

Passing Through the Sun-Door

The Metaphysical Writings of Ananda K. Coomaraswamy

by Peter Samsel

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Joseph Campbell's mentor, the great scholar of myth and symbol Heinrich Zimmer, once wrote that "we all stand upon the shoulders of Coomaraswamy." The work of Coomaraswamy certainly was one of the chief sources of inspiration for Parabola's founder D. M. Dooling and it remains an enduring influence on the journal today. [Editors]

The occasion of the long-awaited publication of Ananda K. Coomaraswamy's final essays, *Guardians of the Sun-Door*¹, merits a revisiting of the intellectual legacy that this great scholar so richly endowed to those fortunate enough to follow him. Although now remembered primarily as an art historian, Coomaraswamy was, more significantly, one of the most remarkable contemporary expositors and defenders of traditional metaphysics. While unquestionably a difficult author, his difficulty stems, not from any obscurity, but rather from a profound generosity, a generosity made possible by his vast erudition: it is quite typical for him to bring to bear, even in the course of a single short essay, the testimony of nearly all the wisdom traditions. This universal testimony, brought into sharp relief through the agency of his scholarship, is perhaps the clearest demonstration of the truth of the *philosophia perennis*, a demonstration so overwhelming—taken in the entirety of his mature writings—that it borders on proof.

Coomaraswamy was always moving on—to the next article, the next theme—a man working under *tapas*, spiritual heat, a pilgrim among the texts and traces of wisdom, struggling to fulfill the scope of his intellectual vision before the ending of his term. His many later essays bear the uniform stamp of his concerns and of his genius, but they are not *unified*: there is a synthetic vision, but no correlative systematic construction. This presents a challenge to the reader attempting to grasp his metaphysical writings in their totality. What is needed is an Ariadne's thread to guide one through the labyrinth of his thought—and his thought truly *is* labyrinthine, for all his paths lead to the same Center, wherein resides only the Godhead, wherein what is slain is but one's own lower soul. To walk a labyrinth is to enact a pilgrimage; to learn what Coomaraswamy would teach is to become a pilgrim, with all the present trials and potential rewards that such a state entails.

The encompassing vision of Coomaraswamy's mature work turned on a single dominant theme: that of human awakening. However, before we may speak of humanity, we must first speak of God; before the many, there is the One. This One, the Godhead, is ultimately indescribable, even as it is the very source of the words that fail us. Yet in another sense, we *may* speak of God, and know that One as a perfectly simple Identity that is at once an identity of two contrasting natures in the heart of the Divine. As Coomaraswamy describes in his essay, "The Tantric Doctrine of Divine Biunity,"² this Supreme Identity of two natures in a single essence is variously conceived as between Nonbeing and Being, Knower and Known, Intellect and Speech. It is the empty plenum, at once utterly alone and yet fecund with the possibilities of all things. This Divine "biunity" is what renders the created order both possible and necessary, just as the knower demands the known for its fulfillment.

The distinction in unity of the Divine conjoints is coincident with the Logos, the locus of the Divine procession into creation. In his essay “Vedic Exemplarism,” Coomaraswamy explores how the Logos serves as mediator between the eternal reasons of things and those things as they contingently manifest. This mediation is at once a perception and creation, for here knowing and being are inseparably fused. The sensible world may, in one sense, be said to be brought into being by the reflective capacity of the Logos, as a likeness in a mirror or image in an eye. In another sense, the sensible world may be said to be brought into being by the projective power of the Logos, as a raying forth or giving of form. Entering into the created order, it yet abides in its own ground, at once undivided and yet apparently divided in relation to the world of contingent becoming.

Just as the character of the Supreme Identity may be approached obliquely through symbol—as Intellect and Speech, as Pen and Tablet—so also the Logos may be described symbolically both as Son and as Sun, the last being particularly common across traditions. In its reflective and projective act, the supernal, intelligible Sun is at once receiver of image and giver of light. It is an Eye that blazes forth, at once a vision and a raying. The Sun is the “weaver” of the world; the threads with which it weaves are at once light, breath and spirit. In human beings, the “thread-spirit” of the supernal Sun is the animating power within; it is the immanent Logos, the Sun in the heart, the Spirit breathed into us.

Yet we are not only spirit, but also psyche and body. In his essay “On the Indian and Traditional Psychology, or Rather Pneumatology,” Coomaraswamy clarifies the distinction of Spirit from the “psycho-somatic” complex. It is here that the Divine biunity finds its trace in our composition, for there are two selves in us, as all traditions hold. Just as the two Divine natures are characterized as active and receptive, masculine and feminine, so also the higher Self is the active agent, while the lower self is its faculty of manifestation and expression. However, whereas the two natures in God are “fused but not confused,” the two selves in human beings are dual and distinct. These two selves are evident to us in our consciousness of being at once self-knower and self-known: we are at once the ground and content of our own awareness, for we both *are* awareness and yet are aware of ourselves. Even our ordinary language betrays the presence of these two selves, as when we speak of “con-science,” of “com-posure,” of “self-possession,” of “self-control,” of our “better self,” of “taking counsel with ourselves.”

The higher Self is the true ground of our selfhood, the true subject, knower and doer. In contrast, as Coomaraswamy elucidates in his essay “Does ‘Socrates is Old’ Imply That ‘Socrates Is’?” the lower self bears only contingent reality, the “personality” an aggregate of ideas without essence, the sense of “identity” a sequence of thoughts without continuity. The higher Self “is,” whereas the lower self “becomes”; the higher Self is constant and immortal, the lower self mutable and mortal; the higher is an essence, the lower a phenomenon.

Despite the overarching reality of the higher Self, it is the lower self that is routinely identified with. This identification is an aspect of manifestation, in which, for the world to arise, the Logos, while itself remaining a unity, must divide itself, must be “dis-membered” into ourselves, its children. While from one aspect, the manifestation of the world is the realization of a Divine potentiality, from another aspect, it is a fall, a sacrifice and a crucifixion. The immortal Self identifies with the contingent, mutable, mortal self, and in so doing traps itself “like a bird in the net.” So long as we do not know what we are, we perpetuate the trap, *our* trap. In his essay, “On the One and Only Transmigrant,” Coomaraswamy explores how, just as the Logos “dis-members” itself in us, so we must “re-member” it as our immanent selfhood. We must heed the

Oracle: we must “know ourselves.” To do so is our proper end and completion: it is to reunite that which is divided, to make one again that which has been made many.

To know oneself implies a transference of self-reference from the lower self to the higher Self, from the feeling that “I am So-and-so” to the “re-cognition” that “I am.” As Coomaraswamy clarifies in his essay “On Being in One’s Right Mind,” this Self-recognition is, of necessity, a self-naughting. It is to “hate one’s own soul”: at once a “self-denial,” “self-sacrifice,” “self-conquest” and “self-extinction.” It is to become no one, and thus become what one is. For this, the knots of the heart must be unloosed, the idea of “me and mine” abandoned; for this, a battle must be waged, a surrender conceded and a victory secured. For the one surrendered who is at last “at peace with himself,” such a one is at last “in his right mind”; for the prodigal who has at last “come to himself,” such a one may say “I live, yet not I.”

The Logos, as the locus or “eye” of Divine manifestation, is inversely the “eye of the needle” through which we may return to the Unmanifested: the Sun is—for those who may pass—a “Sun-Door.” As Coomaraswamy surveys in his essay “*Svayamatrnna: Janua Coeli*,” the Sun-Door is variously described as the “strait gate,” the “severing truth” and the “point on which contraries turn.” This door is the passage from that which lies below the Sun to that which lies above, from the duality of manifestation to the unicity of the Godhead. The created world, born into duality, is of necessity the realm of contraries, of pairs of opposites—hot and cold, north and south, night and day. The lower self, having “eaten of the fruit of the tree,” is also such a realm, possessed of fear and hope, love and hate, weal and woe. The conflict of the pairs within the world will persist until the world’s end, but the conflict of the pairs within the self can be overcome.

This liberation of the lower self can only be effected through the higher Self—the Sun-Door within us—for there is no side path, no other way “under the Sun.” Seated in its ground, the higher Self persists above the fray in a state of invariability, in the coincidence of contraries, in the reconciliation of the pairs. The passage through the Sun-Door is precisely the passage from duality to unity, from the identification with the self trapped in multiplicity to that with the Self seated in unicity.

The door is not open to all, but stands closed and guarded. In the essay “On Hares and Dreams,” Coomaraswamy explores numerous myths recounting the Quest for Life, in which the one who passes through the door—the Solar Hero—evades the guardians and carries away the substance of immortality. The guardians of the door are frequently paired, as affronted cherubim, as clashing rocks or as the clashing jambs of an active door. The hero must pass over the threshold in an instant, without thought or hesitation. Even so, the hinder part is severed from him, be it the spurs of the knight, the stern of the ship or the tail of the hare. Victorious, such a hero is the “Grail winner,” the “*Soma* thief,” the “retriever of the Golden Apples.”

In this universal myth, the Solar Hero is none other than the Sun, the Self liberated into itself, the “bird broken out of the snare.” Just as the door is the point of coincidence between contraries, the threshold between duality and unicity, so the paired guardians symbolize the paired contraries that define the created order, as explored in Coomaraswamy’s essay “The Guardians of the Sundoor and the Sagittarian Type.” The hero must pass the threshold in a moment without duration as he is literally passing out of time and into the timeless. He must pass through the narrowest way between the clashing guardians as he is literally passing out of space and into the spaceless. He has *no time* and *no room*, and in this he finds his liberation. That instant and point where the guardians clash is precisely where the contraries are coincident, where the pairs are

reconciled. The hinder part that is cut away is that mutable, mortal part of him, inherent in duality, that never truly was and now cannot pass.

The qualification to pass through the door is to know what one is. As Coomaraswamy clarifies in his essay “The ‘E’ at Delphi,” the question that will be asked of us is “Who art thou?” At that moment, everything will hinge on our locus of self-identification, whether in the lower self or the higher Self. If the answer given is any personal name, then the door remains closed and barred to us, and we remain “below the Sun,” condemned to the “factors of time.” If the answer given is “Thou,” then the guardians will welcome us, the door will open, and we may pass through, “beyond the Sun,” to our deliverance and consummation. The way that leads through the door is necessarily one of gnosis, not of merit; our liberation cannot be won by works or even by virtue, as necessarily dispositive as these may be.

The door may be passed through before physical death, and indeed, this is the best course; otherwise, at the ending of our lives, the “moment will be upon us” and the question will be posed. As Coomaraswamy explicates in “The Meaning of Death,” the lower self—composite, mutable, mortal—is unmade into the world of becoming that is its natural resting place; the higher Self returns to the Sun and Self of all, drawn back along the solar ray, the spirit-thread that connects it to its ground. What will become of *us* very much depends on what *we* are, for one may either “collect himself” or “be collected,” may be either actively “self-possessed” or passively “repossessed.”

Here, we must distinguish between two paths, as addressed in Coomaraswamy’s essay “On the Pertinence of Philosophy”: that of merit and that of gnosis. The first path leads, not to liberation, but to salvation, to the “summit of contingent being” below the Sun. The distinction between the ends to which these two paths lead is none other than that between the lower and higher paradises, in which the walls of the latter are “built of contradictories.”

The one who would pass through the door and “win beyond the Sun” must be virtually already past. In the essay “*Akimcanna*: Self-Naughting,” Coomaraswamy elucidates how the one who has so passed already in this life—liberated from the fallacy and prison of the lower self—is characterized at once by anonymity, equanimity and dispassion. He is a “free man here and now,” a “mover at will.” If action is called for, he “simply acts”: his action at once an inaction. He is “not aware of anything, yet not without awareness,” having “laid aside both innocence and learning.” For him, seeing the Self in all, it is “evermore day.” He is at once at peace with himself and the Spectator of all things.

In a culture where the self is continuously spoken of but never the Self, Coomaraswamy’s great virtue is the massed textual authority, the “cloud of witnesses,” that he brings to bear. Through the very weight of his scholarship, he speaks to our conditioning, showing the way out of the trap, the way into the Center. For those who are sensitive to it, that weight may impress upon their hearts, so that, in a sustained act of repentance, of metanoia, of “cardio-tropism,” they may become wayfarers on the journey that is no journey, to the place where we have always been, had we but known it.

1 See Ananda K. Coomaraswamy (ed. Robert Strom), *Guardians of the Sun-Door*, (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2004), available from Fons Vitae, www.fonsvitae.com.

2 The Coomaraswamy essays mentioned here appear in the following collections:

Selected Papers, Metaphysics: “The Tantric Doctrine of Divine Biunity,” “Vedic Exemplarism,” “On the Indian and Traditional Psychology, or Rather Pneumatology,” “Does ‘Socrates is Old’ Imply that ‘Socrates Is’?”, “On the One and Only Transmigrant,” “The ‘E’ at Delphi,” “The Meaning of Death,” “*Akimcanna: Self-Naughting*”

What is Civilization?: “On Being in One’s Right Mind,” “On Hares and Dreams,” “On the Pertinence of Philosophy”

Selected Papers, Traditional Art and Symbolism: “*Svayamatrnna: Janua Coeli*”

Guardians of the Sun-Door: “The Guardians of the Sundoor and the Sagittarian Type”