

**The Bhikkhu and the Magus:  
Exploring Allan Bennett's Influence on Aleister Crowley**

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**[Slide 1]** With a title like “Exploring Allan Bennett's Influence on Aleister Crowley” I could take this paper in any number of directions. This is because Allan Bennett was a significant person in the early years of Aleister Crowley's magical career. Crowley met Bennett in 1898 while in the Golden Dawn and almost immediately afterwards had Bennett move in with him and become his magical teacher. A couple of years later Bennett traveled to Southeast Asia due to a number of reasons, primarily health concerns and Crowley visited him there three times over the next four years; the last time being in November 1905. Over these seven years Bennett introduced Crowley to a number of magical practices, philosophical ideas, and yoga techniques. To cover all these subjects would take more time than I have allotted, thus I will concentrate on an important aspect of Crowley's magical system introduced to Crowley by Bennett that gets very little attention: the Magical Memory.

**[Slide 2]** Before going further though, I think it may be useful to give some background information about Allan Bennett since many people are unfamiliar with him or only know of him through his brief time in the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn or through his friendship with Crowley. Bennett was born on December 8, 1872 in London. His parents were Catholic and his father was an engineer. His father died early in Bennett life. There is much we don't know about his childhood, although there are few conflicting stories about his mother and his upbringing. He did have one sister who often cared for him because he was very sickly with asthma. He was trained as a chemical analyst and was employed briefly in London. Yet his health kept him bedridden quite frequently.

In 1893 he joined the Theosophical Society and was a member until 1895. During this period, 1894, he took initiation in the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn and assumed the name Frater Iehi Aour which means “let there be light.” Within a year had entered the Golden Dawn's Second Order. He met Crowley in 1898 when Crowley joined the Golden Dawn. At the end of 1899 or the beginning of 1900, due to continued health problems, Bennett moved to Ceylon (modern Sri Lanka) and began to study yoga abandoning magic, the Golden Dawn, and all associated with it. **[Slide 3]** In August

1901 Crowley made his first visit to Bennett in Asia and they went for an extended retreat where they both practiced yoga.

By the end of 1901 Bennett had decided that Buddhism was his calling and that the West, in particular England, should know the truth of Buddhism. He relocated to Burma and in December 1901 became a novice within Theravada Buddhism. In February 1902 he took his Bhikkhu ordination and became the second Englishman ever to become a Theravada monk. At his Ordination he assumed the name Ananda Maitreya which he later changed to the Pali version, Ananda Metteyya. Crowley second visit was just after the ordination. **[Slide 4]** Bennett founded the International Buddhist Society, the Buddhasana Samagama, in 1903. He began a publishing campaign sending pamphlets and a quarterly journal to English speaking countries. His goal was to establish a Buddhist Sangha in the UK and in April 1908 he returned to England to promote Buddhism and establish this Sangha. **[Slide 5]** While there he helped found the Buddhists Society of Great Britain and Ireland. He returned to Burma in October 1908, six months after his arrival. His health problems persisted for years and in 1914 he de-robed, returned to England with the intent of going to a better climate in California. However, due to the same health issues, he was denied passage to the US and thus was stranded in the UK.

While no longer a Bhikkhu, he supported the London Buddhists as best he could. He presented lectures and wrote for and edited the Buddhist Society Journal, *The Buddhist Review*. **[Slide 6]** In January 1923 his only book was published, *The Wisdom of the Aryas*. His joy from that was short, however, because he died two months later of an intestinal blockage. He was fifty-one when he died.

**[Slide 7]** Now let's turn to the importance that magical memory has in Crowley's work. For him, the magical memory began to develop as a practice when he stayed with Bennett for three days in Burma in November 1905. While there Bennett, having been a Bhikkhu for almost three years, instructed Crowley to explore his karma and his past lives. As Crowley writes in *The Temple of Solomon the King*, Bennett said, "Explore the River of the Soul. ... whence and in what order you have come by."<sup>1</sup> This was no easy endeavor. But subsequent pages in *Temple of Solomon the King* note how Crowley struggled with this task. Eventually Crowley comes to the realization that the purpose of his life, the reason for his myriad past lives, and the impetus of his karma was to teach the one method of attaining Knowledge and Conversation of the Holy Guardian Angel.<sup>2</sup> **[Slide 8]** Later this process of "thinking backwards" through the line of karma becomes a magical practice described in Liber CMXIII (913) or Thisharab, Thisharb being the word Berashith spelled backwards. Published in *The Equinox*, Volume I, number 7, in 1912, Thisharb is described at the beginning of the document as, "not intended to lead to the supreme attainment. On the contrary, its results define the separate being of the Exempt Adept from the rest of the Universe, and discover his relation to that Universe."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Temple of Solomon the King, in *The Equinox*, Volume I, number 8, p. 10.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>3</sup> Liber Thisharb, in *The Equinox*, Volume I, number 7, p. 107.

Moreover, “It is of such importance to the Exempt Adept that We cannot overrate it. Let him in no wise adventure the plunge into the Abyss until he has accomplished this to his most perfectest satisfaction.”<sup>4</sup> Furthermore Crowley writes in *Magick or Book Four*:

The danger of ceremonial magick --- the subtlest and deepest danger --- is this: that the magician will naturally tend to invoke that partial being which most strongly appeals to him, so that his natural excess in that direction will be still further exaggerated. Let him, before beginning his Work, endeavour to map out his own being, and arrange his invocations in such a way as to redress the balance.

Crowley adds a footnote to this saying, “The ideal method of doing this is given in Liber 913”. Also, in one of his last books, actually published after his death, *Magick Without Tears*, he writes, “‘Magical Memory’ – the memory of former lives ... ‘Magick’ [the book] ... gives a very full and elaborate account of this memory, and Liber CMXIII [913] (Thisharb) a sound official Instruction on the main methods of acquiring this faculty.”

As we can see, this is an important aspect of Crowley’s system, and strangely, one few, if any academics, have explored. One of the reasons may be that Crowley had difficulty with the practice itself. Liber CMXIII [913] lists two ways of examining one’s magical memory. The first being the process of “thinking backwards,” or thinking in reverse order. First you review your day, and then the year, then multiple years, all the way back to your birth and then past that to previous lives. The second method is to extrapolate what happened in previous lives based on processes and conditions of this current life. Again, in *Magick Without Tears*, Crowley writes, “None of my writings, by the way, deal with the First Method; this is because I could never make headway with it; none at all. F[rater] Iehi Aour [Allan Bennett], on the other hand, was a wizard at it; he thought that some people could use that way, and others not.” Here we find Crowley referencing Bennett in connection to the Magical Memory, and it is not the first time. In fact, within Liber CMXIII [913], there is a direct reference to read an essay by Bennett published in Crowley’s *Equinox* the year before Thisharb’s publishing in 1912. The essay is entitled, “Training the Mind.”

The “Training the Mind” essay by Bennett is very important because it tells us a little more about the relationship between Crowley and Bennett. The essay, published in *Equinox* Volume I, Number 5, details how using Buddhist meditation one can cultivate Right Concentration, one part of the Buddhist eight-fold path. As Bennett writes at the beginning of the essay, “the object of this paper is to set forth what is written in the books of these methods of cultivating and purifying the mind.” This goal is important to note because what few people know is that Bennett never wrote this essay for the *Equinox*. In fact, “Training the Mind” was not the original title. **[Slide 9]** Instead Bennett wrote this essay for Buddhists in the United Kingdom and entitled the essay “On the Culture of Mind.” It was originally published in 1908 as a pamphlet for Bennett’s organization, the International Buddhist

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

Society. It appears Crowley obtained a copy, renamed and published it in the *Equinox*. He also made small edits throughout the essay. There are questions as to how he obtained a copy and when, especially since it was originally published in 1908 and the last recorded communication that I know of between Bennett and Crowley was in 1905, but nevertheless, the essay tells us that even after Crowley has abandoned Buddhism for Thelema, he still sees the Buddhist methods of meditation as useful.

[Slide 10] Looking back at Liber 913, we can also gain more insight into this essay and specifically what Crowley found attractive about it. In his reference to the essay, he specified certain pages he found most important. In Liber Thisharb he writes, “The first method to be described has been detailed in Bhikkhu Ananda Metteya's ‘Training of the Mind’ (EQUINOX, I. 5, pp. 28-59, and especially pp. 48-56).” Crowley adds that the point of the practice is to “freedom from all desire” and “aid the adept in the second method.” When looking at pages 48-56 we find this section details the process of “thinking backwards.” First it discusses the continuity of rebirth and how if we could lookback over our lives “then indeed we might realise the utter misery and futility of all this earthly life, might understand and grasp those three characteristics of all existent things.” Those three being sorrow, impermanence and no-self.

Following these pages we come to the detailed instructions of what Crowley calls the first method of Liber Thisharb, *thinking backwards*. The process consists of entering a meditational state and then beginning to review the recent past slowly working towards more distant events in one’s life. Over the course of many meditations one finally comes to the earliest parts of one’s life. As Bennett writes,

Time after time retracing in their order the more important events of this life, at last, one day you will bridge over that dark space between death and birth, when all the Sankhāras are, like the seed in the earth, breaking up to build up a new life; and one day you will suddenly find yourself remembering your death *in your last life*.

[Slide 12] Through this method Bennett was hoping to show a number of things to Buddhists. First, that the Buddhist assertion of re-birth was true; second, that all life is transitory; third, that karma controls re-birth; fourth, that there is no self just a continuous process of causes and conditions; and fifth, that the Buddhist *dukkha*, or sorrow, is always present in previous lives. This is all, of course, core Buddhist doctrine. However, we can see that Crowley took the method Bennett described and reapplied it to his magical system. Now within Crowley’s magical system the practice of thinking backwards is used to identify patterns in one’s karma and to work to balance one’s work. Moreover, it is used to understand the unique aspects of the self and to see from where they derive. As Crowley noted to a student of his in 1923, “So called successive lives are only separate in the illusory mode of time. They are like separate arbitrary sections of a picture. The reality is the picture which integrates all the aspects.” Thus we can see that for Crowley, the practice of Liber Thisharb is an important one in his system.

Earlier I mentioned the quote from *Magick Without Tears* where Crowley states that “could never make headway” with the first method, Bennett’s thinking backwards. From this we might think that Crowley tried the technique and was unsuccessful. In fact, this is not true. From August 1918 until August 1919 we have records of Crowley actually practicing Liber Thisharb and recording his previous incarnations. [Slide 12] In a diary entry for August 8, 1918 Crowley writes, “The magical memory is the unveiling of the subconsciousness; therefore as I awaken it I find that episodes of my conscious life count less than things built into the unconscious.” From this he engages in a series of narrative about past lives. These lives span centuries and encompass various personalities ranging from Eliphas Levi, Cagliostro, Edward Kelly, Alexander VI, down to unknown personalities like a favorite page of Jacque De Molay, or a deformed hermaphrodite. In many of the entries Crowley writes about how this life influenced his current life. In the entry for July 7, 1919, one of the entries where Crowley discusses his life as Alexander VI, the narrative relates Alexander’s attempt to restore paganism and that the people sided with the Church Fathers. Crowley writes, “This, by the way, explains Levi’s flirtation with Rome and my own position to-day as regards popularity.”

The August 2, 1919 entry denotes Crowley’s “Great Incarnation.” In this entry, Crowley denotes that far in the past, many great masters came together, a “consistory of adepts,” including the previous lives of people who would become Mohammed, Blavatsky, Christian Rosencreutz, and many others. At this meeting these great mystics decided how the future would develop for humanity. Crowley writes, “I got the Pagan and Ritual work, which ended in Alexander VI.” He also notes how others “took care of art, learning, etc.” Interestingly, in this entry Bennett is also present as a previous incarnation in the person of Merlin and Crowley notes that after he was Merlin and before being Bennett, he was also Adam Weishaupt.

In *Magick* or *Book Four*, Crowley dedicates a chapter to the Magical Memory. In this chapter he addresses some of the incarnations listed previously. These include Levi and Kelly. Here he discusses how one should test these memories by researching the past lives and comparing details. Crowley writes, “One of the great tests of the genuineness of any recollection is that one remembers the really important things in one's life, not those which mankind commonly classes as such.” He goes on to admit he does not remember anything significant in Levi’s life. He makes similar admissions about other lives and also notes his unknown previous incarnations.

Now to some or all this may sound amusing or absurd. But what is important to keep in mind is that regardless if Crowley was Eliphas Levi or Edward Kelly in a previous life, and regardless if Allan Bennett was masterful at past life regression, both believed remembering previous lives was possible, and moreover, both believed that performing these meditations were important. This is why Crowley continues to mention the practice of thinking backwards over the course of 30+ years, and also write about the magical memory.

[Slide 13] As I mentioned previously, Bennett wrote his 1908 essay, “On the Culture of Mind” addressing the technique of thinking backwards. This was not the only time he wrote about this. At

the end of 1917 and the beginning of 1918, Bennett gave six lectures on Buddhism hosted by English writer and playwright, Clifford Bax. The texts of these lectures would eventually make up the bulk of his book *The Wisdom of the Aryas*. In the chapter on attainment he, once more, brings up the practice of remembering backwards. Bennett notes that in the past in Buddhist countries, there were masters who “could look at an aspirant’s Karma as the ordinary man can look at his bodily presentment.” They would recommend the best practices to deal with the karmic legacy of the person. However, the West, lacking this history, does not have people who can assist. Thus he claims the process of thinking backwards is a useful meditation and one that can replace this lack of direction from a master. He also notes that since western practitioners have been trained to think linearly and via “formulas,” the process of thinking backwards is better suited to the practitioners of the West. Thus it becomes quite clear, over a decade since Bennett instructed Crowley to “Explore the River of the Soul” he was still instructing English Buddhist to meditate on past lives, and learn from where they came.

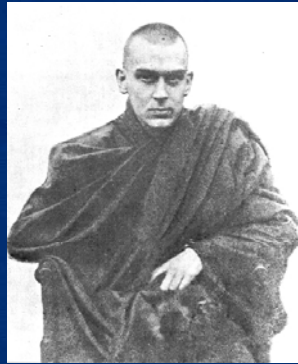
Around this same time period, 1918, Crowley too was teaching this method. He took a brief retreat with his student, Charles Stansfeld Jones, also known as Frater Achad, and they went to Oesopus Island. In fact, based on notes from Jones, this is where Crowley started the process of his own journey remembering backwards from which I quoted previously. Nevertheless, after the retreat, Jones wrote a short essay entitled, “Thinking Backwards.” The first line of this essay reads, “In my initiation I was taught to think backwards, and I am more and more convinced of the value of this practice.” This time period may also be the beginning of their deteriorating relationship, but nevertheless, we can see that the practice of Liber Thisharb is still a central part of Crowley’s program that he was teaching to his students.

I could go on with other quotes from Crowley about the importance of the magical memory and its practice, but I am short on time and I hope that this brief outline has shown how this practice, learned from Allan Bennett, Bhikkhu Ananda Metteyya and the Buddhist teachers of Bennett’s in Burma. The latter may sound vague but at this time, I still have not found the exact source of this Buddhist teaching although I have begun inquiries with Burmese Buddhists. **[Slide 14]** Still much more research needs to be done, about Bennett and also exploring his influence on Crowley. As Symonds notes in his biography, Bennett is one of two teachers Crowley had that he never wrote anything bad about, the other one being the engineer and mountaineer, Oscar Eckenstein. Even in Crowley’s private diary entries when Bennett is mentioned, he is admired and revered. There is obviously a reason for this and more needs to be discovered about Bennett to see why he was such a positive influence. Then there is the research into how Bennett’s Buddhism influenced Crowley, especially Crowley’s ontology. Crowley wrote *Berashith* shortly after his 1902 meeting with Bennett in Burma. Crowley referred to that document during his whole life and it became foundational in Crowley’s Thelemic cosmology. Then there is the influence in yoga, ceremonial magic, the creation of talismanic rituals and also works published like *777* and *Sepher sephiroth*. Traces of Bennett’s

influence can be seen in numerous places in Crowley's work and there has been little exploration of it. I am hopeful that as time progresses and the study of Crowley expands, this will change. Thank you for your attention today.

# The Bhikkhu and the Magus:

Exploring Allan Bennett's Influence on Aleister Crowley



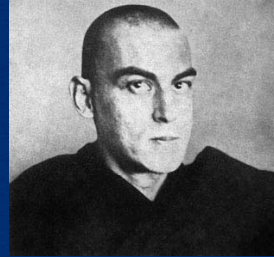
## Allen Bennett

- Born December 8, 1872
- Father died when young
- Very sickly with asthma
- Trained as analytic chemist
- Theosophical Society, 1893 - 1895
- Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, 1894 - 1900
- Moved to Ceylon 1900





## Allan Bennett



- August 1901 Crowley's first trip (Ceylon)
- December 1901 Bennett becomes Theravada Buddhist Novice
- February 1902 Bennett takes Bhikkhu ordination, becomes Ananda Maitriya
- February 1902 Crowley's second trip (Burma)

## Allan Bennett



- 1903 founds International Buddhist Foundation, Buddhasasana Samagama
- Begins publishing pamphlets & *Buddhism: An Illustrated Review*
- November 1905 Crowley's third visit (Burma)
- Returns to England in April 1908 to promote sangha

## Allan Bennett

- Helps found The Buddhist Society of Great Britain and Ireland
- Returns to Burma October 1908
- De-robes and returns to England 1914
- Supports local Buddhist with lectures, writings, and editing *The Buddhist Review*



## Allan Bennett

- End 1917 – Beginning 1918, six lectures sponsored by Clifford Bax
- January 1923 *The Wisdom of the Aryas* published
- March 1923 Dies of intestinal blockage

## The Bhikkhu's Advice:

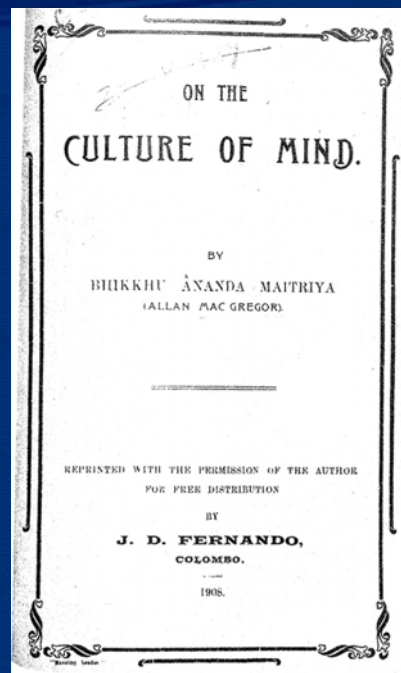
*Explore the River of the Soul. ... whence and in what order you have come by...*

## Liber Thisharb

- Liber Thisharb is “not intended to lead to the supreme attainment. On the contrary, its results define the separate being of the Exempt Adept from the rest of the Universe, and discover his relation to that Universe.”
- “It is of such importance to the Exempt Adept that We cannot overrate it. Let him in no wise adventure the plunge into the Abyss until he has accomplished this to his most perfectest satisfaction.”

## Magick Without Tears

- “None of my writings, by the way, deal with the First Method; this is because I could never make headway with it; none at all. F[rater] Iehi Aour [Allan Bennett], on the other hand, was a wizard at it; he thought that some people could use that way, and others not.”



## Liber Thisharb

- First Method:
  - See “Training of the Mind,” *Equinox*, I. 5, pp. 28-59
  - See especially pp. 48-56
  - Results:
    - Freedom from all desire
    - Aid second method

## Training of the Mind

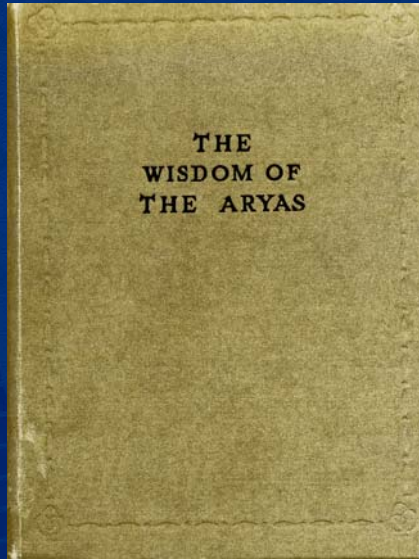
- Rebirth
  - Countless lives
  - Constant misery
  - Illusion seen as real
  - Futility of earthly life
  - Three characteristics
    - Sorrow (suffering)
    - Transitoriness (impermanence)
    - Soullessness (no self or soul)

## Bennett's Goals for Essay

- Rebirth was true
- All life is transitory
- Karma controls re-birth
- There is no self just a continuous process of causes and conditions
- The Buddhist *dukkha*, or sorrow, is always present in previous lives

## Crowley's Past Lives

- Eliphas Levi
- Cagliostro
- Heinrich van Dorn
- "Father Ivan"
- A hermaphrodite
- Marius de Aquilis
- Claudia Venturini
- "Klopio"
- Alexander VI
- "Mischievous period" – unincarnated
- "Favorite page of De Molay"
- Baal Zabar (Templar Magician)
- "Great Incarnation"



- **The Wisdom of the Aryas**
- Introduction
- The source of the Teaching: The Buddha and His Attainment
- The Fundamental Principle: The Universal Reign of Law
- The Buddhist World-View: The Three Signata
- The Four Aryan Truths
- **The Path of Attainment**
- The Three Refuges and Nirvana
- The Buddhist Doctrine of Re-Birth

## Charles Stansfeld Jones (Frater Achad)



- “In my initiation I was taught to think backwards, and I am more and more convinced of the value of this practice.”

## More Bennett/Crowley Research

- Influence of Bennett on Crowley
- Buddhism's influence on Crowley's Ontology (Berashith)
- Yoga
- Ceremonial magic
- Published works
  - 777
  - Sepher sephiroth