

Split Selves and Fractured Karma

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About two years ago, quite unexpectedly, I received in the mail one day from Mr. T. Magness of Bangkok—a person totally unknown to me, even though I had spent a full five days in Bangkok in 1958—two paper-covered volumes entitled *Samma Ditthi* (Right Understanding) and *Samma Samādhi* (Right Concentration). Immediately I began to read one of them, being intrigued to find a Theravada Buddhist quoting from Alfred North Whitehead, but then they got somehow displaced from my mainstream of reading. And thus it was not till this past winter that I actually got around to reading them straight through. And not till I was well through my second volume—the *Samma Ditthi*, did I realize that I was encountering something brand new, at least to me, in Theravada Buddhism. When I discovered this I wrote Mr. Magness, who promptly and generously gave answers to my questions about his theory of split-personality or psychic-offshoots and their relation to the Buddhist doctrines of karma and rebirth. From his books and letters I will attempt to present something of his doctrine.

But first it will be best briefly to present an outline of the basic Buddhist doctrine of selfhood as a background before dealing with the psychic-offshoot doctrine.

THE TRADITIONAL BUDDHIST ESTABLISHMENT OF SELFHOOD

According to this doctrine each of us sentient individuals have assembled as one life moment out of an empty vacuum of time and space of individualized existence, which has been projecting itself anew,

moment by moment, life by life, and age after age, in many forms from some primordial but unspecified beginning about which Buddhism refuses to speculate. This chain-of-being will continue to project itself forward into an indefinite future eternity, propelled by the blind will-to-be (or *tanhā*, the thirst for existence), unless it achieves an absolute detachment from all desire-to-be in some new form, and thus gains Nirvana.

This process may be viewed from two somewhat different perspectives. We may take it in *cross-section*, i.e., by an analysis of an existent sentient being at any one moment of its existence. In this perspective Buddhism holds that there is no integral self to be found in the final analysis of self, though of course there is an empirically perceptible being-of-sorts. This conviction it states in its doctrine of *anattā*—non-self, no-self, or no-soul. What appears to be a personal individual, says Buddhism, is actually a composite bundle of five loosely related factors, one of *tangible form* (including *physical form*) and four others comprising the feeling, volitional, and consciousness components. These have no true center, be it repeated; the so-called persons which we conceive our selves to be, are of *dependent origination*, i.e., formed by the momentary association of our component factors which *together* make up a kind of "person" of illusory substantiality. But this person is never a true unity and comes completely unglued or unwound at physical death. It is more like a stream, to use another favorite Buddhist analogy, which is contained within the rough limits of its banks, i.e., individualized form; but it is really a fluxing, momentarily changing current of mental-physical events, rather than a substance; an "amorphous plurality," to use Mr. Magness' excellent phrase. It is only an impersonal blind will-to-be that thrusts forward from moment to moment and life to life, taking unto itself ever different sets of five-fold factors to form a new pseudo-being at each rebirth.

There is also another way of portraying this essential unreality of the so-called individual being. And this is the doctrine of the "four heaps" or streams of personality. This differs from the above view of the individual as a fivefold bundle of constituent factors, only in emphasis and context, by describing individuality in its formative process. Each heap or stream is one of four *successive* and *causally related* stages of development, but each state, heap,

or stream is itself fivefold. And secondarily, in some sense that I am not fully certain of, these heaps are also constitutive *levels* of being:

1. The first heap or stage, and basic ingredient or fundamental level of a new being, is "The aggregate stream of the immediately past life which descends to rebirth in a womb" at the moment of conception. It is comprised of ignorance (of its former births and its own illusory nature), desire, grasping tendencies toward new life, and "mental impulsions of becoming." These comprise the basic karmic deposit from the past, as yet only potential but reaching out hungrily for new form. "The bulk of Kamma [Karma] is condensed into the first heap; the other three heaps preserve only the residue. For it is the first heap that is to be built into the parami self."

2. The second heap, stage, stream, or level of personal being is the receptacle-vehicle comprising the empirically perceivable "substance," as it were, of the fivefold body-mind individuality which each one of us is. It comes into being as a result of the combination of the first-heap karmic thrust or stream with the male and female physical elements. The thrusting-desiring-grasping karmic impulse of the first stream draws to itself the as-yet-dissociated second-heap elements of new being, as a magnet attracts iron filings. The elements of this new fivefold being at first are "purely receptive and negative, and at birth are devoid of immediate ethical responsibility."

3. The third heap, stream, or level represents the past karmic inheritance of the first heap or stream, having received its renewed actual embodiment in the second-heap elements; and "it is this third stream which accumulates fresh kamma [karma] and condenses it down into the two preceding streams, leaving an impress therein." In other words, this third stage or stream of becoming is the new "self" *in active engagement with its environment in thought and action*, taking into itself at its deepest level striking influences and characteristics which will thenceforth be components of its essential nature. This is the dynamic-positive aspect of the new sentient being, *in qualifying, altering, and interactive relation* to what has been given it by karmic inheritance and to its new mind-body form (i.e., the sum of the first two streams). These two first streams, interacting with the individual's

environment, form the enlarging, Karma-accumulating individuality of the third heap, and comprise the ongoing base of personal process.

4. From the third stream or heap or stage, as active and dynamic, arises the fourth one which is "futuristic in content. That is, a negative group for future rebirth and reception of impressions." This stage, or this stream, in confluence with the other streams and resulting from the other stages, represents the total "self" of successive states interacting externally with environment, internally with its own component streams, and all together thrusting forward in time by futuristic intention, thus accumulating a new karmic destiny.¹

Now whether or not we grasp all the subtleties of this analysis, it is clear that it emphasizes in a second way the non-integrality of personal being, by portraying it as a bundle of streams or levels of energy-for-becoming, neither more nor less. But it brings into play another factor which represents the second perspective from which we can view the process of selfhood, namely the *longitudinal-section* view which calls attention to the factors of *continuity*. Now this *continuity*, even if not continuing *identity*, of successive states or stages of becoming, is truly as important as the non-integrality (according to the cross-sectional view) of the *becoming-process* (of person) at a given moment. For it is their *continuity* that gives the successive states their significance. And that continuity, within the individual life stream, is *absolutely integral*, with no mingling sidestreams, no confluence of separate personal-being streams with each other. There may be a slight porosity of the banks of that stream of being that is "I"—that is, "outside" influences may penetrate my consciousness and influence my course—but the central identity of the forward thrust into new being, moment by moment, life by life, is purely my own; and this, not in the sense of an identical soul or self that passes from life to life, but in the sense of a self-contained karmic stream of forward-thrusting-into-being, whose new states or positions in time are the result of one and only one linear set of previous body-mind events. To repeat: The karmic integrity of this individualized stream of being is absolute through the ages.

Now it is important for our purposes here to observe briefly the ideal perfection of the factor of *continuity* as achieved in the lives of the saints and Buddhas. They are initially subject to karma as other men, and are composed of the same four-heap and five-factor selfhood. But theirs is a superior use of karma. *For they are the embodiment of a victorious and ever-cumulative will-to-perfection.* Whereas the lives of ordinary beings describe an indecisive seesaw of varying karmic fortune and uncertain will, those who become saints and Buddhas do so by the unceasing performance of worthy and insightful deeds which cumulatively bear their fruit in an increased capacity for spiritual accomplishment and self-control that finally achieves a superior kind of cohesiveness. One may say that with such persons, the longitudinally-viewed cumulative continuity of their will-to-liberation becomes dominant over the cross-sectional quality of individuality as *anattā*, or "amorphous plurality." The forward-upward tending dynamism of this will-to-perfection is the *essential* quality of their karmic life-stream; they represent self-created centers of dynamic power for good. The mere blind thrust of karmic energy into a new existence is progressively transformed into a fully conscious, deliberate and irresistible drive toward the perfection of enlightenment.

In passing, it may be observed that the only difference between the saint and the Buddha is the relative thickness, so to speak, of the sheaf of capacities composing this dynamic new self which each carries on into the future. Sainthood (as seen in Theravada Buddhism) is composed of a sheerly individualized will-to-release of the thickness of a needle-pointed thrust toward Nirvana. Buddhas, because of a millionfold number of existences lived under the compulsion of a vow to achieve ultimate Buddhahood, are by contrast massive forward thrusts of monumental perfections (*pāramīs*) which enable them, upon their final engagement, to teach and sustain others in the way to Nirvana, besides achieving their own Nirvana. And such is the force of these accumulated perfections that they somehow remain as a mystical and dynamically present force in the world after the Buddha has entered into his own inaccessible Nirvana.

SPLIT-PERSONALITY KARMA AND ITS CURE

We are now ready to turn to the split-personality doctrine proposed by Mr. Magness. This doctrine may be stated thus: The loose congeries of factors that make up the pseudo-self of the cross-sectional view (*anattā* or non-self stream of being) may become dissociated into new selves, especially upon death, each of which splinter selves or psychic-offshoots then takes its own separate course of karmic being—though it takes some time for such a self to accumulate much self-being even of the illusory sort. (It may wander as a disembodied spirit for long ages.) In such an interpretation of *The Three Faces of Eve*, had Eve died when the three selves within her were struggling for mastery, she might have split into three new sub-selves who might not have recognized each other at their next encounter in their next lives. A quotation or two will give Mr. Magness' account of this situation:

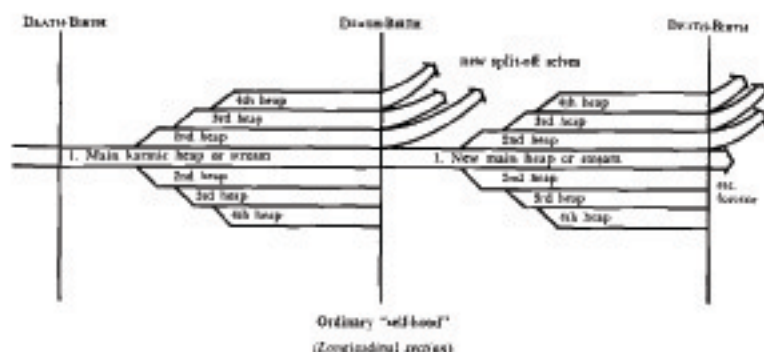
At death, due to lack of integration and purification at one firmly poised and oriented center, these four heaps of personality make a total split and go their ways² (see Diagram I).

When a man dies, the main stream of consciousness, or life-continuum process (*bhavanga-sota*), though it continues to activate as a stream, has offshoots. That is, under the force of the grasping impulses which accumulated from antecedent environmental contact (but constrained by the centripetal gravitational force in the organism) the main stream is split off into sub-streams, each instinct with a separate life-continuum process of its own henceforth (not unlike the divided amoebae).

Thus what is perpetuated is not static identical singularity but, rather, amorphous plurality. Each separate life-continuum process is then propelled to its own kammic [karmic] destiny, sometimes taking rebirth immediately. Once separated thus, it would scarcely be to the point to say that one such life-continuum has an identification with another. The logical conclusion is that a man may meet one of his former life-continuum fragments incarnate and never so much as recognize the connection.³

Here then is a variant form of the *anattā* or four-stream conception of being. It emphatically asserts that there is no true self-identical person at any moment, nor any identity carrying on from life to life; that dependent-origination-identity is not true iden-

DIAGRAM 1



ity. Yet it is different from the assertion that the five factors simply come apart upon death, in its statement that the pseudo-self comes apart into subordinate *selves*, or split-karmic streams—each of which becomes a new five-factor pseudo-self. For Mr. Magness this neatly explains or confirms two tangential Buddhist doctrines: (1) the seemingly infinite perpetuation of the number of selves to be reborn, though the "original" total number has been reduced by those attaining Nirvana; and (2) why it is that the memory of one's past lives—attainable by psychic discipline—peters out in the far past into an indistinct haze. The unperceivable beginning of a "self" represents its split-off point into sub-selfhood at some past time. Of course each splinter-self, though "but a recent product of environmental friction and contact," containing only a fraction of the parent stream's qualities, nevertheless as a proud pseudo-self "considers itself to be unique, god-given and eternal."¹

Such is the negative side of psychic off-shoots, so to speak. Must one then consign himself to be thus forever split and re-split into an infinitude of sub-selves?—most disturbing, especially respecting Westerners! Where in all this is the hope of Nirvana?—for Nirvana for all its seeming negativity is not a mere zero end of self-fragmentation, but the maximization of one special sort of self-becoming. *The whole point of Mr. Magness' work is the delineation of the positive prospect of achieving "true self-inte-*

gration"—though this phrase is distinctly not Theravadin:

Thus also it is said that insofar as the individual is concerned he can be said to endure from existence to existence *only to the extent that his paramis (perfect qualities of consciousness) are preserved intact. . .*⁵

The way to release, therefore, is a unification, integration, and purging of all rebirth factors, so as to eliminate any further reproduction of the amorphous plurality which perpetuates existence in the world spheres, without end.⁶

The way of release is then a genuine integration of those factors found in the ongoing stream of pseudo-selfhood, which is only a series of successive states, causally related to each other but otherwise discontinuous, into a new self of genuine integrity, a self capable of salvation in Nirvana. It should be noted that this is the maximization of the element of continuity, observable in the longitudinal-section view of life and which is best achieved by the saints' and Buddhas' will-to-perfection. It is the creation, along the way, of a non-splitting, true selfhood composed of an enduring entity of spiritual deeds (see Diagram II).



Before speaking a little further of the *religious* implications of this new and integral salvation-self, it is of interest to observe Mr. Magness' interpretation of the *psychological* process involved in the creation of this new self. Briefly, it is a process by which there is deliberately formed an integrated self-consciousness which is superior to, i.e., more deeply central and more tightly unified than, all of the separative self-fragments which compose ordinary and peripheral selves. It is a process in which all levels

of the self are united into an integral unity; from the ongoing subconscious life-stream (*bhavanga-sota*) which flows onward even during sleep and is the lowest common denominator of all life, up to and including the highest levels of explicit consciousness of saintly and Buddha awareness. In response to my question as to whether some of his descriptions of the action and interaction of consciousness and subconsciousness during the process of self-remaking were Freudian or reverse-Freudian, Mr. Magness replied in part:

The collective experience of the parami-self cannot be to the fore of consciousness in its completeness at any given moment. What is not to the fore is sunk and collected in a receptacle which is the bhavanga, its subconscious otherness. . . . When it is said that the peripheral mind must be sunk down into the bhavanga, what is actually meant is to sink it down and then edge it up two finger-breadths above the bhavanga. . . . If it is not edged up there will be no full bhavanga awareness, there will be only submergence into the ceaseless random flow of the subconscious stream. It is edged up thus so as to be near the bhavanga stream, so that it can dip into it at will, just as one dips into a stream and retrieves flowing objects therein. It is correct to say that by so doing the peripheral mind is deepened and made aware of experience unplumbed (brought over from other lives, as well as opening new horizons which may arise). It is also correct to say that it is the redemption of the subconscious by making it conscious.⁷

Now some of the imagery here is esoterically Buddhist. The two-finger distance above the bhavanga-stream center, located near the navel, goes back to an ancient Hindu-Buddhist theory of psycho-physiology and its appropriate meditative techniques; nor is the picking up of the memories of past lives particularly Freudian—no matter how vast the subconscious realm is conceived to be! But the psychological bearings are clear. Conscious and subconscious levels of awareness are broken open to each other, and by their interrelation a new integral unity is created, containing elements of both. Not only is the superficial ordinary consciousness brought into vital contact with its own inward roots and hidden sources, but the turbid irrational currents of the subconscious life-force (or Id) are brought to clarity, redeemed by consciousness, and made part of a new self-consciousness which is

neither sub- nor super- but integral. As Mr. Magness goes on to say:

Because his subconscious is pure the arahatta [i.e., the saint ready for Nirvana] has no delusive or morbid dreams.⁸

But of course for the Buddhist the result is far more than the merely psychological renewal and integration of the person. It is a salvational process as well. This new self that results from the intermingling of the *bhavanga-sota* (subconscious continuum) and rational consciousness under proper auspices, is the parami-self. Its unification and purification of the ordinary fractionated pseudo-self's impulses and drives constitutes a self capable of liberation from the impersonality of karmic being, and preserves it unto true Nibbanic selfhood with no further fractioning.

As a consistent Buddhist, however, Mr. Magness is very emphatic that this new self is not the Hindu atman or primordial transcendent soul in disguise:

The nature of the transcendence of the new self that arises... is not to be considered as inherent in individuality, for that would be tantamount to championing the doctrine of a permanent soul flowing on unchanged, from some primordial source. It is indeed created by self-action, but by no means is the self which created it originally transcendent. It is not a matter of original transcendence but transmutation.⁹

And every human self has at least a latent capacity to thus take the elements of its *anattā* (non- or pseudo-self) and transmute them into a *finally* transcendent self.

Now does this integration or transmutation of self, which results in Nirvana's attainment, signify the utter cessation of selfhood? Mr. Magness quite emphatically denies such a conclusion. For, were annihilation the case,

it would be a contradiction in terms, for one does not integrate one-self through a process of aeons merely to disintegrate again into some ocean of forgetfulness. Super-selfhood [my phrase] is just the end-result of the aeonic process, and Buddhas at the moment in Nibbana [Nirvana] are certainly imbued with consciousness or they wouldn't be what they are. Their radiance fills the ocean of Nibbana.¹⁰

POSTSCRIPT

What is the significance of this doctrinal statement of Mr. Magness? Writes he: "I have proposed nothing new at all, but rather these doctrines have been imposed on me as the result of prolonged investigation. It is not book-learning which clarifies doctrines but the understanding which one brings thereto, revealing old doctrines in fresh light."¹¹ Nor is he concerned with whether "Buddhist orthodoxy" finds him "heretical" or not—since that "orthodoxy" is a body of inconsistent doctrinal variations, in his opinion.

To me as an outsider, Mr. Magness' doctrine seems to have considerable Buddhist logic about it and to make more rational the doctrine of the karmic inheritance of personal characteristics. For I quite agree with him when he writes: "It is always wrong in Buddhist circles to reduce everything to a naked karma-thrust."¹²

To me it also seems that Mr. Magness has courageously made explicit what is largely implicit and subdued, and somewhat illogical, in Theravada orthodoxy because of its deep addiction to negative language, namely, the *dynamically positive quality of Buddhist salvation as a process of building a higher, more integrated self*. (For "self" is always an evil term in Theravada no-soul orthodoxy.) But actually "self-building" has a significant parallel in the widely received Theravada presumption that the infinite store of the Buddha's accumulated merits (his parami-self) remains as a *presently available and dynamic force for good and salvation among men*, though the Buddha himself, as an empirically perceptible self, has passed on into theoretically inaccessible Nirvana. And as I see it, the forging of an enduring *parami-self*, wrought of good deeds done in a meditational wisdom-context, is the *essence* of saint-making or salvation in Buddhism. It is therefore Mr. Magness' great importance to attempt to rescue the anatta (no-self) doctrine from its sheer negativity and the conception of karmic thrust from its nakedly characterless propulsion into new being.¹³ And it is of great interest, and perhaps significance, that this no doubt represents a manifestation of the new *experiential* emphasis in Theravada Buddhism,

consequent upon the layman's very recent venture into the former exclusively monkish preserve of meditational discipline.

NOTES

1. All quotations from letter of July 13, 1963.

2. Letter, July 13, 1963.

3. *Samma Ditthi*, p. 69.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 72.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 69 (*italics added*).

6. *Ibid.*, p. 70.

7. Letter, July 13, 1963, p. 1.

8. *Ibid.*

9. *Ibid.*, p. 2.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 1.

11. Letter, September 15, 1963.

12. Letter, July 13, 1963.

13. Part of the "characterlessness" of the karmic thrust into new being may arise from my own misinterpretation of Buddhist karma. In any case I had not been so sharply aware, before reading Mr. Magness' writings, of other alternatives to the seeming bareness (*i.e.*, devoidness of personal qualities) of the karmic thrust of a life into new individuality.