

# THE NATURE OF BECOMING: AN EXAMINATION OF ALEISTER CROWLEY'S ONTOLOGY AND MAP OF CONSCIOUSNESS

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## Introduction

In 1902 English mountaineer, poet, and occultist, Aleister Crowley (1875-1947), published his “theory of the Universe”<sup>1</sup> in which he combined the concepts of Buddhist ontology with Hermetic Kabala regarding the symbolic representation of existence. The central thesis of his work is the enigmatic equation  $0=2$ . He then took his Kabalistic Ontological “map” and constructed a spiritual practice for the systematic attainment of various levels of consciousness that ended up leading the practitioner to a level of consciousness whereby one is “wholly free from all limitations soever, existing in the Nature of all things without discrimination of quantity or quality.”<sup>2</sup> In this paper I plan to explore the meaning of Crowley’s  $0=2$  equation and detail its significance within the context of Buddhism and Western Hermetic Kabala.

## Background

Before examining Crowley’s ontology, it is necessary to have a little background information about him. In his adolescents, Crowley rebelled against the spirituality of his parents and began looking to meet his spiritual needs elsewhere. The first significant place Crowley looked was an obscure semi-Masonic organization called

<sup>1</sup> Aleister Crowley, *Collected Works of Aleister Crowley*, vol. 2, “בראשית [Berashith] An Essay in Ontology with Some Remarks on Ceremonial Magic” (Chicago: Yogi Publication Society, 1906), 233.

<sup>2</sup> Aleister Crowley, *Magick: Liber ABA, Book Four, Parts I-IV*, 2d rev. ed., ed. Hymenaeus Beta (York Beach, ME: Samuel Weiser, 1994), 491.

The Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. Taking initiation on November 18, 1898, Crowley advanced quickly. It was within the Golden Dawn that Crowley was exposed to many occult doctrines including Hermetic Kabala. Also in the Golden Dawn, Crowley met Allan Bennett (1872-1923), who had joined the Golden Dawn in 1894<sup>3</sup> where he became an important member.<sup>4</sup>

Bennett was a sickly very person suffering from Asthma. As time progressed, Bennett's illness worsened and became so severe that he eventually left Britain in 1900 and went to Sri Lanka for a warmer climate.<sup>5</sup> In Sri Lanka he became a Buddhist Monk and adopted the dharma name *Ananda Metteyya*.<sup>6</sup> A year later, Crowley joined him and converted to Buddhism.<sup>7</sup> It is within this environment that Crowley combined his understanding of Hermetic Kabala obtained while a member of the Golden Dawn and his understanding of Buddhist ontology obtained while studying with Ananda Metteyya to create his theory of the Universe, 0=2.

### Two Realities or Truths

One of the core teachings within Buddhism is that the true fundamental state of the universe is void or empty, *sunyata*. "In order to avoid confusion it should be mentioned here that there are two kinds of truths: conventional truth (*samvrti-satya*) and ultimate truth (*paramatha-satya*)."<sup>8</sup> This means that while in a conventional sense things seem real, in an ultimate sense nothing has any intrinsic existence or essences but instead depends on conditions to seemingly cause it to exist. However, even these conditions are illusory, as Buddhist scholar, Jay Garfield writes, "without individual essences, there will be no basis on which to draw the absolute, essential distinctions necessary to establish phenomena as intrinsically other than their conditions. Without substantial differences, there are no absolute others by means of which to characterize phenomena."<sup>9</sup> This cycle of conditioning is called dependent origination, *pratitya-samutpada*, and is the underlying basis of *sunyata*.

<sup>3</sup> Elizabeth J Harris, *Ananda Metteyya: The first British Emissary of Buddhism* (Kandy, Sri Lanka: Buddhist Publication Society, 1998), 5.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 3-5.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>6</sup> The best source for information relating to Allen Bennett is Elizabeth J. Harris' biography, *Ananda Metteyya: The first British Emissary of Buddhism*, (Kandy, Sri Lanka: Buddhist Publication Society, 1998).

<sup>7</sup> Richard Kaczynski, *Perdurabo: The Life of Aleister Crowley* (Temple: New Falcon Pub. 2002), 81.

<sup>8</sup> Walpola Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught*, 2d rev. ed. (New York: Grove Press, 1974), 55.

<sup>9</sup> Jay L. Garfield, *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way: Nagarjuna's Mulamadhyamakakarika*, (New York: Oxford UP, 1995), 112.

In contrast to ultimate truth, we see around us a conventional truth that seems dualist. Whether the duality is expressed in ideological polemics such as good versus evil, or as phenomena that appears to be independent and separate, conventional truth operates in an apparent state of individuality. Buddhism teaches that this apparent distinction is an illusion. Even emptiness itself is empty and considered dependently arisen.<sup>10</sup>

One fundamental aspect important to understand is that when discussing ultimate and conventional truths, both are valid and accurate from a certain point of view simultaneously. “When we use such expressions in our daily life as ‘I,’ or ‘being,’ ‘individual,’ etc. we do not lie because there is no self or being as such, but we speak a truth conforming to convention of the world. But the ultimate truth is that there is no ‘I’ or ‘being’ in reality.”<sup>11</sup> This ultimate lack of duality results in an ontology that is immanent while conventionally, our world appears to be dual. This differentiation between ultimate truth or reality and conventional truth and both being simultaneously valid is the key to understanding Crowley’s  $0=2$  equation.

### **Nothing and Dual Identity**

When discussing ultimate truth, Crowley uses the word, “nothing” instead of emptiness or void. He equates this nothing to the zero in his equation. What is imperative to keep in mind is that when Crowley says nothing or zero, he does not mean the absence of something equating to a vacuum or space. Instead Crowley asserts, “Nothingness is that about which no positive proposition is valid.”<sup>12</sup> Like above, where emptiness is itself empty, nothing can be said about Crowley’s nothing. In the same way, when he writes zero, he notes it is not the zero of mathematics that is a numerical place holder and can be written to the first power asserting identity. On the contrary, Crowley’s zero is actually zero to the zero power meaning that it has no identify nor is extended in any categories.<sup>13</sup>

On the other side of the equation we find the number two. This two is representative of duality. Crowley notes that it could also be written as one plus negative-one [ $1 + (-1)$ ]. This is because for something to exist in a conventional sense, it must be contrasted against an environment or background dissimilar from the thing itself. As a simple illustration Crowley wrote, “All that of which we are aware must obviously posses limits, or it could have no intelligible meaning for us; if we want ‘pork,’ we must specify its qualities and quantities; at the very least, we

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 305.

<sup>11</sup> Rahula, 55.

<sup>12</sup> Crowley, *Collected Works*, 236.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 237.

must be able to distinguish it from 'that-which-is-not-pork'"<sup>14</sup> All the phenomena that surround us can be observed because we can differentiate it against something that is not the same. It is this mental differentiation that creates the illusion of duality.

Finally, in the middle of the equation is the equal sign. This indicates that there is no difference between the ultimate truth represented by the zero and conventional truth represented by the two. Quoting from the *Vimilakirti-nirdesa-sutra*, Garfield notes, "that the distinction between conventional and ultimate is itself dualistic and hence merely conventional. To realize it is hence [is] to enter into nondual awareness of emptiness."<sup>15</sup> The nondual understanding of existence is vitally important to understanding Thelma and *Liber AL vel Legis*. The cosmological concepts of Nuit and Hadit are contained in the  $0=2$  equation. For instance, the following is Crowley's commentary on the *Liber AL* verse, "Be thou Hadit, my secret centre, my heart and my tounge!" Crowley writes:

Nuit formulates me as Hadit, especially in the three centres of consciousness of her Being. In his way, for this purpose, I became the complement of Her.

These centres are those of Love, Life and language. Duality is the condition of all three. It will appear later how it is that None and Two are identical; they are distinct in our minds only because those minds are conscious, and therefore think of "two" as their own state. But the unconscious mind thinks Nothing, and is Nothing. Yet it is the same mind.

Nuith selects three centres of Her Body to become "Two" with Hadit; for she asks me to declare Her in these three. Infinite freedom, all-embracing, for physical Love; boundless continuity for Life; and the silent rhythm of the Stars for Language. These three conceptions are Her gift to us.<sup>16</sup>

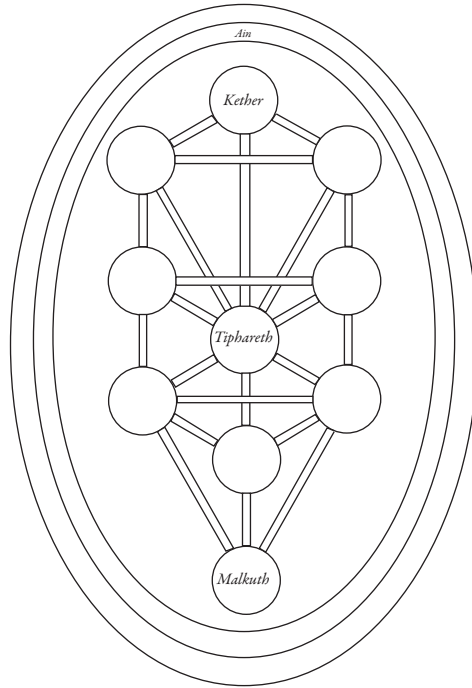
As can be seen, the duality between Nuit and Hadit are conventional as are the various states of consciousness that Crowley discusses. Nevertheless, since we are conscious, being human, we need to work within these limits until we obtain a level of understanding whereby we can get beyond duality and understand existence in its ultimate form, nondual. This is the goal of Crowley's systems and since he was exposed to the Golden Dawn's framework, he used it when creating his system.

<sup>14</sup> Aleister Crowley, *Magick Without Tears* (Temple: New Falcon Pub., 1973), 55.

<sup>15</sup> Garfield, 325.

<sup>16</sup> Aleister Crowley, *Magical and Philosophical Commentaries on The Book of the Law*, ed. John Symonds and Kenneth Grant (Montreal: 93 Pub. 1974), 94.

## Hermetic Kabalistic Tree of Life



### The Kabalistic Map

When formulating the equation of  $0=2$ , Crowley used the Hermetic Kabala's Tree of Life (see diagram) diagram to map out the process of consciousness attainment. Within the Golden Dawn, the Kabala and the Kabalistic Tree of Life were of great importance. Each grade or level of advancement was attributed to a *sepheroth* or sphere on the tree. In addition, noted occult author Israel Regardie stated the Tree of Life "has been found to be the most convenient system yet discovered of classifying the phenomena of the Universe and recording their relations."<sup>17</sup> The Golden Dawn used the tree of Life to map out its initiatory system. Crowley used the Tree of Life much like the Golden Dawn did to map out the stages of one's attainment and to articulate the steps each person would observe when reaching each stage.

The tree itself is made up of ten circles or spheres arranged in three columns and connected with twenty-two paths. The top three spheres and paths form an upward

<sup>17</sup> Israel Regardie, *A Garden of Pomegranates: An Outline on the Qabalah*, 2d ed. (St. Paul: Llewellyn Pub. 1970), 20.

pointing triangle, the next two sets of three spheres form two downward pointing triangles and at the bottom, center, is the tenth sphere. In addition to the paths forming the triangles, there are other paths connecting various spheres together in a system that is mirrored on both sides of the center column. The spheres are numbered one through ten starting at the top center and ending at the bottom center. In addition to the spheres and path, there are also three ovals that surround the tree and are called the veils of existence. This is the diagram and classification system that Crowley used to map his levels of consciousness.

Crowley first placed the zero of  $0=2$  at the top of the diagram represented by the third veil of existence called *ain*, to which he states, “I assert the absoluteness of the Qabalistic zero.”<sup>18</sup> *Ain* means “nothing” in Hebrew and is what Crowley equated to *sunyata*. The other side of the equation is located in *malkuth*, the tenth sphere on the Kabbalistic Tree of Life in which conventional, dualistic, existence operates. The twenty-two connecting paths represent symbolic gateways or connections. Because of the immense scope of the Kabbalistic Tree of Life, I am going to concentrate on the center column and in particular focus on the three spheres, *malkuth*, *tiphareth*, and *kether*.

Conceptually, *malkuth* is where one operates in the day-to-day sense and thus experiences the illusion of duality. All phenomena appear real and separate. This is also the place where time and space are perceived. To this end, Crowley asserted:

Time [was] necessarily created by us in order to make room for the apparent existence of the duality which we devise...Two phenomena which occur in time would be considered simultaneous if separated in space, so that our observation of the former were delayed...[S]o as far as we are concerned, i.e., in our sensoria, so that any two impressions can only be registered by us as consecutive. Even when we are aware of their simultaneity, we are compelled to place them in sequence.<sup>19</sup>

Because of the illusion of duality, our conventional consciousness makes the distinctions between one object or thought versus another in time and space. As such, we constantly differentiate and order our soundings based on observations of separateness and when we observe phenomenon. The result is, “[w]e invent Space, Time, Sense-Impressions, etc. to enable us to distinguish between ‘experiences’ to express our conception of the multiplicity of the possibilities contained in the idea of Zero.”<sup>20</sup> Similarly, discussing the illusory “principle of the independence of

<sup>18</sup> Crowley, *Collected Works*, 236.

<sup>19</sup> Crowley, *Magical and Philosophical Commentaries*, 116.

<sup>20</sup> Crowley, *Magical and Philosophical Commentaries*, 121.

separate phenomena,” Garfield points out that the arising and cessation of phenomena appears simultaneous and distinct only because we misunderstand the nature of dependent arising and thus confuse conventional reality to be ultimate reality.<sup>21</sup> However, Crowley states there are further states of consciousness in which eventually this illusion is eliminated.

The next state of consciousness proceeds from an observation of duality to a state of unity or one-pointed consciousness. This state of mind is mapped to the Kabalistic sphere of *tiphareth*. In *tiphareth* Crowley notes, “the vision (or apprehension, a much better word) of the universe [is] as a single phenomenon, outside all limitations, whether of time, space, causality, or what not.”<sup>22</sup> It is in this state of consciousness that one attains “Knowledge and Conversation of the Holy Guardian Angel.”<sup>23</sup> Knowledge and Conversation of the Holy Guardian Angel was Crowley’s term for uniting the conscious mind with the subconscious. When one achieves one-pointed consciousness, the differentiation between any one thing and other is removed. This includes the perception of time, space, perceptions of cause and effect, and even distinctions between the conscious and subconscious mind.

In his ceremony to lead the practitioner towards one-pointed consciousness, called *Liber Samekh*, Crowley wrote “[t]he Angel appeareth in Tiphareth, which is the heart of the Ruach, and thus the Centre of Gravity of the Mind...Hence the Angel is in truth the *logos* or articulate expression of the whole Being of the Adept, so that as he increases in the perfect understanding of His Name, he approaches the solution of the ultimate problem: Who he himself truly is.”<sup>24</sup> “The subconscious, Crowley said, was to all intents and purposes the Holy Guardian Angel with whom the aspirant wished to communicate, in order to establish his or her ‘True Will.’”<sup>25</sup> Crowley stated that one obtains one’s true will when one becomes fully aware of one’s true self and gains complete self-knowledge. This self knowledge is obtained

by withdrawing for a time to a monistic form of self-consciousness, which does not distinguish between the Ego and Non-Ego; in other words, obtaining Samadhi...One concludes from this that the Universe is identical with the Ego, and all things dissolve into a formless essence characterized by knowledge and bliss. But this early stage of Samadhi is an illusion...But subsequent Samadhi teaches...that his universal instantaneous Unity exists as ‘None and Two’; and he learns that his Samadhi is peculiar to himself as well as common to all.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Garfield, 273.

<sup>22</sup> Crowley, *Magick Without Tears*, 56.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>24</sup> Crowley, *Magick: Liber ABA, Book Four*, 540.

<sup>25</sup> Keith Richmond, *Progradior & The Beast: Frank Bennett & Aleister Crowley* (London: Neptune 2004), 174.

<sup>26</sup> Crowley, *Magical and Philosophical Commentaries*, 117.

When this state of consciousness is reached, barriers between the conscious mind and subconscious are eliminated and they interact as one. Thus the main task of a practitioner was “to have Knowledge and Conversation of his Holy Guardian Angel, to become aware of his nature and his purpose, fulfilling them.”<sup>27</sup> Reaching this point of self-knowledge, i.e. knowing one’s True Will, was of great significance to Crowley. In fact, it was the centerpiece of his spiritual and philosophical system.

Despite the importance of this step in the path of attainment, this state of consciousness is only a step on the path towards deeper state of consciousness; a state in which the true nature of existence is realized. Crowley places this level of attainment on the Kabalistic sphere called *kether*. *Kether* is where one becomes fundamentally aware of the ultimate nature of truth; what Buddhists often call “enlightenment.” Crowley called this ultimate state of consciousness or initiation “ipsissimus”; a combination of the Latin word, *ipse*, meaning self, and the Latin superlative inflection, *-issimus*. In regard to this attainment Crowley writes:

[T]he Ipsissimus is wholly free from all limitations soever, existing in the Nature of all things without discriminations of quantity or quality between them. He has identified Being and not-Being and Becoming, Action and non-Action and Tendency to Action, with all other such triplicities, not distinguishing between them in respect of any conditions, or between any one thing and any other thing as to whether it is with or without conditions...The Ipsissimus is pre-eminently the Master of all modes of Existence; that is, His being is entirely free from internal or external necessity. His work is to destroy all tendencies to construct or to cancel such necessities. He is the Master of the Law of Unsubstantiality (*anatta*). The Ipsissimus has no relation as such with any Being; He has no Will in any direction, and no Consciousness of any kind involving duality.<sup>28</sup>

The Ipsissimus no longer operates on a day-to-day basis within the illusion of duality. Upon reaching a fundamental understanding of the truth, one continues to operate in the world around us, but sees and understand phenomena in a radically different way.

Commenting on this state of consciousness, Crowley describes it as the experience where the universe itself, is “abolished and annihilated.”<sup>29</sup> He continues, “It is commonplace to say that no words can describe this final destruction. Such is the fact; and there is nothing one can do about it but put it down boldly as I have done above.”<sup>30</sup>

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 96.

<sup>28</sup> Crowley, *Magick: Liber ABA, Book Four*, 491.

<sup>29</sup> Crowley, *Magick Without Tears*, 57.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.



### Conclusion

As can be seen, Crowley obtained much of his ontological understanding from the concepts in Buddhism; translating the ideas of *sunyata* or emptiness into the Kabalistic *ain*, or nothing. Crowley adapted the concepts of dependent origination, *pratitya-samutpada*, and conventional truth (*samvrti-satya*) and ultimate truth (*paramatha-satya*) into the compact equation of  $0=2$ . In doing so, he took Eastern ontological concepts and presented them in a Western Kabalistic framework that can be explored by those with little Eastern understanding. By mapping the various states of consciousness to spheres on the Kabalistic Tree of Life, Crowley presents a system by which a practitioner could systematically work to gain the various forms of consciousness. By first transcending dual consciousness and leaving *malkuth*, a practitioner can reach one-pointed consciousness and achieve the first major goal of obtaining Knowledge and Conversation of the Holy Guardian Angel and gaining understanding of one's True Will; this stage being mapped to *tiphereth*. No small task itself, but once completed, the practitioner would work towards higher states of consciousness ending in the sphere *kether*, obtaining full comprehension of the true nature of the universe.

Taken all together, Crowley's system of attainment combined disparate elements of Eastern and Western philosophy and theology into a spiritual philosophy by which practitioners can obtain higher states of consciousness and understanding of themselves and the universe.

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## INTERPLAY

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