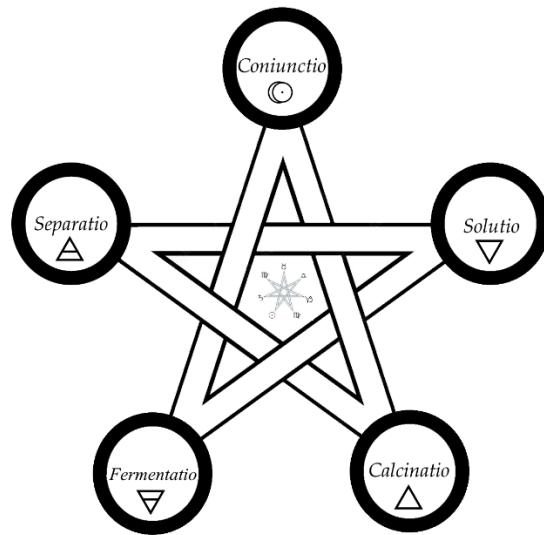


THE JOY OF DISSOLUTION:
Sexual Alchemy, *I Do Not Exist*,
and Thelema's Buddhist Roots
by
Erica Johnson and Christopher Reed Johnson



Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the Law. —*AL*, I:40

THE JOY OF DISSOLUTION

Please introduce this book and what benefits it brings to practitioners.

The Joy of Dissolution is one of the few books that casts a spotlight on the second half of the Thelemic path: ego dissolution. This is the task of the Inner Adept. In this second “half of the equation” (*AL*, I:56), the aspirant converts his or her own lifetime into an alchemical vessel for the Angelic self, the One who took the incarnation. *Thelema* (“Will”) refers to the law of the New Aeon as disclosed in *The Book of the Law*, which was received by the British Magician and prophet Aleister Crowley (1875–1947) in 1904. According to this nondual philosophy, every one of us must uncover and live one’s own Angelic nature. Ego dissolution involves

becoming dynamically receptive to the Universal Will—the Will of the True Self. As we wrote in the Introduction:

We wrote the entirety of this book to illustrate the simple truth that all knowledge you acquire in the quest to *know thyself* and all conversations you have herald the Knowledge and Conversation of your Holy Guardian Angel. Every phenomenon is a dealing of God with your soul, and thus every conversation, every perception, and every experience of pain or pleasure is simply an instance of your ongoing dialogue with God.

The importance of the principle to know thyself is aptly described in *The Secret High Degree Rites of the Masonic Rite of Memphis* by John Yarker:

Whoever shall penetrate into this vault alone will be purified... He will come out perhaps...from the bosom of the earth, and his Soul will be prepared for the revelation of the Mysteries. Child of Earth, sound the most secret corners of thy heart—*Know Thyself*.ⁱ

Today, the maxim “Know Thyself” is more important than ever. Anxiety, loss of faith in something higher, and the fixation on science as the Truth have created an imbalance whereby our connection to nature and God has been usurped by the vision of a cold, mechanistic universe. The realization that we are all Microcosms of the Macrocosm is slowly receding into the background. Only a foggy memory remains as a vestige of our essential connection and unity with the Universe. This sacred, holistic understanding has been supplanted by isolation, alienation, and materialism. Yet with Knowledge of the Self arises an increase in self-confidence and a diminishing of fear, anger, and sadness. Through following the law of Thelema wherever it may lead, you can heal yourself—but only if you realize that any perceived threats emerge largely from within.

Such seeming threats are transparent only because they are functions of the ego.ⁱⁱ Therefore the advanced spiritual aspirant must make the ego transparent to itself. Crowley writes:

One wants to become like a mighty flowing river, which is not consciously aiming at the sea, and is certainly not yielding to any external influence. It is acting in conformity with the law of its own nature, with the Tao. One can describe it, if necessary, as “passive love”; but it is love (in effect) raised to its highest potential. We come back to the same thing: when passion is purged of any “lust of result” it is irresistible; it has become “Law.”ⁱⁱⁱ

You must discipline the ego so that you can obey your internal Law, which is necessarily the Universal Law. Again, this requires you “Know Thyself.” Using the “method of science”, you must know your strengths and faults, both actual and potential, both inherited and acquired. Working with an objective knowledge of the vehicle, you can and must discipline the ego so that it becomes quiet. Only in Silence can it acquiesce to the universal currents coursing through it.^{iv}

You state that this is no beginners book, and it is finally something appropriate for advanced students, can you provide more details as to why this is so?

As a Thelemic beginner, you study, strengthen, and balance your outer self so it can eventually function safely as a vehicle for the True Will—which is always unconscious. Only as an advanced practitioner do you reverse the process: you progressively relinquish control so that the divine current can work *through* your outer self. In other words, as an advanced practitioner you dissolve your ego. Relatively little has been written for the few who are ready to start channeling the divine current. Our book begins there.

As a beginner, you might, for example, carefully test your own physical, mental, and emotional nature and limits by recording the results of magickal and mystical exercises. What are your strengths and weaknesses? You must find out. How have the events of your life led you to pursue the Great Work in the specific way that you do? What is your outer self all about? This type of work is without a doubt the most important part of every Thelemite's path.

In fact, even as an advanced practitioner, you have to keep on going back and shoring up the foundation of your Temple. Naturally, then, a lot has been written on these early stages of the path that occupies most aspirants for their entire lives. Rightly so. Yet as critical as these early stages are, more and more aspirants today are reaching the point that they can begin to put their lifetime to the universal function for which They took it. We wrote *The Joy of Dissolution* for these “few & secret” servants (*AL*, I:10).

What are the practical implications of inhabiting a state of pure Love beyond the confines of the ego, and how might this state of being inform and transform one's relationships, creative expression, and engagement with the world?

Even at the beginning of your Thelemic path, you discover that “freedom is a two-edged sword”. The magician and rocket scientist Jack Parsons wrote brilliantly about how there's no such thing as exercising your Will without allowing everyone else to do their Will first.

The Thelemic path may appear selfish and immoral to those who try to impose rules from the outside—or to those who mistake it for a ticket to harm others without consequence. However, this is the furthest thing from the truth. There is only one Will—the divine Will. If two Stars collide, at least one of them has deviated from doing the True Will into doing whatever they “want”. Thelema immediately requires you to treat others with great respect.

You eventually learn to “Love all things” and people—whether you like them or not. Everything is part of your Universe. The world is your playground. You can advance only if you don’t sell your soul for any of them. Thus, one of the first and, in some ways, most important questions upon contemplating your spiritual journey is this: Are you willing to give up the quest for worldly desires for the chance to serve something higher than yourself? (Letting worldly goods come without trying.)

If so, are you furthermore ready to even give up your fundamental sense of self in the end?

If, upon examining yourself closely, you find that the answers to these questions are “Yes”, then the inner journey is for you.

In the end, those who are ready for simplicity will understand, whereas those who remain entangled in the nets of words, viewpoints, and concepts will inevitably see only what they wish to see.

The aim of all magick is to unify the Above and the Below to channel the True Will. However, to receive and transmit this high amount of energy requires a properly prepared incarnational vessel. Otherwise, the magician’s chakra system may be damaged irreparably.^v

Ego dissolution represents an advanced stage of the Work. Only those who have developed certain abilities can approach it safely. You must have an ego receptive to Will. By “receptive to Will”, we mean an ego confident, open to revision and the unknown, and generally ready to be guided. We refer to the process by which the ego becomes receptive as “ego dissolution”:

“This is the creation of the world, that the pain of division is as nothing, and the joy of dissolution all” (*AL*, I:30).

How does the practice of sexual alchemy facilitate the dissolution of the ego, and what are the specific techniques and rituals involved in this process?

Properly spiritual sexual alchemy represents one of the most potent practices for dissolving the ego. To succeed, it requires of the individual not only a high pitch of sincere spiritual devotion, but also perfect samadhi (concentration) developed through meditation and magickal knowledge of how to wield soul and body—particularly the phallus (penis) or the kteis (vagina)—as an organ of God. In *The Joy of Dissolution* itself, we go more deeply into both the requirements and the basis of practice. Unfortunately, it is not possible to discuss the practical side adequately in the short space of this interview. Here we shall instead try to convey how sexual alchemy overflows the space of physical sex and occupies the entire life of its practitioners.

Although not everyone can, or should, practice sexual magick, Thelema is an irreducibly sexual and creative path. It recognizes that only those who freely embrace their sexual nature can throw off the slavery of false gods.

Furthermore, the Thelemic pantheon involves two Gods whose unceasing sexual congress creates the knowable Universe. The Father Principle, Chaos, the Will of God, is a high-level avatar of the infinitesimal and omnipresent God Hadit, whose principal Force is “to go”. On Earth, He is represented by prince-priest—the Beast—and his phallus. Likewise, the Mother Goddess, Babalon, is a high-level avatar of Nuit, the Goddess of “Infinite Space, and the Infinite Stars thereof” (*AL*, I:22). The Sacred Whore, Babalon, originates all Form. On Earth, She is represented by the priestess, or Scarlet Woman, and her kteis.

Even though Crowley continued to agree with Gautama Buddha that duality causes pain at times, he urged the Thelemic adventurer to view those transitory pains as “but sharp Sauce to the Dish of Pleasure” (“De Comedia Universa, Quae Dictur Pan”, *Liber Aleph*). Indeed, such duality stands as the prerequisite for divine “love under will” (*AL*, I:57), which creates joyfully everywhere and all times: “For I am divided for love's sake, for the chance of union. This is the creation of the world, that the pain of division is as nothing, and the joy of dissolution all.”

Through Thelemic sexual alchemy, the practitioners dissolve their separateness, not only from one another, but in general. Through their yoga (union) they become the very bed of the Gods (see *AL*, I:66).

Although sexual alchemy involves what most people would recognize as sex, it is a 24-hour-a-day pursuit that involves the dissolution of all separateness and opposition in general. It culminates in the marriage of Self and non-self—of Heaven and Earth:

Yet rest not in the Joy of the Destruction of each complex in thy Nature, but press on to that ultimate Marriage with the Universe whose Consummation shall destroy thee utterly, leaving only that Nothingness which was before the Beginning. So then the Life of Non-Action is not for thee; the Withdrawal from Activity is not the Way of the Tao; but rather the Intensification and making universal every Unit of thine Energy on every Plane. (Aleister Crowley, “De Nuptiis Mysticis”, *Liber Aleph*)

What are the potential risks and challenges associated with the practice of sexual alchemy, and how can practitioners navigate them safely and ethically?

When an Adept earths out his or her sexual energy in physical lust or in the unconscious urge for security and protection, the sexual energy that should have been consecrated to union with the divine is wasted.

The occult path is more dangerous than others for many reasons, one being that any premature encounter with the Real can induce psychosis—sometimes permanently. Another danger is the phenomenon of the Adept who overdevelops the ego to such an extent that he or she becomes unbalanced—a phenomenon all too evident in the rantings and ravings of personal greatness and the delusions of grandeur found in the discourses of individuals in most, if not all, occult communities.

[H]uman beings need the ego to protect them from the unbearable energies of the Real—what magicians worship as God. Anyone who experiences reality unmediated by a proper ego will find their psychic system burnt out. Such a person will typically become psychotic or might even die. Thus, we need an ego to survive in our socially structured world.^{vi}

By contrast, the Adept who exercises his or her sexuality without Restriction while dedicating it to his or her own inner divinity may yet touch wonder.

In what ways does Thelema's understanding of the nature of the self and the process of ego dissolution align with or diverge from Buddhist teachings on the concepts of anatta (non-self) and nirvana?

As we touch upon in *The Joy of Dissolution*, Aleister Crowley embraced Buddhism as a young man, and he never strayed far from its basic tenets. Yet, after he received *The Book of the Law*, he tweaked his essentially Buddhist metaphysics in an action-oriented, dynamic, and joyful direction.

For example, he identified as a Buddhist in March of 1902 when he wrote “Berashith” (published in 1903). This was his foundational essay on ontology, which is the study of Being. There he provided a theory of the universe as Nothing “conceived as (illusory) pairs of contradictories” (*Confessions*). Crowley made his theory explicitly compatible with Buddhist meditation. To him at the time, meditation was the ideal practice for spiritual attainment, albeit untenable for most Westerners. Thus, he also made his theory friendly to magick and Qabalah. He wanted to motivate Western practitioners to lay for themselves the groundwork for later meditation. When he wrote “Berashith”, he regarded the ultimate spiritual goal as Nirvana, which he defined there as “extinction of all that exists, knows, or feels”—the gateway to enlightenment. Once he received *The Book of the Law*, he still believed in extinguishing the seeds of cause-and-effect, but not to escape conscious experience. Indeed, he urged Thelemites to revel in the adventure of life—simply without attachment.

Similarly, he consistently adhered to the doctrine of Anatta. However, by “non-self” he understood no *unchanging* self. Thus, he wrote:

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. (Aleister Crowley, “De Gotama”, *Liber Aleph*)

Crowley came to see Thelema as a pathway, not off the wheel of existence, but rather onto the axis of that wheel—the center of all. For him, the Thelemite cultivates Pure Joy in existence, without “lust of result” (attachment), without falling “down into the pit called Because” (AL, I:44; II:27).

How can the practices and insights of Buddhism inform and enrich the Thelemic path, and what unique contributions does Thelema offer in terms of its approach to self-realization?

Buddhist-derived meditation and mysticism continue to be necessary to the Thelemic path, as a counterbalance to its action-oriented, magickal nature. As Frater Perdurabo (Crowley) and Soror Virakam (Mary Desti) point out in *Book Four*, Part I, “the contemplative life is generally opposed to the active life, and it must require an extremely careful balance to prevent the one absorbing the other.”

Both mysticism and magick are necessary to realize the Nothingness in the Something and the Somethingness in the Nothing—the True Self. That is why we recommend that everyone take at least one 10-day immersion course of Vipassana meditation, where they use the Buddha’s original teachings as they were preserved in Burma through the school of S.N. Goenka and his teacher, Sayagyi U Ba Khin.

Thelema uniquely offers a sophisticated understanding and wide array of practices for realizing the True Self whose essence is Change. Ego dissolution is what we call the process by which an advanced aspirant realizes his or her True Self. The True Self may be apprehended through the three divine aspects of Absolute Nothingness: Hadit, Nuit, and Ra Hoor Khuit. These three-in-one constitute the ever-changing Self of all.

Hudit is the omnipresent, divine, dynamic, infinitesimal Point of Nothingness that “goes”. “I am the axle of the wheel, and the cube in the circle. ‘Come unto me’ is a foolish word: for it is I that go” (*AL*, II:7).

The God Hudit makes love continually with the Goddess Nuit, the infinitely great Nothingness. She says, “I am Heaven, and there is no other God than me, and my lord Hudit” (*AL*, I:20). In doing so, Hudit and Nuit actively manifest the ever-changing phenomena, centered in Ra Hoor Khuit—Nothingness that is equally Something, having been brought down through the mind into the realm of duality “below the Abyss” that separates the purely potential from the actual.

Before someone dissolves the ego, they suffer the torments of the ego’s defenses against the Truth of the seemingly separate self’s nonexistence. Thus, Ra Hoor Khuit says, “Now let it be first understood that I am a god of War and of Vengeance” (*AL*, I:3). Only by embracing all phenomena as Self can the aspirant enjoy the underlying bliss of existence: “There is no bond that can unite the divided but love: all else is a curse. Accursed! Accursed be it to the aeons! Hell. Let it be that state of manyhood bound and loathing. So with thy all; thou hast no right but to do thy will” (*AL*, I:41-42).

After dissolving the ego, the Adept basks in Pure Joy, recognizing the Universal Self in the Many/One/None. “Remember all ye that existence is pure joy; that all the sorrows are but as shadows; they pass & are done; but there is that which remains” (*AL*, II:9). The aspirant who thus succeeds in dissolving the ego illusion has “crossed the Abyss” between Something and Nothing—meaning that he or she now knows with certainty the Somethingness of Nothing and the Nothingness of Something.

Liberated from the illusion of separateness, he or she exercises the divine creativity that is everyone’s birthright—for we are all God. This unconscious, divine creativity is known as the True Will. It is the Will of the True Self. Because we are all organs of the body of God, the only law of Thelema is “Do what thou wilt” (*AL*, I:40; III:60). Again, “with thy all; thou hast no right but to do thy will” (*AL*, I:42).

What are the key insights and experiences that J. Edward Cornelius shares in his final work, “I Do Not Exist”, and how do they shed light on the ultimate goal of Thelemic practice?

In his final piece, J. Edward Cornelius (1951–2023) discloses explicitly for the first time the female, or “N”, formula within Crowley’s general formula of ON. The N formula allows an Adept to “dissolve” his or her ego. In other words, N allows us to use the personal self as a vehicle for channeling the True Will of humanity without Restriction—namely, “crossing the Abyss”. Cornelius thereby shares the secrets of the ultimate goal of Thelemic practice.

Jerry's piece outlines the formula of "N" in its connections with Speech and Silence, the Holy Guardian Angel (as the foundation to becoming an Avatar), the Abyss, Nothingness, Nuit, Babalon, the ego, Coagula, the Woman, and Death, to name a few—topics that even Aleister Crowley was reticent to discuss for the most part.^{vii}

Cornelius was a Thelemic Magus and the heir of Crowley's immediate student, Grady Louis McMurtry. He was our teacher and the Inner Head of our branch of Crowley's Inner School, the A.:A.:, until he died and Christopher Reed Johnson (*Laus Priapo Deo 217*) grabbed the sword. A brilliant writer and thinker, Jerry was himself an astral magician who excelled above all in channeling the unconscious Will of God. Jerry's major contribution was to explicate and develop Aleister Crowley's magickal formula of ON, about which Crowley wrote only cautiously since it relates to sexual magick.

Crowley discusses ON in *Liber Aleph*, in the chapters on the Tarot trumps of the Devil (connecting Hod-8 and Tiphareth-6) and Death (connecting Netzach-7 and Tiphareth-6). These two paths correspond respectively to the Man's formula and the Woman's formula. The so-called Man's formula pertains directly to the man in sexual magick, but it also pertains to the left-hand, descending paths on any aspirant's microcosmic Tree of Life. The difference is that anyone with a female vehicle works the left-hand paths indirectly, through her seemingly external Universe, while she works the right-hand paths directly. The opposite is true for a male; while working the left-hand paths directly, he works the right-hand, ascending paths indirectly. Thus, Adepts of either sex who have been called, like Atlas, to shoulder a particular determination for all humanity and cross the Abyss must learn how to work the N formula.

Whereas Cornelius spent his life discussing O, the phallic side of Crowley's ON formula, he had never before openly discussed N, the kteic side. In doing so in *The Joy of Dissolution*, he hammers the fact that crossing the Abyss and fulfilling the True Will is *by invite only*. No one who attempts to apply the N formula by force can succeed. Yet, since each of us takes incarnation after incarnation, *slow and steady wins the race*. There's no rush. If and when it's time to dissolve the ego, you'll know.

In the *Joy of Dissolution*, Cornelius reveals how the central sphere of Tiphareth encodes the final secrets (and pitfalls) of the N formula regarding how to "cross the Abyss". In addition, he discusses the practical necessity of correctly working upper Tiphareth along with the other two spheres of the upper Ruach, or mind—Geburah-5 and Chesed-4. The Adept must understand that consciousness cannot rise above Tiphareth in the first two worlds (the top of the lower Ruach). Thus, any visions of Gods, Angels, and so forth are creations of the mind. Such phantasmagoria serves at best as conscious vehicles of something unconscious and unknowable. They are only as useful as the mind is pure.

Cornelius introduces both the paradox and the solution of the N formula for channeling the True Will. The Will swims deep in the ocean of Nothingness rooted in our unconscious mind (upper Ruach), which you must control if you are to channel God's Will purely. But how do you control something that is by nature unconscious to channel the Nothingness from above the Abyss? The simple answer is Love. Of course he refers to the impersonal, Universal Love also known as *Bhakti* (devotion). Cornelius discusses Love in terms of the three spheres of the upper Ruach. Bottom line: unless the Adept has mastered the unselfish Love known as *Bhakti*, he or she has no chance of crossing the Abyss.

...simply because you've taken the Oath of the Abyss doesn't guarantee accomplishments. Any Tom, Dick, or Harry can swear the Oath, but only a magician can live it. Also remember: NO magician remains functioning above the Abyss; a successful crossing allows the MT [Magister Templi] to pick and choose his foundation below... I must be absolutely clear and remind you that unless you can solidify your claims above the Abyss then Qabalistically nature will automatically 'right the wrong' and it'll be out of my hands; nature will choose your foundation below and it is always in relationship to where you are stumbling. (J. Edward Cornelius, *Cornelia No. 13*, 2007, p. 39)

Love is the law, love under will. –AL, I:57

ⁱ Yarker, J. (1993). *The Secret High Degree Rites of the Masonic Rite of Memphis*. Montana: Kessinger Publishing Company, p. 33.

ⁱⁱ Johnson, C. and Johnson E. (2024). *The Joy of Dissolution*. Woodstock, GA: Privately Published, pp. 7, 20.

ⁱⁱⁱ "Chapter XVII: Astral Journey: Example, How to Do it, How to Verify Your Experiences" in Crowley, A. (1973/1991). *Magick Without Tears* (I. Regardie, ed.). Tempe, AZ: New Falcon Publications p. 142.

^{iv} Johnson, C. and Johnson E. (2024). *The Joy of Dissolution*. Woodstock, GA: Privately Published, p. 18.

^v Johnson, C. and Johnson E. (2024). *The Joy of Dissolution*. Woodstock, GA: Privately Published, p. 20.

^{vi} Johnson, C. and Johnson E. (2024). *The Joy of Dissolution*. Woodstock, GA: Privately Published, p. 16, 21.

^{vii} Johnson, C. and Johnson E. (2024). *The Joy of Dissolution*. Woodstock, GA: Privately Published, p. 22.