

**WAS THE BUDDHA A SHAMAN?**

**BUDDHISM, SHAMANISM AND THE NATURE OF CONSCIOUSNESS**

BY

**JOY MANNÉ, PH.D.**

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>Part 1. A typical shaman’s life pattern.....</b>	<b>4</b>
Birth.....	4
2. Youth and Early Adulthood .....	4
Calling.....	4
Spiritual Crises.....	5
3. Initiation .....	5
Ascetic Practices and Death-Rebirth Experience .....	5
Teachers and Socialisation.....	6
Nature and animals .....	7
Recognition .....	7
4. Practice: The shaman’s work .....	7
Teaching.....	7
Journeying, healing and performing magic .....	7
Relationship with spirits .....	8
Politics and Role in Society .....	8
<b>Summary .....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Part 2. A Buddha’s Life Pattern as Depicted in the Pali Canon .....</b>	<b>9</b>
The Life of the Buddha .....	9
1. Birth .....	9
2. Youth and early adulthood.....	10
Calling.....	10
Spiritual Crises.....	10
3. Initiation.....	11
Nature and Animal Imagery, Good and Bad Spirits .....	11
Teachers and Socialisation.....	11
The Death-Rebirth Experience and Ascetic Practices including Heat.....	12
Recognition .....	14
4. Practice: The Buddha’s work as shaman’s work .....	15
Teaching.....	15
Journeying.....	16

Healing.....	17
Performing Magic .....	17
Relationship with Spirits.....	18
Competition.....	19
Political and social role .....	19
Regular shamanic practice .....	19
<b>Part 3. Comparison between a Hypothetical Shaman’s Life Pattern and the Buddha’s Life History.....</b>	<b>20</b>
Buddha’s Life History.....	20
<b>Part 4. A shaman’s eye view on Some of the Buddha’s Teachings .....</b>	<b>22</b>
Did the Buddha teach a system of metaphysics? .....	23
The teaching of “No-self” - <i>anattā</i> .....	24
The Buddha’s own self-concept.....	25
The context of the “No-self” Teaching.....	25
How the Buddha Taught <i>anattā</i> – “No-self” .....	26
Indoctrination, Induction and the Shamanic Transmission of Knowledge.....	28
<b>Part 5. Shamanism, Buddhism and Consciousness .....</b>	<b>30</b>
Propaganda and the Communication of the Teaching .....	30
Consciousness is naturally shamanic .....	31
<b>Part 6. Going Beyond Shamanism .....</b>	<b>34</b>
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY .....</b>	<b>35</b>

Shamanism used to be defined “in the strict sense (as an) eminently a religious phenomenon of Siberia ...”<sup>1</sup> Today it is recognised to be an ubiquitous phenomenon to the extent that some criticise it as “a bandwagon.”<sup>2</sup>

This paper starts with the presentation of a typical shaman’s life pattern. It then goes on to compare this with the life pattern of a Buddha as depicted in the Pāli Canon and shows that there are sufficient features in common to justify calling the Buddha a shaman. It argues that the extensive parallels between a shaman’s life pattern and the life history of the Buddha justify taking a shaman’s eye view of the Buddha’s Teaching. The implications of this are then considered with regard to the problem whether the Buddha taught a metaphysics, and the Buddha’s Teaching on what is “not-self” – *anattā*. The paper ends with some observations on why ‘shamanism’ may be a ‘bandwagon’.

## PART 1

### A TYPICAL SHAMAN’S LIFE PATTERN

Typically, a shaman’s life follows a particular pattern which can be divided into the stages of:

1. *Birth*;
2. *Youth and Early Adulthood*, with the substages of *Calling* and *Spiritual Crises*,
3. *Initiation*, with the substages *Ascetic Practices and the Death-Rebirth Experience, Teachers and Socialisation, Relationship with nature and animals, Recognition*; and
4. *Practice or the shaman’s work* which comprises *Teaching; Journeying, healing and performing magic, his relationship with spirits, his role in politics and society, and includes his death*.

### Birth

Shamans may be selected at or before birth. This may happen through hereditary transmission, including deceased ancestors passing on their helping spirits.<sup>3</sup> If a shaman’s child is selected at conception or birth to carry on the family tradition then particular rituals and preparations are required of the parents.<sup>4</sup> It is worth noting that gestation and birth are increasingly recognised as emotionally and spiritually significant events.<sup>5</sup>

## 2. Youth and Early Adulthood

### Calling

If a person is not selected at birth or through hereditary transmission, the other possibilities for becoming a shaman include spontaneous vocation or calling. The future shaman

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<sup>1</sup> ER/S:202.

<sup>2</sup> Paul Bahn, quoted in *The New Scientist*, in Coukell, Allan, ‘Spellbound,’ 19<sup>th</sup> May 2001.

<sup>3</sup> Eliade, 1964:28.

<sup>4</sup> Walsh, 1990:34.

<sup>5</sup> See e.g. Grof & Zina, 1993; Manné, 1994, 1995; Taylor, 1994, Janus 1997, Chamberlain, 1998. Contact APPPAH for full information and list of relevant publications.

may be called by spirits. Sometimes seeing spirits, which may be the souls of dead shamans,<sup>6</sup> is the determining sign of the shamanic vocation.<sup>7</sup> A person may also decide to become a shaman through his own free will. Self-made shamans, however, are considered less powerful.<sup>8</sup>

### **Spiritual Crises**

There is a well-documented correlation between puberty and the shaman's calling, marked by a psycho-physiological breakdown at that time.<sup>9</sup> The youth and early adulthood of the shaman contain significant episodes or crises related to the calling:

The youth who is called to be a shaman attracts attention by his strange behaviour: e.g. he seeks solitude, becomes absent minded, loves to roam in the woods or unfrequented places, has visions, and sings in his sleep. ... (He) has fits of fury and easily loses consciousness, hides in the forest, feeds on the bark of trees, throws himself into water and fire, cuts himself with knives. ... (He may go through an) hysterical crisis ... (ER/S:202)

Some of these activities are classical means of inducing altered states of consciousness or trance states.<sup>10</sup> The future shaman spontaneously evokes or falls into these. The potential shaman can also be catapulted into intense experiences after an accident or a highly unusual event such as being struck by lightning, or falling from a tree.<sup>11</sup>

A positive outcome to the calling and spiritual crisis happens when the crisis is overcome and the person is acknowledged as a shaman and reintegrated into society in that role. If the crisis is not overcome, the result may be insanity.<sup>12</sup>

## **3. Initiation**

For those who survive the crises of calling, mentally as well as physically, the extraordinary events in youth are an initiation.<sup>13</sup> Elements in the initiation include ascetic practices.

### **Ascetic Practices and Death-Rebirth Experience**

The traditional schema of an initiation ceremony is: suffering, death, resurrection.<sup>14</sup> The preparations for the initiation might include "dietary modification or fasting, sleep deprivation, physical exertion and exposure to extremes of heat or cold,...meditation, yoga, ritual,

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<sup>6</sup> Eliade, 1964:82.

<sup>7</sup> Eliade, 1964:84.

<sup>8</sup> ER/S:202-3.

<sup>9</sup> Gibson, 1997:46.

<sup>10</sup> Walsh, Chapters 6, 12 and Epilogue.

<sup>11</sup> ER/S : 203.

<sup>12</sup> Gibson, 1997:46.

<sup>13</sup> ER/S:203.

<sup>14</sup> Eliade, 1964:33.

prayer,...periods of quiet and solitude.”<sup>15</sup> Drugs and hallucinogens are also used. These are all classical means of inducing altered states of consciousness or trance. The elements of the initiation may include: self-healing from the crises suffered in youth and early adulthood; dreams, including dream or ecstatic experiences of torture, especially the dismemberment of the body;<sup>16</sup> the ecstatic experience of an ascent to heaven or descent to the underworld; meetings with spirits; and religious and shamanic revelations. Mastery over fire and heat is significant.<sup>17</sup> An essential element in the initiation is that the shaman heals himself from his suffering. This may be from an illness such as epilepsy or from some other problem. Another regular event in the initiatory ritual is the symbolic ascent to heaven up a pole or tree.<sup>18</sup> Sometimes the initiation is a public event.<sup>19</sup>

The result of the initiation is that, “the new shaman displays a strong and healthy constitution, a powerful intelligence, and more energy than others of the male group.”<sup>20</sup>

### **Teachers and Socialisation**

Initiation includes an apprenticeship to a master shaman from whom are learned “both theory and practice: the myths and cosmology, rituals and techniques of the shamanic culture.” In other words, the apprentice shaman is socialised. His experiences are “cultivated, interpreted, and made meaningful within the tribal and shamanic traditions.” Part of the training is journeying outside of the body:

To become an effective cosmic traveller he must learn the terrain of this multi-layered, interconnected universe in which he will quest for power and knowledge. He must (be) familiar with its spiritual inhabitants – their names, habitats, powers, likes and dislikes, how they can be called, and how they can be controlled. For it is these spirits whom he will battle or befriend, who will help or hinder him as he does his work. It is they who represent and embody the power at work in the cosmos, and it is his relationship with them that will determine his success. So the cosmology the would-be shaman learns is no dry mapping of inanimate worlds but a guide to a living, conscious, willful universe. (Walsh, 1990, p. 43)

The course of instruction is given both by spirits and by master shamans.<sup>21</sup> It comes after the shaman has received both the ecstatic training that enables him to dream and enter trance states, and the traditional training in shamanic techniques, names and functions of the spirits, mythology and genealogy of the clan, secret language, generating heat, etc.

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<sup>15</sup> Walsh, 1990:30.

<sup>16</sup> ER/S:203; Walsh, 1990:59f.

<sup>17</sup> Eliade, 1964.

<sup>18</sup> ER/S:203.

<sup>19</sup> See ER/S:202; Eliade, 1964, Chapter 2, 4; Kalweit, Chapter 13.

<sup>20</sup> ER/S:203.

<sup>21</sup> ER/S:202.

### **Nature and animals**

Animals play an important part in the initiation and after it. The shaman is supposed to meet with an animal during his initiation. That animal “reveals to him certain secrets of the craft or teaches him the *language of the animals*, or ... becomes his *familiar spirit*.”<sup>22</sup>

### **Recognition**

Recognition that the initiation has been successfully accomplished comes when the shaman is acknowledged to have cured his illness himself.<sup>23</sup> It may come in youth, or it may be preceded by many years of training.

## **4. Practice: The shaman’s work**

After recognition, the shaman’s tasks include teaching, journeying and healing, performing magic, relating to spirits, and a role in politics and society.

### **Teaching**

Shamans tend to have experiences consistent with the myths of their culture.<sup>24</sup> They see the spirits of their culture, channel or act as mediums for their messages and train future shamans in accordance with the requirements of the culture. They teach and in particular contribute to knowledge of death.<sup>25</sup>

### **Journeying, healing and performing magic**

The essence of shamanism, and what has been claimed to set shamans apart from other ecstasies, healers and mystics is the shamanic journey or soul flight in which the upper, middle and lower worlds are traversed at will.<sup>26</sup> Journeys are undertaken to learn, to heal or to help.<sup>27</sup> Shamans struggle against the powers of evil on behalf of their group.<sup>28</sup>

The shaman knows diagnostic and healing practices. He is a particular kind of healer.<sup>29</sup>

Disease is attributed to the soul’s having strayed away or been stolen, and treatment is in principle reduced to finding it, capturing it, and obliging it to resume its place in the patient’s body. (ER/S:205)

Shamans perform magic, in particular flying, and travelling between the realms of heaven, earth and hell.<sup>30</sup> They remember their previous lives.<sup>31</sup> They have competitions.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Eliade, 1960:60f.

<sup>23</sup> Eliade, 1960:76, 1964:Chapter 2; Walsh, 1990:Chapter 8.

<sup>24</sup> Walsh, 1990:116.

<sup>25</sup> ER/S:206. See also Krippner & Welch 1992), Noel (1997).

<sup>26</sup> Eliade, 1964; Walsh, 1990:141.

<sup>27</sup> Walsh, 1990:142.

<sup>28</sup> S:509.

<sup>29</sup> See Krippner & Welch (1992) for an interesting discussion of shamanic healing.

<sup>30</sup> Eliade, 1964; Kalweit.

### **Relationship with spirits**

Shamans have a variety of relationships with spirits.<sup>33</sup> The spirits may be the souls of dead shamans.<sup>34</sup> They may assist “with journeys, by providing strengths and abilities, by teaching, and by possessing the shaman.”<sup>35</sup> The relationship between the shaman and the spirits may be sexual.<sup>36</sup> While the shaman may be possessed by his or her spirits in mediumnic trance and channel their messages, most frequently he controls the spirits, “in the sense that he, a human being, is able to communicate with the dead, ‘demons,’ and nature spirits.”<sup>37</sup> A shaman only controls a limited number of spirits. He may invoke the great gods to a seance, but that does not mean that he controls them.<sup>38</sup>

### **Politics and Role in Society**

The shaman’s political role is to defend the psychic integrity of the community, to be its anti-demonic champion, and to “defends life, health, fertility, and the world of ‘light’ against death, disease, sterility, disasters, and the world of ‘darkness.’”<sup>39</sup>

### **Death**

A shaman may die in a particular way:

(In) old age, ... many shamans again may undergo critical moments. Madness is said to be typical of aging shamans, and many of them die or “go” in their specific way “along the river of his clan without returning home any more” (Ohlmarks 1939). Modern society might call this having “committed suicide,” but from the point of view of a shamanic society, it is a “voluntary departure,” a normal end to a life which has been normally abnormal. (Pentikäinen, 1996: 7)

## **SUMMARY**

A typical shaman’s life pattern is not particularly complex. S/he may be selected at birth. Otherwise, there is a significant incident or series of incidents in youth which may be psychotic or schizophrenic episodes, or what more aware contemporary therapists and healers now call ‘spiritual emergencies.’<sup>40</sup> The future shaman may be an epileptic or have some other major health or mental problem. The candidate is recognised to be a shaman through surviving several ordeals psychically and physically or through being able to cope with his ailment to the extent that he is considered to have healed it himself. In doing this, he acquires his ba-

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<sup>31</sup> Eliade, 1960:52.

<sup>32</sup> Kalweit, Chapter 15.

<sup>33</sup> See Walsh (1990:9, 130-137, and elsewhere) for a psychological understanding of spirits.

<sup>34</sup> Eliade, 1964:82.

<sup>35</sup> Walsh, 1990:121.

<sup>36</sup> Eliade, 1964:72f; 79ff..

<sup>37</sup> Eliade, 1964:5f.

<sup>38</sup> Eliade, 1964:88.

<sup>39</sup> ER/S:205-206.

<sup>40</sup> Grof & Grof, 1989; Walsh, 1990; Chapter 8.

sic skills and learns the basic knowledge that the group requires of its shaman, in particular journeying, healing and relating to the spirit worlds. After recognition the shaman's work in his community includes healing, teaching, performing particular magical acts, relating to the spirit worlds, and a role in the political life of the community.<sup>41</sup>

## PART 2

### A BUDDHA'S LIFE PATTERN AS DEPICTED IN THE PALI CANON

Gombrich, in his article 'Eliade on Buddhism,' throws out of the window those elements in Buddhism that Eliade, in *Yoga, Immortality and Freedom*, claimed were shamanic.<sup>42</sup> Gombrich is wrong. Buddhism is replete with shamanic elements.

The Pali texts present the Buddha whose life and teaching they describe as a type. All Buddha's are the same.<sup>43</sup> Wherever these texts refer to the historical Buddha, it is interesting that insist on a Buddha being a type. We do not imagine today that every detail in the story of how the Buddha became liberated or enlightened as presented in any canon is a factual account. I am going to avoid the questions of "early" or "original" Buddhism, and which elements of the Buddha's life are historically true<sup>44</sup> until the last section when I raise some questions and make some suggestions. Further, my study is limited to the Buddhism of the Pali Canon and to the way these texts present the Buddha's life and work.

### The Life of the Buddha

The life of the Buddha as recounted in the Pali Canon falls easily into the same pattern as the typical shaman's life pattern. The same elements: *1 Birth, 2 Youth and Early Adulthood, 3 Initiation, and 4 Practice*, are emphasised.

#### 1. Birth

The legends make the conception, gestation and birth of the Bodhisattva, the future Buddha, unusual and magical.<sup>45</sup> In shamanic terms, he was selected before conception. At least the texts consider that such an important person would have had a special conception, gestation and birth.<sup>46</sup> In particular, his birth is accompanied by extraordinary phenomena (glorious radiance throughout the worlds, the quaking of the ten-thousand-world system), and

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<sup>41</sup> The Shaman's Hypothetical Case History is significantly different from the Hero's Hypothetical Case History. See Campbell, 1949. (Campbell does not use this terminology.)

<sup>42</sup> Gombrich, 1974. His position is discussed in Section III, *The Death Rebirth Experience and Ascetic Practices including Heat*, below.

<sup>43</sup> Ref

<sup>44</sup> This issue has been studied by Bareau, Bronkhorst, Frauwallner, Thomas, von Hinüber, Vetter, Zafiropolu and many other eminent scholars.

<sup>45</sup> MN Sutta 123. See also Eliade, 1960:110-116; Thomas, 1927, Chapter III; Seth, 1992:55-69. In Gombrich, (1974) certain elements of the Buddha's birth legend which Eliade has assimilated to the shamanic tradition are refuted. I do not use those elements in this paper.

<sup>46</sup> This is true for all Buddhas. DN, Sutta 14.

culminates in his being received into the hands of *devas* – i.e. spirits – before humans are allowed to touch him. Gods and wise men make prophecies about him.<sup>47</sup>

The legends also tell of traumatic events: the Buddha's mother dies seven days after giving birth to him.<sup>48</sup>

## 2. Youth and early adulthood

### *Calling*

The Buddha's birth legend is that he was "selected" before conception. There are no accounts of any calling by spirits or previous shamans or Buddhas in the Pali Canon.

### *Spiritual Crises*

The texts recount two episodes in the youth of the Bodhisattva which may be compared to the spiritual crises that a shaman goes through at the same period in his life. The first is an agreeable ecstatic state; the second is a traumatic initiatory crisis.

In childhood or early youth, at an age which cannot be divined through reading the texts which have different versions,<sup>49</sup> the future Buddha had his first intuition of a high altered state of consciousness:

During the work of my father the Sakka, while sitting in the cool shade of the rose-apple tree, separated from desires, separated from bad things (*dhamma*), I reached the First Dhyāna, which is accompanied by thought and reflection, born from separation, consists of joy and bliss, and remained [there]. (MN I 246f, Tr. Bronkhorst, 1993:22f.)

This may be compared to a shaman's first, initiatory ecstatic experience.<sup>50</sup> It is noteworthy the texts have this taking place under a tree. Trees are significant in shamanic experiences.<sup>51</sup>

The initiatory crisis or illness came years later. The Pali Canon tells us that before his enlightenment, the future Buddha asked himself,

Supposing that, being myself subject to birth, having understood the danger in what is subject to birth, I seek the unborn supreme security from bondage, Nibbāna. Suppose that, being myself subject to ageing, sickness, death, sorrow, and defilement, having understood the danger in what is subject to ageing, sickness, death, sorrow, and defilement, I seek the unageing, unailing, deathless, sorrowless, and undefiled supreme security from bondage, Nibbāna. (MN I 163, tr. MLDB, p.256)<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Sn 131-136.

<sup>48</sup> The Buddha's Birth Trauma deserves study in the context of Birth Trauma Psychology (see Janus, 1997 for an overview of this subject) and I have this in preparation. Brazier (1997) is perceptive with regard to the traumatic effect on the Buddha of losing his mother so soon after his birth.

<sup>49</sup> Thomas, 1927, Chapter IV; Seth, 1992:79-82.

<sup>50</sup> Eliade, 1964:34.

<sup>51</sup> Eliade, 1964; etc.

<sup>52</sup> Cf. AN I 145f.

Today we might call this an existential crisis – a crisis through confrontation with the condition of being human. Later – a different text tells us that it was at the age of twenty-nine<sup>53</sup> – while he was “still young, a black-haired young man endowed with the blessing of youth, in the prime of life,” we are told that against his parents wishes, he shaved his head and beard, put on the yellow robe and went forth.<sup>54</sup> The Bodhisattva’s existential crisis occurred when or before he was twenty-nine, but we don’t know any more than this about the age at which it happened. Thomas takes the word *dahara* (in MN I 163 and 240) to indicate that the Buddha was a boy when he went forth.

### 3. Initiation

The Bodhisattva’s illness, as the texts describe it, was his inability to accept being subject to old age, illness and death. His attempt at self-healing, or the cure that he sought, was the way out of this suffering. In order to achieve that goal, he decided to leave home and become an ascetic.<sup>55</sup>

#### *Nature and Animal Imagery, Good and Bad Spirits*

The future Buddha’s quest begins with episodes that recall the importance of animals and spirits in the shaman’s initiation. As Bodhisattva, he leaves home on his horse. The horse is significant in Shamanism as a funerary animal and psychopomp and a means of achieving ecstasy.<sup>56</sup>

The account of the Buddha’s attainment of Liberation, which defines the end of his period of initiation, is accompanied by nature and animal imagery. According to some legends it is attained under a tree<sup>57</sup> and in the presence of a serpent: the serpent king Mucalinda, a *nāga*, protects the Buddha’s head.<sup>58</sup> Serpents, *nāgas*, and dragons are basic images in shamanic initiations and dreams. One of the recommended places for meditation is in a forest seated at the foot of a tree.<sup>59</sup>

#### *Teachers and Socialisation*

The Bodhisattva goes to teachers to learn how to achieve his goal.<sup>60</sup> Besides learning their methods and practices and their concept of Liberation, he also learns how to live as a

<sup>53</sup> DN II 151.

<sup>54</sup> MN I 163, 240. Tr. adapted from MLDB. The expanded legend tells that the Bodhisattva had a luxurious life (see Gombrich, 1996:75f for a discussion of this legend) and was protected from birth from the sight of human suffering. When he saw for the first time an old man, an ill person, a corpse and an ascetic and learned that he too was liable to old age, illness, and death, he lost his enjoyment in life, and to determine to find a way out of a situation (being subject to old age, etc.) which he found unbearable.

<sup>55</sup> Suttas that describe the going forth include MN 26, 36, 85, 100; AN, 3.

<sup>56</sup> Eliade, 1964:93 >From the most distant times almost all animals have been conceived either as psychopomps that accompany the soul into the beyond or as the dead person’s new form.’ See also p. 467.

<sup>57</sup> Vin I 1ff. See Thomas, 1927:68, fn.1; 70.

<sup>58</sup> SN I 124. V I 1ff. Thomas, 1927: 85. See Bareau, 1963:101-105; Gombrich, 1996:72-75 for a discussion of this legend.

<sup>59</sup> DN I 71 and throughout the canon. See also Blackstone, 1998:94-102 for tree meditations in *Therā- and Theragāthā*.

<sup>60</sup> MN s.26. See Seth, 1992, 104-106; Zafiropolu, 1993:22-29.

member of a group of ascetics. He becomes acknowledged equal with each of his teachers and is invited to share the teaching with them. The Bodhisattva is becoming socialised with regard to the tasks of a religious leader. He is learning the rules. This can be compared to the apprentice shaman's period of studying with acknowledged shamans.

The Bodhisattva's teachers instruct him on how to attain particular altered states of consciousness, or ecstatic states, and he duly learns how to attain these at will. He learns to attain the state of nothingness (*ākiñcaññāyatana*) from Ālāra Kālāma, his first teacher, and the state of neither-consciousness-nor-non-consciousness (*nevasaññānāsaññāyatana*) from Uddaka Rāmaputta, his second teacher.<sup>61</sup>

### ***The Death-Rebirth Experience and Ascetic Practices including Heat***

The bodhisattva is convinced that the altered states of consciousness his teachers have taught him are not the limit of what could be attained as they do not lead “to disenchantment, to dispassion, to cessation, to peace, to direct knowledge, to enlightenment, to Nibbāna”<sup>62</sup> and this is what he requires from the “cure” to his illness. He leaves his teachers and creates his own death-rebirth experience, going off on his own with five disciples for six years of austerities during which he puts himself through tortures almost to the point of death. In the words the texts put into the future Buddha's mouth to describe these painful experiences,

I thought, “Let me, closing my teeth, pressing my palate with my tongue, restrain my thought with my mind, let me coerce and torment it. [I did this until] sweat came from my armpits.”

I thought, “Let me perform meditation without breath. .. I stopped breathing in and out .. there came about the extremely strong noise of winds which went out through my ears, .. shook up my head, ..[gave] strong headaches, ..cut my belly all around.” ( MN I 242-245. Translation taken from Bronkhorst, 1993:1-5.)<sup>63</sup>

The Bodhisattva thinks to undertake a total fast, but the gods intervene to warn him they will prevent it.<sup>64</sup> He compromises with a partial fast, taking food, little by little, drop by drop, until,

My body became extremely thin,...my behind became just like the foot of a camel...my backbone bent up and down like a line of balls,...my ribs were breaking off and falling to pieces,...the glitter of my eyes was seen, deep and low-lying in the sockets,...he skin of my head became shrivelled and withered,...the skin of my belly had become stuck to my backbone.... (MN I 245f. Adapted and abbreviated from Bronkhorst, 1993:5-8.)

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<sup>61</sup> MN I 163-166.

<sup>62</sup> MN I 166, tr. MLDB.

<sup>63</sup> Bronkhorst argues that the practices referred to in this and the following quotes are non-Buddhist and probably Jaina practices.

<sup>64</sup> MN I 245. See also Wagle, 1995:85.

This is comparable to the shamanic dismemberment and rebirth experience, especially the shaman's contemplation of his own skeleton.<sup>65</sup>

There is a competitive element with regard to this fast:

The recluses or Brahmins of the past, the present and the future, who experienced, experience or will experience painful, sharp, severe sensations due to [self-inflicted] torture, experienced, experience or will experience this much at the most, no more than this. (MN I 246. Adapted from Bronkhorst, 1993:8f.)

This passage evokes shamanic competitions.<sup>66</sup>

Severe ascetic practices are typical in a shamanic case history. There are further details of the Buddha's ascetic practices in the *Mahāsīhanāda Sutta* (MN, s.12) including,

I clothed myself in hemp, in hemp-mixed cloth, in shrouds, in refuse rags, in tree bark, in antelope hide, in strips of antelope hide, in kusa-grass fabric, in bark fabric, in wood-shavings fabric, in head-hair wool, in animal wool, in owls' wings. (MN I 78, tr. Ñānāmolī and Bodhi, MLDB:173)

and

Dust and dirt, accumulating over the years, caked off my body and flaked off. (MN I 78, tr. Ñānāmolī and Bodhi, MLDB:174)

The Buddha also avoided human contact completely, ate his own excrement, and inflicted extremes of hot and cold on his body.<sup>67</sup> Eventually, having gone to the extreme, the Bodhisattva rejects asceticism as not leading to his goal, or healing. Having survived his self-imposed tortures, he perceives that he is not reaching his goal through these severe methods. Remembering the agreeable ecstatic experience or altered state of conscience of his youth, he decides that that is the way to his goal. He succeeds, and becomes a Buddha. In shamanic terms, he heals himself.

Mastery over fire and heat is significant in shamanism. Images of heat recur in the Buddha's Teachings, e.g. fire symbolises the cycle of *saṃsāra*,<sup>68</sup> and of course there is the famous Fire Sermon<sup>69</sup> and the event that precedes it I quote Gombrich who is remarkable for the breadth of his knowledge and also for the charm of his expositions,

In this episode the Buddha seems, if I may say so, to behave in a rather strange manner. There are texts (e.g. DN I 213) in which he says that he loathes the display of miracles. But here he performs a whole series of them.... The Bud-

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<sup>65</sup> Eliade, 1964:62ff.

<sup>66</sup> Kalweit, Chapter 15.

<sup>67</sup> Gombrich (1996:78f) remarks on the competitive elements in this sutta.

<sup>68</sup> See Blackstone (1998:102f) for fire imagery in the *Therī- and Theragaathaa*.

<sup>69</sup> SN IV 19 = Vin I 34f.

dha asks to spend the night in Uruvela Kassapa's fire house. The ascetic warns him that there is a *nāga*, a supernatural cobra, living in there who may burn him up. The Buddha goes in and successfully vies with the *nāga* in heating himself up, thought of course he does not hurt him. The whole fire-house seems to be on fire (*āditta*) because of the heat the two of them generate. Moreover the Buddha's flames come in five colours. (Gombrich, 1996:70f)

Gombrich further explains that in the Rig Veda the name "Aṅgīrasa," by which the Buddha is called several times in the Canon, belongs "to a class of supermen, standing between men and gods, and Agni, the personification of fire, is the first and foremost Aṅgīrasa." He draws attention too to other texts where the Buddha is called "Aṅgīrasa" when he is said to shine very brilliantly. As Gombrich comments, "in this passage, (the Buddha) is virtually impersonating Agni, the brahmin's fire god."<sup>70</sup>

Eliade pointed out that MN I 244 speaks of the "heat" obtained by holding the breath, and that other Buddhist texts, e.g. *Dhammapada* 387, say that the Buddha is burning.<sup>71</sup> Gombrich rejects these two examples. He rejects the first passage on the grounds that it "is part of the Buddha's description of the *wrong* way in which he meditated before his Enlightenment; it is part of the mortification of the flesh which he rejects at the beginning of the First Sermon." Although the texts say that the Buddha rejected the mortification of the flesh *after* he attained Enlightenment, they give it *as part of his experiences on his path to Enlightenment*. Gombrich rejects the second passage on philological grounds and I have no dispute with his position here.<sup>72</sup>

As Eliade says, "'Mastery of fire' and 'inner heat' are always connected with reaching a particular ecstatic state or .. an unconditioned state, a state of perfect spiritual freedom. .. [It] indicates that the shaman has transcended the human condition and already participates in the condition of the 'spirits'"<sup>73</sup> The richness of the fire imagery connected with the Buddha and his Teaching is evident.<sup>74</sup>

### **Recognition**

Recognition does not come instantly for the Buddha, except from the Brahmaa Sahampati. The first person the Buddha meets after his Enlightenment, Upaka, a naked ascetic, admires his complexion and appearance, but does not become a follower when the Buddha announces his Enlightenment.<sup>75</sup> Recognition comes once the Buddha has convinced his five companions in ascetic extremes that he has found what they were searching for, or, in shamanic terms, that he has cured his illness and can therefore also cure theirs.

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<sup>70</sup> Gombrich, 1996:71f.

<sup>71</sup> Eliade, *Yoga*, p.331.

<sup>72</sup> Gombrich, 1974:226.

<sup>73</sup> Eliade, 1958, 332; cf.106; 1960:68.

<sup>74</sup> See also Gombrich, 1966:65-69.

<sup>75</sup> Vin I 8, MN I 170f.

#### 4. Practice: The Buddha's work as shaman's work

We have seen in the Hypothetical Shaman's Case History that the shaman's tasks include teaching, journeying and healing, performing magic and taking up a role in politics and society.

##### *Teaching*

Throughout the Pali Canon the Buddha is described in the following way:

An arahant, a fully awakened one, abounding in wisdom and goodness, happy, who knows all worlds, unsurpassed as a guide to mortals willing to be led, a teacher for gods and men, a Blessed One, a Buddha. He, by himself, thoroughly knows and sees, as it were, face to face this universe – including the worlds above of the gods, the Brahmas, and the Maras, and the world below with its recluses and Brahmins, its princes and peoples, – and having known it, he makes his knowledge known to others. The truth, lovely in its origin, lovely in its progress, lovely in its consummation, doth he proclaim, both in the spirit and in the letter, the higher life doth he make known, in all its fullness and in all its purity. (Tr. DB 1 78)

The attributes in this passage are also typically the attributes of a shaman: he knows the worlds, he has cosmic knowledge, and he teaches it.

The texts have the Buddha preaching sermons, taking consultations, and drilling his monks in his Teaching and method.<sup>76</sup> He initiates them into his practices. He asserts that he teaches a practical method that brings results:

Bhikkhus, this Dhamma is visible here and now, immediately effective, inviting inspection, onward leading, to be experienced by the wise for themselves. (*Sanditthiko ayam bhikkhave dhammo akaliko ehipassiko opanayiko paccatam veditabbo viññūhiti* (MN I 265 and variously. Tr. Ñānānandī and Bodhi, MLDB:358)

The Buddha's Teaching is founded on the method he discovered which succeeded in healing his initiatory illness.

Besides teaching his method, the texts have the Buddha teaching a vast diversity of subjects which shamans also teach. These included ethics, the world with its elements,<sup>77</sup> cosmology,<sup>78</sup> ontology (the beginning of things),<sup>79</sup> conception,<sup>80</sup> how things are born,<sup>81</sup> the nature of life (suffering, *dukkha*, and the escape from suffering) and a rather complete model of man (how consciousness functions, and what is not the self, *anattā*). The texts have the Buddha

<sup>76</sup> Manné, 1990.

<sup>77</sup> MN, s.1.

<sup>78</sup> The Buddha's cosmology includes gods, Yakshas, Gandharvas (DN II 57), naming the eight great assemblies (DN II 109), and so forth.

<sup>79</sup> DN I 17f; DN s.27. See Gombrich 1996:80f.

<sup>80</sup> MN I 265f.

<sup>81</sup> MN I 265f.

demonstrating a knowledge of psychology: he encompasses with his own mind, the minds of other beings and people, and knows whether or not their minds are lustful, hate-filled, delusional, focused or disturbed, broad or narrow, with or without a superior, concentrated, or liberated.<sup>82</sup> Shamans are also psychologists.<sup>83</sup>

The Buddha sees with his Divine Eye (*dibba cakkha*). He teaches through his higher knowledge, *abhiññā*, which has shamanic elements. *Abhiññā* includes such psychic powers as levitation, clairaudience, thought-reading, remembering previous incarnations, knowing other's previous incarnations,<sup>84</sup> and certainty of having attained Enlightenment.<sup>85</sup> Among the phrases used typically to describe the Buddha is, "He makes known this universe (*loka*) with its gods, *māras* and Brahmās, and the world with its wandering ascetics and brahmins, princes and peoples having seen it for himself through his own higher knowledge (*abhiññā*)."<sup>86</sup> The term *abhiññā* also occurs in the arahant formula: *āsavānan khayā anāsavam cetovimuttim paññāvimuttim ditthe va dhamme sayam abhiññāya saccikatvā upasampajja vihareyyan-ti*. *Abhiññā* is an essential development which occurs in many, if not all of those who succeed in following the Buddha's method.<sup>86</sup>

The texts attribute further shamanic behaviour to the Buddha. He teaches a spell.<sup>87</sup> He competes with spirits. He sees past lives.<sup>88</sup> He knows where people go after death.<sup>89</sup>

The Buddha prophecies. In the Pānīka Suttanta<sup>90</sup> the Buddha's attendant, Sunakkhatta, is full of admiration for a naked ascetic called Korakkhattiya who goes around behaving like a dog. The Buddha prophecies to Sunakkhatta that the ascetic would die of indigestion<sup>91</sup> within seven days and reappear among the Kālankañja, the lowest grade of asuras (minor deities, an unfortunate reincarnation). Sunakkhatta tells Korakkhattiya of the prophecy and asks him to eat carefully in order to prove the Buddha wrong. Of course, Korakkhattiya dies as the Buddha predicted. It is well known that when a shaman tells someone to die (or, for that matter, when a doctor does<sup>92</sup>), whether this is done directly, or indirectly as in this example, the person is likely to die. This even has a name in contemporary medicine where it is called the nocebo effect.

### ***Journeying***

One of the most repeated descriptions of the Buddha (the first quotation under *Teaching* above) says that "he knows all worlds." In the process of achieving Liberation, the Buddha remembers his former births, with clans etc., and those of others and knows their fate after death: whether they go to heaven or hell.<sup>93</sup> These are typically shamanic capacities related to

<sup>82</sup> DN I 79f. See also Manné, 1995: 15.

<sup>83</sup> Kakar, 1982.

<sup>84</sup> S-riputta praises the Buddha's way of teaching the Dhamma in regard to the last three in DN III Sutta 28.

<sup>85</sup> PED; see also Gethin, 1992:82.

<sup>86</sup> See Ergardt, 1977 and Johansson, 1969 for further discussion.

<sup>87</sup> DN s. 32. See Schmithausen (1997) for further discussion of spells, especially the Snake Charm, in Buddhism, and including "truth magic" (pp. 40, 49) and the protective function of friendliness (pp. 41, 49, etc.)

<sup>88</sup> DN II 91f.

<sup>89</sup> *gati*, MN I 73-77.

<sup>90</sup> DN s.24.

<sup>91</sup> Tr. Walshe.

<sup>92</sup> Siegel, 1986; Grof, 1993:192.

<sup>93</sup> MN I 248; cf. DN s.4 for the Buddha's knowledge of other people's clans and lineages.

journeying out of the body and soul retrieval.

The texts regularly have the Buddha travelling through the air. (DN s.25) He does this, and other shamanic acts, through his magical powers (*iddhi*):

Having been one, he becomes many; having been many, he becomes one; he appears and vanishes; he goes unhindered through a wall, through an enclosure, through a mountain, as though through space; he dives in and out of the earth as though it were water; he walks on water without sinking as though it were earth; seated cross-legged he travels in space like a bird; with his hand he touches and strokes the moon and sun so powerful and mighty; he wields bodily mastery even as far as the Brahma-world. (MN I 69 & variously, Tr. MLDB:165)

These and other shamanic elements are an important part of one of the most frequent Hypothetical Case Histories in the Nikāyas, which I have called “the *Sāmaññaphala Sutta* Hypothetical Case History.”<sup>94</sup>

Perhaps it can also be considered an element in the Buddha’s journeying that he could make his voice heard through to the Brahma world or even further.<sup>95</sup>

### **Healing**

The Buddhist Teaching and terminology is rich in metaphors of illness and healing. In various analogies a person who is not liberated is compared to someone who is ill,<sup>96</sup> and the enlightenment process is compared to a healing process. With regard to the Buddha’s skill as a healer, in the medical imagery of famous arrow simile and elsewhere the Buddha is compared to a surgeon.<sup>97</sup> Elsewhere his Dhamma is compared to a clever surgeon.<sup>98</sup> With regard to physical illnesses, the texts have the Buddha teaching acceptance and detachment. He endured his own final ailment “mindfully and clearly aware, and without complaint.”<sup>99</sup> The Buddha’s healing is aimed at psychological and spiritual illness.

### **Performing Magic**

The texts are ambivalent in their attitude to the shamanic powers related to performing magic and miracles. There are many more shamanic elements in the DN version of *Sāmaññaphala Sutta* Hypothetical Case History than in the MN version, which indicates an important difference in emphasis between these two collections.<sup>100</sup> In the DN, the *Kevaddha Sutta*, (Sutta 9, §§ 4, 6) and the *Sampasādaniya Suttanta* (Sutta 28, §18) are contemptuous of many shamanic powers. The *Pānika Suttanta* (DN s.24) is specifically against magical powers being the goal of the Buddha’s teaching while at the same time being full of examples of the Buddha’s shamanic powers, including demonstrations of clairvoyance, a manifestation of

<sup>94</sup> Manné, 1995.i. When I wrote this paper I was not aware that elements in this Case History were shamanic.

<sup>95</sup> AN I 227. See also Wagle, 1995: 98.

<sup>96</sup> E.g. AN III 189.

<sup>97</sup> MN I 429; AN IV 340.

<sup>98</sup> AN III 238.

<sup>99</sup> DN II 128. Tr. DB.

<sup>100</sup> Manné, 1990.

his magical powers<sup>101</sup>, and information gained from a spirit guide, namely Ajita, the general of the Licchavis who had recently died and been reborn in the company of the Thirty-three Gods. The display of magical powers in this sutta ends, as described by the Buddha, “I entered into the fire-element and rose into the air to the height of seven palm-trees, and projecting a beam from the height of another seven so that it blazed and shed fragrance, I then appeared in the Gabled Hall in the Great Forest.”<sup>102</sup> The sutta ends with the Buddha explaining a full cosmology: the beginning of things.

The Vinaya has an account of a very long and intense magic competition between the Buddha and Kassapa of Uruvela.<sup>103</sup>

In the MN, in the *Ākhankheyya Sutta* (s. 6) monks are encouraged to wish or aim to attain the magical powers (*iddhis*), as well as the supernormal powers (*abhiññās*): clairaudience, knowledge of the minds of others, their previous lives, and the future incarnations of others. In the *Mahāsīhanāda Sutta* (s. 12) the Buddha vaunts his magical powers (*iddhis*) and his clairaudience. It is through *iddhi* that the Buddha tames Angulimāla the notorious murderer.<sup>104</sup>

### *Relationship with Spirits*

Like a shaman, the Buddha has contact with the upper and lower spirit worlds, the worlds of the good and the bad spirits, of heaven and hell. After attaining Liberation, the texts have the Buddha expressing doubt whether to teach. Brahmā Sahampati, who can be described in shamanic terms as a good spirit, authenticates the Buddha’s experience by coming to persuade him to teach.<sup>105</sup> The gods celebrate his first sermon.<sup>106</sup>

The Buddha is not only supported by the gods but also by spirits. When Saccaka, the Nigantha’s son, does not answer a challenge, a *yakkha* bearing a thunderbolt comes to support him.<sup>107</sup>

On several occasions the “bad spirit,” Mara, comes to try to persuade the Buddha not to teach.<sup>108</sup>

The Buddha is described as teacher of gods and men.<sup>109</sup> Gods, like humans, acknowledge his higher standing in their mode of salutation and in the terms of address they use when they come to see him.<sup>110</sup> They refer to his higher authority,<sup>111</sup> and ask him doctrinal questions.<sup>112</sup> They lend him their authority by confirming his statements.<sup>113</sup> The gods keep him informed: e.g. Brahmā Sahampati informs the Buddha of Devadatta’s defection.<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> See Gethin, 1992:97-101

<sup>102</sup> Translation Walsh, LDB:380.

<sup>103</sup> Brekke, 1997.

<sup>104</sup> MN s.86. See Gombrich, 1996, Chapter V for an interesting explanation of this sutta.

<sup>105</sup> MN I 168f.

<sup>106</sup> Wagle, p. 88, SN I 421-423.

<sup>107</sup> MN I 231.

<sup>108</sup> Sn verses 425-449. See Thomas, 1927:71f and elsewhere.

<sup>109</sup> See first quotation under *Teaching* above.

<sup>110</sup> Wagle, p.86.

<sup>111</sup> Wagle, 1995: 91, DN I 215-223.

<sup>112</sup> Wagle, 1995: 84.

<sup>113</sup> MN I 497, Wagle, 1995:85.

<sup>114</sup> Wagle, p.88, SN I 153-4.

The Buddha controls his spirits; he is not possessed by them. He is a greater shaman than they are!

### **Competition**

The Buddha competes with other shamans in various ways, as well as with everyone else who leads a religious group or holds a religious conviction.<sup>115</sup> In the *Kassapa-Sīhanāda Sutta*,<sup>116</sup> the Buddha claims to be the highest in morality (*sīla*), self-mortification (*tapas*), scrupulous austerity (*jigucchā*)<sup>117</sup>, wisdom (*paññā*), and liberation (*vimutti*).<sup>118</sup> In this sutta too, the Buddha asserts his proficiency in debates.<sup>119</sup> In the *Kevaddha Sutta*, he is acknowledged by the great Brahmā to be more knowledgeable than he himself is.<sup>120</sup> This is another example of the Buddha controlling his spirits.

A particularly shamanic incident is the Buddha's competition with Ālāra Kālāma. The Buddha is told that (one of his teachers) while conscious (*saññī*) and awake (*jāgaro*) did not see or hear five hundred carts passing close to him. The Buddha declares in his turn that he, while conscious and awake, did not see or hear anything when the rain-god streamed and splashed and the lightning flashed and the thunder crashed.<sup>121</sup> The text does not indicate what particular altered state of consciousness Ālāra Kālāma and the Buddha were in. As Walsh observes of shamans, "During journeys awareness of the environment is significantly reduced."<sup>122</sup>

Some spirits defy the Buddha, but he proves he is stronger than they are.<sup>123</sup> He wins a knowledge and magical power contest with Baka the Brahmā.<sup>124</sup>

### **Political and social role**

The Buddha had a rich social and political role, despite the fact that he had gone forth and withdrawn from worldly affairs. He ran the Order of his monks. He was regularly consulted by kings, brahmins, leaders of ascetic groups and others. He was a confident debater in the eight assemblies, i.e. among nobles, brahmins, householders, recluses, the gods of the heaven of the Four Great Kings and of the heaven of the Thirty-Three, assemblies of Māras and Brahmās.<sup>125</sup>

### **Regular shamanic practice**

After his Enlightenment, the Buddha continued the typically shamanic practice of taking retreats in the forest. At one point he defends this practice. It is not because he is *not* free

<sup>115</sup> Manné, 1990, 1992.

<sup>116</sup> DN I 174.

<sup>117</sup> The compound *tapo-jigucchā* is difficult to translate. PTSD has "detesting asceticism" under *jigucchā* and "disgust for" under *tapo*. Rhys Davids has both "austere scrupulousness" and "scrupulous care of others." Might this be referring to the disgusting asceticism e.g. of eating his own excrement referred to above?

<sup>118</sup> Tr. from Walshe, LDB:155.

<sup>119</sup> Manné, 1992.

<sup>120</sup> DN s.9.383.

<sup>121</sup> DN II 130-132. See Bronkhorst (forthcoming) regarding the authenticity of this incident.

<sup>122</sup> Walsh, 1990:220.

<sup>123</sup> Wagle, 1995: 89.

<sup>124</sup> MN, s.49, *Brahmanimantaṅkika Sutta*. Cf. SN I 141-144.

<sup>125</sup> MN I 72, s.12. See Manné, 1992.

from lust, hate and delusion but because it is pleasant for him, and to set an example. (MN I 23) He encourages his monks to practice in solitary places. (MN s.6)

### PART 3

#### COMPARISON BETWEEN A HYPOTHETICAL SHAMAN'S LIFE PATTERN AND THE BUDDHA'S LIFE HISTORY

Previous studies have addressed the question of the authenticity of the information given in these (and other) texts about the Buddha with regard to his life, his parentage, the incidents supposed to have happened, and above all which aspects of the Teaching in these texts may be considered authentic – the search for Ānanda's diary, as Frauwallner so wittily puts it.<sup>126</sup> To the best of my knowledge, however, there have been no studies of the *pattern* or *type* of life attributed to the Buddha, although Gombrich has described it as an allegory.<sup>127</sup> What, then, was this type or pattern? Was the Buddha indeed a shaman?

The following table compares the typical shaman's life pattern with the Buddha's life history as presented in the Pali Canon.

**Table of Comparisons**

	<b>Hypothetical Shaman's Life Pattern</b>	<b>Buddha's Life History</b>
<b>Birth</b>	Sometimes important	Important
<b>Youth and Early Adulthood</b>	Intense experience Crisis	Ecstasy Crisis: seeing old age, illness, death and the ascetic
<b>Initiation</b>	Apprenticeship Dietary modification Body dismemberment, torture Solitude	Apprenticeship Dietary modification Fasting so severely that he was only skin and bones. Solitude

<sup>126</sup> Frauwallner, 1956:310.

<sup>127</sup> Gombrich, 1996:75f.

	Ecstasy, journeying - ascent to heaven - descent - meeting spirits  Revelation  Self-healing  Mastery of fire and heat  Animals and nature	- ascent to heaven - descent - meeting spirits  Revelation  Self-healing  Mastery of fire and heat  Animals and nature
Professional practice	Teaching  Journeying  Healing  Magic  Ritual paraphernalia: drum, dress, bag, mask	Teaching  Journeying  Healing  T + criticism of magic  Monk's robes, begging bowl, medicines, etc.
Death	Recurrence of crisis        Suicide or "voluntary departure"	? (Was it ongoing and needing regular "treatment" through meditation practice?)        "Voluntary departure"

The Table of Comparisons shows the very close similarity between the Buddha's life history and a Hypothetical Shaman's life pattern.

To what extent was the Buddha a shaman? Eliade's is still the best and most concrete (and so falsifiable) definition of shamanism that I have found. Eliade looks for a definition that does not confuse shamanism with "the mass of 'magical' ideologies and practices attested almost everywhere in the world and on all cultural levels."<sup>128</sup> He defines the following elements as being peculiar to shamanism:

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<sup>128</sup> Eliade, 1969:319.

(1) an initiation comprising the candidate's symbolic dismemberment, death, and resurrection, which, among other things, implies his descent into hell and ascent to heaven.

The severe ascetic practices of the Buddha come close to dismemberment, birth and resurrection and correspond to this category.

(2) the shaman's ability to make ecstatic journeys in this role of healer and psychopompos he goes in search of the sick man's soul, stolen by demons, captures it, and restores it to the body; he conducts the dead man's soul to hell, etc..

Two elements in Buddhism correspond to this category: the Buddha's knowledge of what happens to people after death, and his statement that following his Teaching saves people from hell.<sup>129</sup>

(3) "mastery of fire" (the shaman touches red-hot iron, walks over burning coals, etc., without being hurt).

The fire imagery in the Teaching corresponds to this category.

(4) the shaman's ability to assume animal forms (he flies like the birds, etc.) And to make himself invisible. (Eliade, 1969: 320)

The Buddha assumes animal forms in the Jātakas. He regularly flies through space and makes himself invisible in the Nikāyas and elsewhere.

The Buddha's relationship with spirits, here the gods and Māra, too, and especially his control of and superiority to them, conform to the shaman's capacities.<sup>130</sup>

The Pali texts attribute to the Buddha a shaman's life and life-style: they give the Buddha a typical shaman's case history. In every way, the Buddha as depicted in these texts conforms to Eliade's definition of a shaman. Further, as the *Mahāpadāna Suttanta* (DN, sutta 14) shows, they attribute the same life pattern or type to all previous Buddhas, so according to these texts, all Buddhas are also shamans.

What about the historical Buddha? Can we believe that he really was a shaman or did he go beyond shamanism? There is evidence for both in these texts. Some evidence suggests a certain ambivalence towards or opposition to shamanic practices, particularly those involving magical practices.<sup>131</sup> A large amount of evidence shows that the Buddha practised as a shaman even after his Enlightenment and his death was certainly shamanic. I come back to this question in the last section (7) of this paper.

## PART 4

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<sup>129</sup> MN, s.130 and elsewhere.

<sup>130</sup> See also Gombrich, 1996:91.

<sup>131</sup> See also Brekke, 1997.

## A SHAMAN'S EYE VIEW ON SOME OF THE BUDDHA'S TEACHINGS

The extensive parallels between a hypothetical shaman's life pattern and the Buddha's life history justify taking a shaman's eye view of the Buddha's Teaching. I will consider two problems here which this view illuminates. The first is the question whether or not the Buddha taught a system of metaphysics, and the second, the question of the Buddha's teaching of *anattā* – “not-self”.

### Did the Buddha teach a system of metaphysics?

The problem whether or not the Buddha taught a system of metaphysics has several aspects. One basic concern is how ‘metaphysics’ is defined.<sup>132</sup> Another element is how the nature of original Buddhism is conceived of. For the purposes of this paper, however, the interesting issue is that study of the texts leads scholars to ask this question. There is doubt!

A shaman teaches. That is among the requirements of his profession. His teaching takes the form of handing down the myths and culture of his society, both within the social group that he serves in a professional capacity, and, particularly, to aspiring shamans as part of their initiation. The texts which are presenting the Buddha as (i. a.) a shaman have, therefore, to show that the shaman-Buddha has all the necessary knowledge, and indeed they do so.<sup>133</sup> What is particularly interesting is how the texts depict the way the Buddha teaches metaphysics.

There are cases in which the texts have the Buddha teaching metaphysical elements reluctantly. The Pātika Sutta contains a friendly and rather intimate dialogue between the Buddha and Bhagavagotta, a fellow ascetic (*paribbājaka*), albeit of different practices. The Buddha visits Bhagavagotta in his park. Bhagavagotta makes him welcome and comments that it is a long time since he has called.<sup>134</sup> The Buddha describes some nuisance he has experienced with some particularly foolish and troublesome followers. He is exasperated with them and is grumbling rather freely about them to Bhagavagotta, as, one might say, between colleagues and equals who understand each other's problems because they are in the same profession. The Buddha recounts how Sunakkhatta, a dissatisfied monk, had complained that the Buddha did not teach him knowledge of the Beginning (*aggāñña*) while, for his part, the Buddha had never maintained that that made up any part of his Teaching. The Buddha insists that of course he knows the beginning, and further, he knows things that go beyond that.<sup>135</sup> Moreover, he is consulted with regard to the Beginning by various samanas and brāhmānas. The sutta has the Buddha refuting their positions and providing an explanation which they then embrace.<sup>136</sup> The Buddha teaches this reluctantly, but he teaches it nevertheless.

There are other cases in which the texts have the Buddha refusing to take up any position regarding metaphysical elements, as in the questions he refused to answer and did not

<sup>132</sup> Edgerton (1959) disputes Von Glasenapp's position. See also Thomas, 1929:192; Bronkhorst (forthcoming).

<sup>133</sup> See the section on Teaching under the Buddha's life history.

<sup>134</sup> I understand from the text (DN III 1-2) that although he is a *paribbājaka*, Bhagavagotta has his own park, and that the Buddha is a regular, if infrequent, visitor.

<sup>135</sup> DN Sutta 24.

<sup>136</sup> See Gombrich, 1996: 80-82 for a discussion of how Buddhist cosmology is taught in comparison to and as a parody of brahmanical cosmology.

answer. In still other cases they have him rejecting metaphysical questions on the grounds that they are “speculations .. which will have a particular result on the future condition of those who trust in them,”<sup>137</sup> “a net of views in which fish flounder.”<sup>138</sup> The Buddha, rather, “knows things far beyond, ... He has, in his own heart, realised the way of escape from (these views), has understood, as they really are, the rising up and passing away of sensations, their sweet taste, their danger, and how they cannot be relied on, and not grasping after any (of those things men are eager for) he is quite set free.” He has understood “those other things, profound, difficult to realise, hard to understand, tranquillising, sweet, not to be grasped by mere logic, subtle, comprehensible only by the wise ... which he has set forth.”<sup>139</sup>

My position as a scholar is that the Buddha did not teach a system of metaphysics, but a practical method<sup>140</sup> which, as the texts so often say, led beyond the human condition, transcended old age, illness and death, and culminated in Enlightenment. It is completely logical that a method that leads to transcending the human condition has no need to explain or account for how things began, but only to explain how it is transcended. But shamans teach ontology and cosmology: it is one of their jobs. Confronted with such a unique and unusual shaman, what could the tellers of stories and the compilers of the texts do? The Buddha may or may not have taught a system of metaphysics. What the texts have him demonstrate is that he knows and understands other contemporary metaphysical systems as well as and better than their own proponents – or should one call them his fellow shamans – do?

### The teaching of “No-self” - *anattā*

A shaman enters into ecstasy or altered states of consciousness at will, and induces them in others for ritual or healing purposes and like a shaman, the Buddha did exactly that. He taught his followers how to enter altered states of consciousness (e.g., i.a., the *jhānas*) or trans-consciousness (*Nibbāna*) in order to become healed of Suffering, craving, attachment and other aspects of the human condition that lead to unhappiness, and to become liberated from rebirth. His method can be clearly demonstrated through an examination of his Teaching on *anattā* - “No-self”.<sup>141</sup> The style of this Teaching provides the method through which his followers could auto-induce a particular altered state of consciousness – the “No-self” state, at will.

I will not enter into the details of the controversy among scholars concerning the teaching of *anattā* – whether the Buddha actually taught that there was a permanent Self or that there was not one: there is already an enormous literature on this subject and I have nothing to contribute to it as it is argued. The “No-self” controversy is usually battled out between scholars on philological grounds.<sup>142</sup> I propose to take a “*shaman’s eye*” view of this Teaching,

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<sup>137</sup> DN I 31.

<sup>138</sup> DN I 45.

<sup>139</sup> Tr. adapted from DB.

<sup>140</sup> See also Hamilton, 1998.

<sup>141</sup> This term is variously translated, including “Not the self,” “Without self,” “selfless,” etc. My arguments in this section do not depend on a position with regard to translating or decoding the term *anattā* as I take it to be a transpersonal experience and in this realm, describing altered states of consciousness almost always leads to problems with terminology.

<sup>142</sup> Bronkhorst, Collins, Gombrich, Oetke, Perez-Ramon, etc.

in particular by considering *how* the concept of “No-Self” was taught.<sup>143</sup> Before I turn to this, let me make some remarks about the Buddha’s own self-concept.

### **The Buddha’s own self-concept**

At a recent conference whose theme was “The Psychology of Awakening: Buddhism, Science and Psychotherapy,”<sup>144</sup> many of the participants expressed their confusion regarding how the Buddha could function in the world *without a self*. Because they were Buddhists, they were trying to follow the Teaching and to achieve, or to imitate, what they imagined this form of functioning could be.<sup>145</sup> I thought they had missed the point! What the texts show in the character of the Buddha is someone with *a very advanced self-concept*. His self-esteem is perfect; he has gone beyond doubt; he knows, and he is confident of his knowledge; he expresses himself with conviction. When the Buddha talks of himself in the first person he does so with clarity. He has a strong sense of identity and knows very well who he is. He gives accounts of his life experiences in the first person. He gives accounts of his spiritual capacities in the first person: e.g. he announces and proclaims that he is a Buddha and says what a Buddha is. He gives first person accounts of the capacities required of him by society, e.g. he insists he is a competent debater.<sup>146</sup> He discusses at ease and in full equality with kings and other notables. He defends himself and his Teaching against unjust accusations and false representations. It is clear that the Buddha’s ‘self,’ – as this concept is understood in contemporary psychology and psychotherapy: namely, a clear sense of identity, the ability to function competently and realistically in the world, to have a standard of ethics, to achieve one’s goals, to interact with people, to make good choices, and so forth – was fully functional and remarkably well-developed – as one would expect.<sup>147</sup> Neither psychotherapy nor meditation is possible unless the sense of identity or ego is mature and well-grounded. Otherwise there is nothing to change and nothing to go beyond.<sup>148</sup>

What kind of a self, then, did the Buddha *not* have?

### **The context of the “No-self” Teaching**

Ripinsky-Naxon maintains that “the idea of the surviving, or eternal, soul is fundamental to the tenets of shamanism.”<sup>149</sup> At the same time he points out that the role that culture plays in shaping the nature of a preternatural experience has not been sufficiently studied.<sup>150</sup> The Buddha’s Teaching on *anattā* – “No-self” took place in a particular context: the tradition of meditation and asceticism of the ancient Indian religious movements. This tradition can be understood as consisting of

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<sup>143</sup> See Bronkhorst, 1993:99, fn 12, and forthcoming.

<sup>144</sup> Dartington Hall, Devon, November, 1996.

<sup>145</sup> See also Epstein, 1988; Loy, 1992.

<sup>146</sup> Manné, 1992.

<sup>147</sup> See also Hillman, 1996, Chapter 2.

<sup>148</sup> Engler, 1984.

<sup>149</sup> 1993:37.

<sup>150</sup> 1993:19.

direct and consistent answers to the belief that action leads to misery and re-birth. In this tradition some attempted to abstain from action, literally, while others tried to obtain an insight that their real self, their soul, never partakes of any action anyhow. (Bronkhorst, 1993:128)

This background influenced the way the *anattā* – “No-self” Teaching was conveyed. Gombrich explains,

The Buddha’s position...was opposing the Upanishadic theory of the soul. In the Upanishads the soul, *Ātman*, is opposed to both the body and the mind; for example, it cannot exercise such mental functions as memory or volition. It is an essence, and by definition an essence does not change. Furthermore, the essence of the individual living being was claimed to be literally the same as the essence of the universe. This is not a complete account of the Upanishadic soul ...<sup>151</sup>

### How the Buddha Taught *anattā* – “No-self”

Samuels compares “the death of the self involved in the Buddhist attainment” to “the ritual death and rebirth involved in many forms of shamanic training.”<sup>152</sup>

The texts have the Buddha teaching against the existence of a permanent “self” through philosophical arguments which disposed of the positions of his adversaries.<sup>153</sup> They also have the Buddha teaching against the existence of the self through standard expressions, and through routine sequences of questions and answers. In this way the Buddha drills the monks to be sure they have understood his Teaching.<sup>154</sup>

Here are some frequent formulae through which *anattā* is taught:

#### 1. This is a standard expression or pericope:

The eye is impermanent.  
 What is impermanent is suffering;  
 what is suffering is not the self;  
 what is not the self is to be understood as it is with the highest insight (*paññā*) as,  
 ‘This is not mine, I am not this, this is not myself.’<sup>155</sup>  
 The ear (*sota*) is impermanent ...,  
 The nose (*ghāna*) ...  
 The tongue (*jīvha*) ...  
 The body (*kāya*) ...  
 The mind (*manas*) ... (S IV 1 and variously)

<sup>151</sup> Gombrich, 1996:16; see also the whole of Chapter II.

<sup>152</sup> Samuels, 1993:377.

<sup>153</sup> E.g. DN Sutta 1; Vin I 13f, and many other examples throughout the Canon. See also Manné, 1990:45..

<sup>154</sup> Manné, 1990:67.

<sup>155</sup> Translation after Gombrich, 1996:38.

The Teaching is that what is impermanent (*anicca*) and suffering (*dukkha*) is not the self. Here it is applied particularly to the six senses (*salāyatana*).

2. This is a routine sequence of questions and answer.

“Is physical form (*rūpa*) permanent or impermanent?”

“Impermanent.”

“Is what is impermanent suffering or happiness?”

“Suffering.”

“Is what is impermanent, suffering and subject to change fit to be regarded thus: ‘This is mine, this I am, this is my self?’”

“No.”

“Is feeling (*vedanā*) permanent or impermanent...”

“Is apperception (*saññā*) ...”<sup>156</sup>

“Are formations (*samkhārā*) ... “

“Is consciousness (*viññāna*) permanent or impermanent?”

Etc.

“Therefore any kind of material form whatever, whether past, future, or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near, all material form should be seen as it actually is with proper wisdom thus: ‘This is not mine, this I am not, this is not my self.’

Any kind of feeling, etc.” (MN I 138f, tr. Walshe)<sup>157</sup>

Here the Teaching that what is impermanent and suffering is not the self is taught with regard to the aggregates (*khandhas*):<sup>158</sup>

3. This is a further standard expression or pericope taught with regard to the *khandhas* and the false view that they make up a self or personality – *sakkāyaditthi*:

How does personality view come not to be?

A Well-taught disciple .. does not regard material form as self,

or self as possessed of material form,

or material form as in self,

or self as in material form.

He does not regard feeling ... apperceptions ... formations ... consciousness as self, etc.

(MN I 300, tr. Walshe, 398)

4. This is a further standard expression or pericope taught to avoid regarding the *khandhas* as the “self”:

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<sup>156</sup> After Gombrich, 1996:4, fn.6.

<sup>157</sup> This sutta begins by rejecting philosophical positions about the self.

<sup>158</sup> See Gethin, 1986; Bronkhorst (forthcoming).

Whatever exists therein of material form, feelings, perception, formations and consciousness, he sees those states as impermanent, as suffering, as a disease, as a tumour, as a barb, as a calamity, as an affliction, as alien, as disintegrating, as void, as not self. (MN I 435 Tr. Walshe, 540)

5. Other ways at arriving at an understanding of what is not the self include cultivating the meditation on *Paticchasamuppāda*.<sup>159</sup> It is through this sequence that the theory that there is a permanent self is grasped after. Through no longer identifying with this sequence<sup>160</sup> and overcoming it, this theory is no longer held.

### **Indoctrination, Induction and the Shamanic Transmission of Knowledge**

Gombrich describes how the Buddhist meditator has to train himself to see reality as the Buddha has taught it,

In the fundamental texts on meditation, the *Satipatthāna* and *Maha Satipatthāna Suttas*, the meditator has to train himself to see reality as the Buddha has taught it to be. He is to do this in four stages. First he learns to observe physical processes in his own and other people's bodies; then he learns to be similarly aware of feelings; then of states of mind. Finally he learns to be aware of *dhammā* ... the *dhammā* that the texts spell out are in fact the teachings of the Buddha, such as the four noble truths. The meditator moves from thinking *about* those teachings, to thinking *with* them: he learns (to use an anachronistic metaphor) to see the world through Buddhist spectacles. The Buddha's teachings come to be the same as (any) objects of thought, because anything else is (for Buddhists) unthinkable. (Gombrich, 1996:36)

It sounds as if the disciple is being indoctrinated! He is certainly being trained to perceive in the same way as his teacher. And what is particularly noteworthy in the passages containing the Buddha's Teaching of "no-self" quoted above is that they look suspiciously like *indoctrinations*! Although there are some cases of philosophical arguments against other positions,<sup>161</sup> there are many examples of the pericopes quoted above.

Why should there be so much indoctrination in an *ehipassika* teaching, where the disciples were invited to come and see for themselves, and by implication, to test for themselves? Bronkhorst has said,

It is possible that early Buddhism did not deny the existence of the soul ... One reason why it did not want to talk about it may well be that conceptions of the soul were too closely connected with methods of liberation described in (non-Buddhist meditation). (Bronkhorst, 1993:99, fn.12.)

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<sup>159</sup> See Bronkhorst (forthcoming).

<sup>160</sup> MN I 66 and elsewhere.

<sup>161</sup> Gombrich, 1996, Chapter II.

It is well-known that hypnosis is easily induced when there is sensory deprivation or sensory repetition.<sup>162</sup> Meditation requires sensory deprivation. Moreover there is sensory repetition, for example, in observing the breathing, which is basic to Buddhist meditation practice.<sup>163</sup> My proposition is that these passages are not so much indoctrinations – although they do, in fact, in-doctrinate – as much as *inductions*. They serve as self-suggestion, or auto-hypnotic messages<sup>164</sup> designed to induce a particular altered state of consciousness, namely, that of “no-self.” When the monks sat down to meditate (perhaps at the foot of a tree), having learned by heart, studied and been in-doctrinated into the ideas expressed in the passages above and in other similar passages, they would tell themselves with regard to all of their experiences as they arose “This is not the ‘self’” or “This is not mine, I am not this, this is not myself.” They would be using one of the many available *anattā* – “No-self” experience inductions. Eventually all that would be left to those among them for whom these inductions worked would be the experience of the altered state of consciousness of “No-self.”<sup>165</sup>

One of the shaman’s tasks is to induce his followers into altered states of consciousness.<sup>166</sup> This is one of the ways in which he transmits his knowledge. Many elements in the Buddha’s method are capable of inducing shamanic states of consciousness. These include solitude, moderate eating (Vinaya shows how few monks could cope with the periods of fasting), sensory deprivation, and Breathwork (*Ānāpānasati Sutta*). Felicitas Goodman, in her extraordinary work on trance and posture, has already shown that when trance is induced, “without an absolute commitment to a mythology, ... there (is) nothing to give cohesion to the experiences....The trance experience itself is vacuous....If no belief system is proffered, it will remain vacuous.”<sup>167</sup> The shamanic trance experience requires a belief system to give it its meaning.

The formulations of the “no-self” Teaching were the Buddha’s way of leading his followers into an experience that was consistent with his Teaching. The followers had to be indoctrinated first, and clear inductions into the required state had to be given and learned, because, as Bronkhorst, Gombrich and others have said, the Buddha’s position and that of the brahmins was very close – close enough for Gombrich to designate as a pseudo-problem whether or not the Buddha believed in a self.<sup>168</sup> The Buddha had to in-doctrinate his monks to make sure they had the “right” experience.

The texts have the Buddha saying,

Pottāhapāda, it is difficult for one of different views, a different faith, under different influences, with different pursuits and a different training to know

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<sup>162</sup> Cheek, 1994:28.

<sup>163</sup> Manné, 1994, 1995, 1997.

<sup>164</sup> See Staal, 1975. Staal discusses earlier work by S. Lindquist.

<sup>165</sup> See Bronkhorst, Two Studies of Human Nature - <http://www.bronkhorst-absorption.info/> for the importance of concentration and absorption in the achievement of altered states of consciousness.

<sup>166</sup> Drury, 1982:18. On the use of the breath as an induction, see Grof, 1988.

<sup>167</sup> Goodman, 1990, p.17. Goodman quotes the work of V. F. Emerson who “had done work with various meditative disciplines and had found that differences in their belief systems correlated with the fact that during meditation, each discipline employed its own specific body posture.”

<sup>168</sup> Gombrich, 1996:64.

whether these [perception and the self] are two different things or not. (DN I, s.9; LDB 164;cf. DN s.24, 25)

The inductions alone were not enough. Simply practising the inductions did not necessarily lead to the ecstatic, or trance, or altered state of consciousness experience of “no-self” which the Buddha, as shaman, offered to his followers as a cure for their suffering. Indoctrination was essential as the Buddha’s “no-self” inductions could as easily lead the practitioner to the experience of the Self in the Brahmanical or Jungian sense as to the “no-self” experience that the Buddha taught. They could just as easily lead a disciple to enter the ecstatic state offered by a rival shaman.

## PART 5 SHAMANISM, BUDDHISM AND CONSCIOUSNESS

The Pali Canon presents the Buddha as a shaman. Etymologically, the word “shaman” is derived from the word *shramana/samana*<sup>169</sup> and several different Buddhist words have come to be used to refer to the shaman in different cultures. Gibson argues that this is not due to “a single wave of wave of cultural influence, but must be seen as a process that was repeated several times.” Gibson further argues that the linguistic evidence demonstrates Buddhism’s intimate concern with the special qualities that distinguish the shaman.<sup>170</sup> This is supported by the strong similarities between the Buddha’s life history and the typical pattern of a shaman’s life.

### Propaganda and the Communication of the Teaching

Did the texts have to present the Buddha as a shaman for propaganda purposes in order to make their hero and their message more convincing? The possession of at least some shamanic capacities certainly seems essential and indeed inevitable in a religious leader. As Samuels has pointed out, “Major world religions such as Buddhism, Islam, and Christianity frequently derive their initial impetus from a ‘shamanic’-style revelation.”<sup>171</sup>

The oral tradition and, eventually the texts themselves, had to make the Teaching communicable. So, of course, did the Buddha, when he started teaching.

Samuels sees early Buddhism “as an attempt to create a framework that could reconcile the literate, rationalised, hierarchical society that was coming into being with the human values of the older, shamanic form of society” and the Buddha’s Teachings as “an adaptation of the shamanic training for the new urban social context.”<sup>172</sup> The Buddha’s life history as

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<sup>169</sup> Gibson, 1997:51. Paul Kiparsky, personal communication (email, 7<sup>th</sup> March, 1997): ‘According to Vasmer’s Russisches Etymologisches Woerterbuch, Russian *shaman* is ultimately from Prakrit *samana*. He thinks it was borrowed into Russian via Tungic *shaman* “Buddhist Monk” and Tocharian *shamane*. The Western European languages might have got the word either from Russian or via Persian.’ But see also Ripinsky-Naxon, 1993:69.

<sup>170</sup> Gibson, 1997:50f.

<sup>171</sup> Samuels, 193:365.

<sup>172</sup> Samuels, 1993:365, 368ff.

conveyed by the Pali texts demonstrates a substantial shamanic element in the religious milieu of the Buddha's time and for several later centuries. Otherwise attributing to the Buddha a shamanic development – a shaman's birth, youth and young adulthood, initiation and life – would have made no sense and would have convinced and converted no-one. If the Buddha, or the tradition (as we have inherited it in the Pali texts) wanted to convince these groups that he, or it, had a better method, it was essential to have shamanic elements in the texts. It was also essential to present the Buddha as a more powerful "shaman" than any of the others around, and, indeed, this is what the texts do.

To say, however, that the shamanic elements are in the texts for propaganda purposes, does not explain them away.

### Consciousness is naturally shamanic

Pentikäinen says, "The concept of shamanism has undergone a kind of devaluation in recent popular and scientific literature....Shamanism is nowadays offered as a universal means of penetrating into the depths of the human conscience."<sup>173</sup> Pentikäinen is wrong. The concept "shamanism" has not undergone a *devaluation* but a *re-evaluation*, and a very healthy, positive and inspiring re-evaluation.<sup>174</sup>

Shamanism has come back into our contemporary societies in many different ways during the last thirty or forty years, from attempts to learn from contemporary shamans, to attempts to discover and recreate original shamanic practices, to the recognition of placebo and nocebo effects, to teaching doctors how to use beneficially the healing powers their patients attribute to them,<sup>175</sup> to the revival of magical practices, the recognition of the effect of hands-on healing and prayer<sup>176</sup> – the list is endless.

Andrew Weil proposes that, "We seem to be born with a drive to experience episodes of altered consciousness," and that, "this drive expresses itself at very early ages in all children in activities designed to cause loss or major disturbances of ordinary awareness."<sup>177</sup>

Walsh has pointed out that most cultures have "institutionalized altered states of consciousness." He argues that conditions that induce shamanic states "... include such common experiences as isolation, fatigue, hunger, and rhythmic sound, and thus they are likely to be discovered by different generations and cultures." He too proposes that "shamanism and its widespread distribution may reflect an innate human tendency to enter certain pleasurable and valuable states of consciousness," and that "Once discovered, rituals and beliefs that support the induction and expression of these states would also arise and shamanism would emerge once again."<sup>178</sup>

Walsh and Weil are idealizing. If it is a natural human tendency to enter into shamanic states, it is as natural to enter into the terrifying states as into the agreeable ones – and it

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<sup>173</sup> Pentikäinen, 1996: 6.

<sup>174</sup> See e.g. Krippner & Welch (1992), Noel (1997).

<sup>175</sup> Personal communication from a pediatrician in Lausanne, Switzerland regarding post-qualification courses on offer.

<sup>176</sup> Dossey, 1997.

<sup>177</sup> Weil, 1972 : 23.

<sup>178</sup> Walsh, 1990 : 14.

may even be more natural!<sup>179</sup> Ellenberger's concept of the creative illness supports this position.

In *The Discovery of the Unconscious*, Ellenberger compares the shaman's "initiatory illness" to "creative illnesses," as he designates "the experiences of certain mystics, poets and philosophers."<sup>180</sup> Ellenberger defines a "creative illness" as follows,

A creative illness succeeds a period of intense preoccupation with an idea and search for a certain truth. It is a polymorphous condition that can take the shape of depression, neurosis, psychosomatic ailments, or even psychosis. Whatever the symptoms, they are felt as painful, if not agonizing, by the subject, with alternating periods of alleviation and worsening. Throughout the illness the subject never loses the thread of his dominating preoccupation. It is often compatible with normal, professional activity and family life. But even if he keeps to his social activities, he is almost entirely absorbed with himself. He suffers from feelings of utter isolation, even when he has a mentor who guides him through the ordeal (like the shaman apprentice with his master.) The termination is often rapid and marked by a phase of exhilaration. The subject emerges from his ordeal with a permanent transformation in his personality and the conviction that he has discovered a great truth or a new spiritual world. (Ellenberger, 1970 : 890)

Ellenberger is discussing elements in the development of the great psychiatrists, Freud and Jung and comparing them to the general pattern of shamanic development.<sup>181</sup> He distinguishes between the creative illnesses of the pathfinders and the followers,

The pathfinder should not only teach the theory but provide a practical guide for others to follow that theory. Thus the shaman-apprentice must see an old shaman, at regular intervals, whose instruction he will put into practice step by step throughout his initiatory malady. (Ellenberger, 1970 : 890)

The specific character of the creative illness is that,

It is a strictly personal experience for its pathfinder, but it sets a model for the follower, and this conformity of pattern will tend to be transmitted from one initiated to the other within the same school. (Ellenberger, 1970 : 891)

It is well-known that the clients of analysts are followers and show conformity of pattern: they produce dreams in accordance with their analyst's school!

Walsh takes the position that "some recurring combination of social forces and innate abilities must have repeatedly elicited and maintained shamanic roles, rituals, and states of

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<sup>179</sup> Grof, 1988.

<sup>180</sup> Ellenberger, 1970 : 39.

<sup>181</sup> Ellenberger, 1970 : 889.

consciousness.”<sup>182</sup> For Jung “shamanic symbolism is a projection of the individuation process.”<sup>183</sup> Janus describes the shaman’s journey as “a graphic reactivation and symbolization of pre- and perinatal experience”<sup>184</sup> Weil maintains that we are born with a drive to experience altered states of consciousness.<sup>185</sup> Noel shows the relationship between shamanism and the imagination, discussing contemporary shamanovelists and shamanthropologists.<sup>186</sup> My argument is that *consciousness is naturally shamanic*. As naturally and as inevitable as consciousness tends to create the experience of Ego or individuality, consciousness equally naturally tends to create and to seek shamanic experiences. It has, quite naturally and of itself, a shamanic dimension.<sup>187</sup> Further, as shamanism is culturally influenced in its manifestation, this also accounts for the large variety of its different manifestations, and also for why it is difficult to define it with complete precision. Moreover, it is healthy and healing for consciousness to be shamanic, as Frances Vaughan says, “The popular resurgence of interest in shamanism has given many people an opportunity to see themselves in a new light, validating the spiritual dimension of experience and reconnecting them to nature in a meaningful way.”<sup>188</sup> It may indeed be that for creativity, invention and healing to take place, it is essential for consciousness to have access to its shamanic dimension. Even those with the most hardcore materialist view of consciousness, Dennett and his colleagues, have taken the bat as their shamanic animal – although they have not – as yet – succeeded in communicating with it!<sup>189</sup>

What about the much discussed relationship between shamanism and mental disease?<sup>190</sup> This is what Walsh says,

What can we make of this curious combination of initial disturbance and subsequent health? Mainstream psychiatry rarely recognizes the possibility of positive outcomes from psychosis; the diagnostic manual does not even mention it.<sup>191</sup> ... Yet a significant number of researchers, some quite eminent, have recognized that psychological disturbances, even including psychoses, may

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<sup>182</sup> Walsh, 1989:7-8; 1990 : 14.

<sup>183</sup> Jung, 1954:341. See also Downton, 1989:73.

<sup>184</sup> Janus, 1997:165

<sup>185</sup> Janus, 1997. See also Ripinsky-Naxon, 1993:94, 133.

<sup>186</sup> Noel, 1997.

<sup>187</sup> See also Dourley on Jung and shamanism, p. 54. It is possible that Burkert is saying the same thing, although in different language, when he says, “Religion (is) an aboriginal tradition of serious communication with powers that cannot be seen. The problem of ‘worlds beyond’ .. (can be accounted for through) the existence of biological patterns of actions, reactions, and feelings activated and elaborated through ritual practice and verbalized teachings, with anxiety playing a foremost role. Religion offers solutions to various critical situations recurring in individual lives.” (1996 : 177)

<sup>188</sup> Vaughan, 1995 : 116. See also Kalweit, Chapter 19.

<sup>189</sup> Dennett, 1991 : 441-448; Akins, 1993 : 151f.

<sup>190</sup> Eliade, 1964; Grof & Grof, 1989; Kalweit, Part 5; Walsh, 1990, Chapter 8; etc.

<sup>191</sup> Since then DSM IV has introduced the category, that of Religious and Spiritual Problems, which at least opens the door to this possibility.

function as growth experiences that result in greater psychological or spiritual well-being. (Walsh, 1990 : 90)<sup>192</sup>

These crises are currently called transpersonal crises, spiritual emergency or spiritual emergence.<sup>193</sup> Shamanic societies, and now many New Age groups provide a framework for these experiences. Walsh says

Mystical traditions serve as road maps for using (the) technology (of the sacred) ... From this perspective we might say that mystical traditions and religions are created and sustained by people who access transcendent states of consciousness and then provide instructions whereby others can also access them and thereby re-create the founder's insights. ... Ideally, mystical traditions serve to preserve and transmit these insights and instructions.

Where Walsh says that "The first such tradition was shamanism,"<sup>194</sup> I wish to add, "and the last."<sup>195</sup>

*Consciousness is naturally shamanic.* The whole "New Age" movement in its wonderful and in its terrible forms, including the contemporary drug culture illustrates this.

Considered from its own point of view, all the strange behaviour of the shaman reveals the highest spirituality; it is, in fact, expressive of an ideology which is coherent and of great nobility. The myths by which this ideology is constituted are among the most beautiful and profound in existence: they are the myths of Paradise and the Fall, of the immortality of primordial man and his conversation with God, or the origin of death and the discovery of the *spirit* in every sense of the word. (Eliade, 1960 : 70)

The New Age movement has nothing new about it. It is simply consciousness reasserting its essential nature, and its quest to return to paradise.

## PART 6 GOING BEYOND SHAMANISM

I come back to the discussion (at the end of section 4) whether the Buddha was indeed a shaman or whether he did, in fact, go beyond shamanism? The texts attest beyond any doubt that the Buddha practised as a shaman. How, therefore, do we account for those instances when the texts depict the Buddha as turning against certain shamanism elements and practices? Was he simply removing shamanic elements that were not necessary to his own self-healing, and therefore to his (shamanic) method? As Bronkhorst says, the Buddha

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<sup>192</sup> See also Eliade, 1960 : 76-80.

<sup>193</sup> Walsh, 1990 : 93; Grof & Grof, 1989; Grof & Bennett, 1993; Perry 1974.

<sup>194</sup> Walsh, 1990 : 160.

<sup>195</sup> See Noel (1997) for an appraisal and a critique of how neoshamanism is developing.

claimed to teach something new.<sup>196</sup> Was an element in this new method the fact that it led beyond shamanism? If it was, becoming shamanic was a stage through which the Buddha passed before he went beyond it. Lee Siegel, however, says,

The sannyasi is precisely he who sees through illusions, through all tricks, all magic; he is the man for whom nothing is surprising, who feels no wonder. Thus his liberation from this world. (1991:412)

If he is right, then going beyond the shaman's tricks and magic is not the new element in the Buddha's Teaching, but is something common to all sannyasis, or at least to those that achieve liberation.

Was the Buddha a shaman? Yes, the evidence is clear: the Buddha practised in a way comparable to the practices of a shaman. Did the Buddha go beyond shamanism? I don't think the evidence is clear enough. There are some passages in which the Buddha is depicted as being against shamanic practices, but these are rather few, while the Buddha is depicted as performing shamanic practices throughout his life time.

What I propose is that consciousness is naturally shamanic. It is natural for shamanic capacities to develop in people who are following a spiritual path, and it does not seem to matter what spiritual path that is. Some people stop there. The Buddhist texts indicate that the Buddha did not stop there, but went – as Lee Siegel suggests other sannyasis have gone before him – beyond it.

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## ABBREVIATIONS

- APPPAH - Association for Pre- and Perinatal Psychology and Health  
DN - *Dāgaha Nikāya*  
ER/S - Shamanism, Encyclopedia of Religion  
LDB - Walsh, *The Long Discourses of the Buddha*  
MLDB – Ñāṃoli & Bodhi, *Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*  
MN - *Majjhima Nikāya*  
S - Eliade, *Shamanism*  
s. - sutta  
Tr./tr. - translation