

Transmigration in the Writings of Ananda K. Coomaraswamy

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Introduction

It is fair to say that Dr. Ananda K. Coomaraswamy (hereafter “AKC”) was among the greatest expositors of the *philosophia perennis* in the 20th century. At the outset of his adult life, and contemporaneous with his graduate studies in geology beginning in 1900 at University College, London, AKC was also beginning to undertake a serious study of the cultural milieu and religious heritage of his father, a Hindu, from an island nation that was predominantly Buddhist—Ceylon, now Sri Lanka. Given that the island has had a majority Buddhist and minority Hindu composition since roughly the 1st century C.E., this study inevitably led him to encounter the concept of *transmigration* as a core doctrine of both traditional Buddhism and Hinduism.

In 1903, after having been named a Fellow of University College, he was appointed Director of the Mineralogical Survey of Ceylon. During this period AKC’s life underwent a significant intellectual and vocational shift of direction. Impelled by the need to familiarize and immerse himself in the culture and worldview of his father, his geological interests would consequently be overtaken toward Ceylonese culture and religion. Concurrent with his *in situ* scientific investigations into the geological phenomena of Ceylon, which led him to every corner of that island, AKC’s interest turned to the culture of the Ceylonese people—an interest stimulated by their architecture, graphic arts, customs, and religions.

His final report for the Survey was submitted in 1906, the same year he was awarded the Doctorate (D.Sc.) in Geology from London University. But within the space of several years, his geological research had been effectively replaced by his interest in the resuscitation of Ceylonese culture, an interest that soon thereafter expanded to include involvement in India's popular *swadeshi* movement of traditional cultural reform. Frequent trips between Ceylon and India in the East and England in the West during the period of 1906-1917 prompted more comparisons by AKC of the arts and crafts of both cultures, and of the sacred philosophies inherent in them.

During this period AKC began to correspond with scholars, artists, and others who shared his views of traditional art and symbolism. In addition, he expanded his own studies into the doctrine of transmigration as found *explicitly* in early Buddhism and in Hinduism, and *implicitly* in the revealed religions of Christianity and Islam. AKC's later and more developed views on the subject paralleled those of many of the principals of the Traditionalist perspective. Moreover, it can be said that AKC *generally* conformed to their infrequent and cryptic treatments of transmigration which were (i) devoid of any discussion of the concept of *kośas* (Sanskrit: "envelopes" or "bodies") or (ii) the specific process of their transition through the *post-mortem* states from death to rebirth as set forth in various ancient, sacred texts of these two religions.

It was not until the early 1930s, however, that AKC's great intellectual energy became almost entirely focused on a more scholarly and expansive exposition of the *philosophia perennis*—including the doctrine of transmigration—which occupied his attention thereafter until his death in 1947. Part of his prodigious scholarship was as a highly skilled polyglot, who read Pāli and Sanskrit, Latin and Greek with such mastery that he reviewed and frequently corrected the works of specialist scholars of those languages. AKC's written legacy contains over 900 published books, essays, and monographs on everything from geology, culture, art, and philology to religion, iconography, mythology and, above all, the *philosophia perennis*.

Competing Terminology Regarding Transmigration

AKC once wrote that "Metempsychosis must be distinguished from

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