless quite importantly, the same remark applies to the role of Buddhism in the doctrine and methods of Thelema. I propose to interrogate this thesis at some length.

One of the first prose works composed after the reception of *The Book of the Law* in 1904 is indicative of Crowley's manner of incorporating elements of Asian spiritual traditions within the syncretic method of what he would eventually label as *magick*. I have in mind some interesting and important, albeit subtle, references to Buddhist theories in a short text titled "The Wake World," included with three others (and an important Foreword) in the 1907 volume *Konx Om Pax: Essays in Light*. The timing of the publication is of interest in that it occurred practically simultaneously with the founding of the A.˙.A.˙.. Formally resembling a fairy tale, the text is presented as a monologue of a girl called Lola Daydream who, led by her Fairy Prince whom she eventually marries, travels to ten houses governed by the prince that metaphorically represent the ten *sephiroth* on the Tree of Life. The journey takes place alongside twenty-two roads, associated with the paths of the Tree, and is punctuated by experiences and imagery traditionally depicted on the major Tarot cards. The progress towards the First House is intertwined with the increased condition of wakefulness, the text explicitly stating that those who dwell in other Houses are asleep and dreaming, the full awakening being a prerogative of the First (and highest) House only. This general theme, reinforced by the title of the essay, bears obvious resemblance to Buddhist teachings in that it associates spiritual maturity with the state of awakening (the 'Buddha', which is a title rather than a personal name, means the 'awakened one').

It is however when Lola attempts to 'cross the Abyss'—one of the two major goals in Crowley's spiritual system enshrined in the structure of his teaching Order, the A.˙.A.˙.—that the text introduces a much more significant allusion to Buddhist doctrine. Generally speaking, in order to 'cross the Abyss' one needs to annihilate one's ego. Crowley will eventually conceptualize this achievement as a transpersonal rebirth of the aspirant in the form of a 'Babe of the Abyss,' nur-

tured by the mother Babalon—a Thelemic goddess associated with the *sephira* Binah (whose number is Three), a metaphorical home of the 'Masters of the Temple' (Magistri Templi), i.e. those who have successfully accomplished the 'crossing.' The designation of the grade and its general prerogatives, Crowley inherited and adapted from the teachings of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, in other words, from the Western esoteric tradition, but the method of achievement, as described in 'The Wake World', is straightforward Buddhist in its vocabulary and implications. This important subject deserves a substantial quote. Lola tells us that:

> You have to leave the House of Love, as they call the Fourth House [*Chesed*]. You are quite, quite naked: you must take off your husband clothes, and your baby cloths, and all your pleasure clothes, and your skin, and your flesh, and your bones, every one of them must come right off. And then you must take off your feeling clothes; and then your idea clothes; and then what we call your tendency clothes which you have always worn, and which make you what you are. After that you take off your consciousness clothes, which you have always thought were your very own self, and you leap out into the cold abyss, and you can't think how lonely it is.[43]

What is being described here is the engagement with, or rather disassociation from, what the Buddhist call *skandhas* (Pali, *khandhas*), which are the constitutive elements or 'aggregates' that in combination help maintain the illusory notion of one's essential identity. Consequently, to 'wake up' from this dream of one's substantive selfhood, one needs to divest oneself of, we could nowadays say to deconstruct, these combined aggregates. As Lola names them, these *skandhas* are, in technical vocabulary: *nāma-rūpa* = name-and-form ('clothes … skin … flesh … bones'); *vedanā* = feeling ('feeling clothes'); *saṃjñā* = perception ('idea clothes'); *saṃskāra* = mental formations ('tendency clothes'); and finally, *vijñāna* = consciousness ('consciousness clothes'). This is a significant proposition, which evidently suggests that the Buddhist analysis of the constitutive elements formative of one's (illusory) personality is correct in its insight, and that the path towards the annihilation of such personality, the path sought after by the initiates of the A.˙A.˙., follows the route already clearly delineated in traditional Buddhist doctrine.

43 Crowley, 'The Wake World', 21.

That Crowley did not fully renounce aspects of Buddhist teachings subsequent to his acceptance of the mantle of the prophet of Thelema is also evident from the following. He continued to endorse a basic form of Buddhist meditation, the *mahāsatipaṭṭhāna*, as an important tool in disciplining the mind. In the Thelemic variant of *prisci theologi*, the succession of historical Magi who inaugurated major changes in the religious consciousness of humankind, the Buddha is counted as one of them. In his major doctrinal text, *Liber Aleph*, written in New York City during WWI, in a section titled 'De Gautama', Crowley writes:

> Whom Men call Gotama, or Siddartha, or the Buddha, was a Magus of our Holy Order. And His Word was ANATTA; for the Root of His whole Doctrine was that there is no Atman, or Soul, as Men ill translate it, meaning a Substance incapable of Change. Thus, He, like Lao-Tze, based all upon a Movement, instead of a fixed Point. And His Way of Truth was Analysis, made possible by great Intention of the Mind toward itself, and that well fortified by certain tempered Rigour of Life. And He most thoroughly explored and mapped out the Fastnesses of the Mind, and gave the Keys of its Fortresses into the Hand of Man. But of all this the Quintessence is in this one Word Anatta, because this is not only the foundation and the Result of his whole Doctrine, but the Way of its Work.[44]

It is also rather significant that in his overview of the structure of A.˙. A.˙., which maps the stages of spiritual progression in accordance with the principle of Thelema, as presented in the text 'One Star in Sight', included in *Magick in Theory and Practice* (1929), the three highest Grades, in other words the three supreme achievements, imply the mastery over those aspects of reality, which Buddhists consider and classify as the 'three characteristics of existence,' and which Crowley accepted as valid constituents of Buddhist doctrine in 'Science and Buddhism' (1904): suffering (*dukkha*), impermanence (*anicca*), and lack of self (*anatta*). It is noteworthy that although the tasks of the A.˙. A.˙. grades require 'mastery' over these characteristics, the implication remains that the Buddhists are fundamentally correct in assessing the basic nature of reality. We have already seen that this was also true with respect to Buddhist teaching regarding the constitutive elements of one's personality that need to be discarded in 'crossing the Abyss' (and as described in 'The Wake World'). Perhaps even more significantly, and quite explicitly, in one of the received or 'holy'

44 Crowley, 'De Gautama', 70.

books of Thelema, the short text called 'Liber B vel Magi', the highest spiritual achievement is described as 'the Opening of the Grade of Ipsissimus, and by the Buddhist it is called the trance Nerodha-Samapatti [i.e. *nirodha-samāpatti*]'.[45]

Crowley's answer to the challenges presented by the realities of sorrow, impermanence, and the lack of selfhood—the three characteristics of existence postulated by Buddhism, the mastery over which constitutes the task of the three highest grades in the A.˙.A.˙.—is rooted in the fundamental insight concomitant to what he terms the 'logic' functioning above the Abyss. According to this insight, any statement is true only to the degree that it contradicts itself. The corollary to this is that below the Abyss, the contradiction is division, but above the Abyss, the contradiction is unity. Accordingly, if sorrow, impermanence, and the lack of selfhood are true, their opposites are equally true. In an unpublished diary entry for May 12, 1920, Crowley reflects on the matter explicitly: 'The Mystery of Sorrow was consoled long ago when it went out for a drink with the Universal Joke. The Mystery of Change amounted to Nothing, exactly as in a chemical equation. And the Mystery of Selflessness? Here I am not yet clear. There is Self everywhere, in each part as in the Whole; but it is not Separate Self'.[46]

Despite his arguably deep indebtedness to the teachings of Gautama, a fundamental change in Crowley's outlook, which led to his abandoning of Buddhism as a worldview, did take place. Of course, this concerns his adoption of the ideology of Thelema, but we have seen that this adoption did not necessarily and automatically change some of his earlier-held views. He eventually rejected the pessimistic approach to human existence as well as to the orien-

45 Crowley, 'Liber B vel Magi sub figura I', 5. "The attainment of cessation (*nirodha-samāpatti*) is the highest meditational state possible in Theravada Buddhism. Those in this state are to all appearances dead, for it is the extinction of all feeling and perception, continuing for as long as seven days. It is seen as the actual realization of Nibbana in this life" (King, 'The Structure and Dynamics of the Attainment of Cessation in Theravada Meditation: Abstract', 226). Compare this to Crowley's account of what he refers to as his 'final initiation' (implying the grade of Ipsissimus) that took place in the Spring of 1924: "In this last ordeal the earthly part of him was dissolved in water; the water was vaporized into air; the air was rarified utterly, until he was free to make the last effort, and to pass into the vast caverns of the Threshold which guards the Realm of Fire. Now naught human may come through these immensities. So in that Fire he was consumed wholly, and as pure Spirit alone did he return, little by little, during the months that followed, into the body and mind that had perished in that great ordeal of which he can say no more than: *I died*" (Crowley, 'The Master Therion: A Biographical Note', in *The* Equinox, vol. III, no. 10, 16–17; emphasis added).

46 Crowley, "Diary Excerpts," 12 May 1920. O.T.O. Archives. My thanks to William Breeze for providing a copy of the excerpts.

tation towards *nibbāna* understood as an eternal rest. In the commentary to a verse from *The Book of the Law*, he writes about the necessity to '*cut out the idea of the Eternal Rest*. This *nibbana*-idea is the coward-"Mother's Boy" idea; one ought to take a refreshing dip in the *tao*, no more. I think this must be brought forward as the Cardinal Point of Our Holy Law'.[47] He will eventually formulate the theory of 'Three Schools of Magick', which mutually differ regarding their outlook on the nature of existence. Within that schema, Christianity and Buddhism would be prime examples of what he designates as 'Black Schools', which perceive existence as infused with sorrow, while Thelema and, interestingly enough, Indian Tantra would be classified as representatives of the 'White School', which celebrates existence as 'pure joy'.

As mentioned earlier, in his magnum opus *Magick in Theory and Practice* (1929), Crowley argued that the ontology, originally proposed in 'Berashith', is harmonized in the theoretical model based on the philosophy and theology of Thelema. What is different in these two accounts, separated by a quarter of a century in terms of the publication dates, is the introduction of the Thelemic *dramatis personae* who stand for the three ontological varieties, which he continued to regard as the three basic theories of the universe. It is a very important fact, in my opinion, that the perspective of dualism receives erotic connotation: it is represented by the pair consisting of Chaos (alternatively Therion, the Beast), 'one Father of life',[48] and Babalon, 'the Mother of us all',[49] both of whom are—perhaps principally—symbolized by the sexual organs, the *phallos* and the *kteis*; the *lingam* and the *yoni*. While Crowley maintains the view that sorrow obtains in the nature of duality (understood, I would argue, as a separation), his solution to the annihilation of this duality is not to advocate renunciation (as Buddhists might do), but to proclaim the precept 'Love is the law, love under will'. This love, *agape*, which he also calls Yoga, emphasizing its etymological meaning of 'union', eventually and ultimately consists of the 'marriage' between the self and non-self, resulting in 'Consummation [which destroys one] utterly, leaving only that Nothingness which was before the Beginning'.[50]

The most original innovation arguably concerns Crowley's understanding of the state of unity. We have already seen that he was critical of the *advaitic* position of monism throughout his career. His ingenuous solution, based on

47 Crowley, *The Law is for All*, 171; emphasis in the original. Note the syncretic approach again, and the mixing of Buddhist and Daoist terminology.

48 Crowley, 'Liber XV: O.T.O. Ecclesiæ Gnosticæ Catholicæ Canon Missæ' in *Magick*, 585.

49 Ibid.

50 Crowley, 'De Nuptiis Mysticis', 23.

his understanding of the message of *The Book of the Law*, suggests that the ultimate unitary principle, the pure self, is a dynamic and continually changing phenomenon. In the vocabulary of Thelemic symbolic discourse, the state and experience of union is represented by an 'ever-growing child' who is the Lord of this Aeon. Crowley thus rejects the *vedāntic* monistic conception of *ātman*, understood as 'a Substance incapable of Change',[51] and instead defines its function as being one of constant 'going' (i.e. change), a quality which he associates with the function and nature of gods. Unlike the Buddhists, who are unwilling to accept the notion of the essential self, the *ātman*, since they perceive change as a universal characteristic of existence and argue that what changes cannot be one's self, Crowley is adamant that this self exists. As a matter of fact, he ascribes to it divine qualities, but argues that the self is dynamic, growing, constantly changing, and that each experience, which inevitably alters the nature of this self, is an act of love under will and a marriage, which leads to orgasm, which represents the nature of existence, which is, according to *The Book of the Law* and contrary to the Buddhist 'First Noble Truth', pure joy.

At least since the formation of the Theosophical Society in 1875, Asian forms of spirituality have penetrated, influenced, and altered—to varying degrees—aspects of Western culture and society, including an array of esoteric currents. Colin Campbell has dubbed this trend 'the Easternization of the West' and compared its significance to the impact of the Renaissance, Reformation, and Enlightenment, echoing both the thesis and title of Raymond Schwab's classic study *The Oriental Renaissance: Europe's Rediscovery of India and the East* (English trans. 1984; French original 1950).[52] Crowley is not the only Western esotericist who incorporated elements of non-European, particularly Asian, traditions into the theory and practice of his spiritual system. We cannot fully understand and interpret such systems without some knowledge of other cultures' religious traditions, elements of which in many respects exhibit meaningful similarity to what we designate as *Western* esotericism. More comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon of esotericism not only calls for comparative undertakings, but also suggests that esotericism, as a particular aspect of religious traditions and a style of thought, exists in other cultures as well: in the form of alchemy, astrology, divination, and magic (to state the most obvious examples). I suggest that it is limiting to construct the category of esotericism as an exclusively Western cultural phenomenon[53] and propose that

51 Crowley, 'De Gautama', 70.

52 See Campbell, *The Easternization of the West*.

53 For the various iterations of this thesis, the following selected references are illustrative.

we, instead, operate with the notion of regional, denominational, and historical varieties of esotericism, for both comparative and theoretical purposes.

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For the argument that esotericism is best seen as a cross-cultural phenomenon, while focusing on Indian traditions of Yoga and Tantra as the closest South Asian analogues of *Western* esotericism, see Djurdjevic, 'Masters of Magical Powers'; idem, *India and the Occult*; and idem and Shukdev Singh, *Sayings of Gorakhnāth*. In his 'Locating the West: Problematizing the *Western* in Western Esotericism and Occultism', Kennet Granholm points out the constructed and thus unstable nature of the categories of 'East' and 'West' and their putative contrast, suggesting in the process the preference towards more specific and localized descriptions of matter at hand (e.g. *Florentine* rather than *Western* esotericism), in Henrik Bogdan and Gordan Djurdjevic (eds), *Occultism in a Global Perspective*, which volume both implicitly and explicitly suggests transcultural nature of its subject matter. Several authors have interrogated the influence that Western forms of esotericism exerted on Indian culture. Henrik Bogdan explores this in relation to Crowley's Thelema in his 'Reception of Occultism in India'. Mriganka Mukhopadhyay, in 'The Occult and the Orient: The Theosophical Society and the Socio-Religious Space in Colonial India', suggests that the Theosophical Society 'emerged as a transcultural agency that connected the Orient with the Occident, highlighting the occultist and esoteric lore of Hindu religious tradition' (34). See also Keith Cantú's forthcoming Ph.D. Thesis on Śri Sabhāpati Swāmi, who influenced Crowley and was on his part also influenced by Theosophy. The focus on esotericism as a Western phenomenon also implies its rootedness in Christian tradition; recently, Liana Saif and Matthew Melvin-Koushki emphasized both the richness of Islamic esotericism and its influence on the medieval and renaissance West (in particular, but by no means solely, through Al-Kindi's theories of astral rays and the impact of the Arabic manual of magic *Ghāyat al-Hākim* that became widely known under its Latin title as *Picatrix*). See, inter alia, Saif, *The Arabic Influences on Early Modern Occult Philosophy*, and Melvin-Koushki's review essay of Saif's study, '(De)colonizing Early Modern Occult Philosophy', and in particular the concluding remark that 'It seems a historical justice, then, that the high Christian occultism of the Renaissance remained so profoundly and organically—if occultly—*Islamic*' (112; emphasis in the original). See also Roukema and Kilner-Johnson, 'Editorial: Time to Drop the "Western"', in *Correspondences* 6:2. Of course, the scholars of Vajrayāna Buddhism, to return to the area study closer to the subject of the present paper, were referring to it as *esoteric* Buddhism for decades. A possible counter-argument that what is meant by 'esoteric' in the context of Indian or Tibetan spirituality does not exactly denote the same cluster of cultural significations as is the case with the Western term holds no water, since the proposal that esotericism is a cross-cultural phenomenon implies that its manifestations are always contextual and thus never the same. We are always dealing with the individual, regional, historical, and denominational *varieties* of the phenomenon.

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