

blessings. In northeastern Thailand these ceremonies often involve a quorum of four monks who chant while holding a white cord that connects their hands to everyone in the room. This cord is also wrapped around a Buddha image and often surrounds the whole room or even the whole house. One end of the cord is submerged in a bowl of water and, after the chanting, a handful of leaves is placed in the water and then used to flick water over those objects to be blessed and the people who attend the ceremony. Protective *yan* (Sanskrit, *yantra*) are drawn with moistened white powder and sealed with small gold leaves and the exhalation of the monk who has chanted. The power of *parittas* lies in their sound and in their role in a protective ceremony, and less (or not at all) in their semantic meaning. In fact, their meaning often has nothing to do with their role and result in a ritual.

The numbers of mantras (Pāli, *manta*) in the various *paritta* collections varied widely before the printing of modern prayer books like the *Royal Chanting Book of Thailand*, the various *Gu Meu Phra Song* of modern Laos, and the *Catubhānavāra* in Burma (Myanmar). Still, the *Ratana*, *Maṅgala*, and *Dibbamanta parittas* have remained at the core of these collections for centuries. The parameters of the *Rakṣā* genre in Tibet and East Asia are more difficult to define and this genre overlaps in content and function with that of DHĀRAṆĪ. Both groups of texts play a significant role in the ritual life of Buddhists across the various schools in Asia.

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PATH

From the inception of their tradition, Buddhists have conceived of their soteriological regimens as analogous to a "path" (mārga). Buddhists from different traditions invariably believed in the power of the mārga to provide a tested and viable passage to NIRVĀṆA, and to replicate in those who followed its course verifiable transformative experiences. The idea that religious life primarily involves one's own personal effort in walking an explicit path of training distinguishes the MAINSTREAM BUDDHIST SCHOOLS from those religions that place pride of place on adherence to stipulated doctrines or the saving grace of a transcendent "other."

The teachings of the Buddha were often referred to as "traces of [the Buddha's] footsteps or tracks" (*prati-padā*), because they were seen as being deliberately left behind by him after he had personally traversed the highway to liberation.

The path is more than a descriptive account of absolute paradigms of religious ideals *in illo tempore*; it also defines prescriptive parameters for religious behavior and spiritual attainment in mundane time, which allows Buddhists of different traditions to articulate their religious experiences in mutually intelligible language. The notion of path helps to organize a highly illusive and subjective realm of personal experience according to normative standards, and provides a heuristic model upon which Buddhist teachers could ground their pedagogy and claim a sense of continuity within the transmitted tradition.

The notion of path contains the simultaneous implication of constancy and elasticity. The Buddha is said to have professed that he was but one of the many enlightened beings since time immemorial who had

walked on this same “ancient path,” making his role more that of a restorer than an innovator. Ever accessible and enduringly relevant to human quandaries, Buddhists describe this path as being discoverable even by those in future eons who were bereft of the benefit of direct Buddhist instruction, seeing the periodic resurrections of the timeless Dharma by future BUDDHAS as a virtual certainty and a reassuring prospect. In this regard, the metaphor of path represents something that is unalterably reliable, a constant that will forever exist, whether or not it is discovered. Since the conundrums besetting all SENTIENT BEINGS are presumed to be the same throughout the ages, attributable to primordial nescience (*avidyā*) and craving (*trṣṇā*), the solution thereof is presumed to be immutable and eternally applicable as well.

On the other hand, the path is also construed by some as elastic and open to potential elaborations and even modifications. It is more than the Buddha’s account of an unchanging, settled course of action to be passively retraced by future generations. The Buddhist path was also seen as in some way originally and ingeniously devised by the Buddha, who had judiciously and expediently plotted its guideposts with considerations specific to both time and individual. This utilitarian view of the path allows for the possibility of different paths with different approaches, so long as they lead to the appropriate goal or the general well-being and betterment of sentient beings. Many Buddhists therefore conceive the path as open to renewal and reinvention by the spiritually qualified in order to address changing religious needs, an approach consistent with the Buddhist strategy of employing diverse UPĀYA (skillful means) in the edification of even the least spiritually inclined. The path as a historical reality, too, was never statically suspended outside the contexts of history, but constantly evolves in dynamic interaction with social and cultural changes. This intrinsic resilience is particularly evidenced by the new categories of soteriological schemata that Buddhism formulated as the religion was transplanted to different geographical regions or responded to the emergence of new traditions.

This tendency to formulate mārga systems as an afterthought to newly arisen doctrines and ideals is contrary to the common expectation that the path should exclusively provide practical guides to the realization of enlightenment. In actuality, the development of new programs of praxis has often been instigated by polemical agendas or by an impulse to provide a sense of coherence, self-containment, and legitimacy to an

ideology that a faction was promoting. Rather than spiritual maps, then, path schemata could at times serve more as hermeneutical devices to relegate or promote, to exclude or incorporate, different teachings and traditions, like KŪKAI’s ten abodes of the mind (*jūjūshin*), which subsumes the whole of Buddhism in a schema that privileges his own school of SHINGON BUDDHISM (Buswell and Gimello, p. 20), or as ceremonies of ritualized and formalized behavior that invoke and reaffirm ancient mystical paradigms, like the initiation procedures into the Sōtō Zen transmission of the mind (Bodiford, pp. 423–424).

The emergence of the MAHĀYĀNA movement led to a plethora of new, elaborate mārga systems. Among these, the status traditionally assigned to the Buddha underwent significant upgrading as the gaping distinction of the BODHISATTVA path and its goal of buddhahood from mainstream Buddhist SOTERIOLOGY and its ideal of arhatship became the hallmark of Mahāyāna’s dramatic self-idealization. Correspondingly, the path that led to such an infinitely more elevated religious goal was also framed quite differently in both quality and projected duration. The arduous and protracted crucibles that a bodhisattva is supposed to endure are exemplified and organized in the uniquely Mahāyāna scheme of the ten stages or grounds (*bhūmi*) of the bodhisattva path: the stages of joy, immaculacy, splendor, brilliance, invincibility, immediacy, transcendence, immovability, eminence, and dharmacLOUD. In this schema, each stage is primarily defined by marvelous powers, transcendental wisdom, and altruistic qualities in increasingly mythic proportion and is to be completed in exponentially greater numbers of eons. The Mahāyāna tradition’s understanding of its soteriological objectives similarly was expanded immeasurably to embody the loftiest inspirational models, rather than strictly prescribing something that is readily accessible in the here and now. Buddhahood, the radically reenvisioned product of this expansively reconstituted path, stood in the most hyperbolic contrast to the now polemicized HĪNAYĀNA ideal personality of the ARHAT, in terms of a buddha’s near-omnipotent capacity to save all beings and his myriad other wondrous qualities.

Doctrinal implications of the path

Just as a path is delineated according to fixed coordinates, the Buddhists maintained that their religious path is based on the bedrock of certain cosmically operative laws that are eternal, inviolate, and efficacious. According to Buddhism, these laws—such as KARMA

(ACTION) and its fruition, anātman (no-self) and ŚŪNYATĀ (EMPTINESS), and PRATĪTYASAMUTPĀDA (DEPENDENT ORIGINATION) or the conditioned coarising of suffering and of psychophysical existence—are discernible and logical, and open to rational and meditative scrutiny, because they are the organizing principles of reality itself rather than the haphazard and fantastic figments of personal mystical experiences. Since the Buddhist spiritual path was said to pattern itself after these universal principles, the path is also held out to be fundamentally rational and logical in that it is propped on the grounds of a proper diagnosis of human problems, the accurate pinpointing of the source of those problems, the prognosis of a problem-free condition, and the solution tending to the eradication of the problem—the contents of the paradigmatic Buddhist soteriological formula, the FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS.

In distinction to non-Buddhist soteriological solutions—which are seen as either futile or at least inefficient because of their failure to properly identify and base their solutions on operative and governing natural laws—the four noble truths represent instead an attempt to plot religious development in accordance with certifiable causal relations so that the path is specifically and efficaciously tailored to target the real cause of suffering. The noble eightfold path by the same token is understood to be “right,” not so much because it stands in opposition to what is morally wrong but because it is proclaimed on the principle of the middle way—a religious attitude grounded on the experientially sensible, which is free from the extremes of such categorical assertions as eternalism and nihilism, dogmatism and skepticism, self-indulgence and self-denial, and so on (Kalupahana, pp. 121 and 152). Denouncing blind FAITH in hearsay, metaphysical reasoning, and divine revelation, the Buddha was widely seen by his followers not as a purveyor of arbitrary ritual injunctions but as one whose direct experiential insight conforms well to both reason and the observable principles of all phenomena (Jayatilleke, pp. 169–204). Just as the word *Dharma* in its Indian religious and philosophical context represents both the underlying principles governing all phenomena and the religious teachings deriving thereon, the term *mārga* to a large extent is synonymous and connotes the same dual implication. The four noble truths therefore anchor personal religious action on external natural laws, making the realization of “the way things are” equivalent to the attainment of ultimate liberation and purification.

Although reason and analysis were rarely presumed in the Buddhist tradition to be sufficient in themselves

to engender liberating insight—in fact some schools of Buddhism at times saw them as impediments to be transcended before genuine, nonconceptual wisdom could set in—a consistent attempt was made to integrate the conative aspect of the path with its cognitive aspects. In other words, the four noble truths were enumerated in such a way so as to make them congruous with the Buddha’s analysis of existential realities as encapsulated in the scheme of, say, *pratītyasamutpāda*, so that Buddhist praxis is presented as an ineluctable course of action deriving from the proper understanding of the way things are.

These are not just “truths” in the sense that they are distinguished from what is rationally incoherent or incompatible with epistemological facts. Buddhists have always viewed this “proper understanding” to be more than just a neutral intellectual assent to what is factual: It actually carries a compelling ethical dimension that informs and structures religious behavior so that the latter is carried out in accordance with the ethical efficacy of the external natural laws. Thus, to see reality is to understand the imperative to walk the path, in the same manner that these reified Buddhist sets of truths, like the twelvefold chain of dependent origination and the four noble truths, were not intended to be metaphysical expositions, but instead psycho-ethical analyses that helped to galvanize spiritual action. This was the reason that the Buddha proclaimed that penetration into any one of the noble truths amounts to penetration into all four: Since the fourth noble truth is the prescribed praxis (conative) after the diagnosis and prognosis of the problem were identified in the first three truths (cognitive), the conative and cognitive aspects of the path are in this way seen to be complementary and mutually validating. In this framework of understanding, to divorce one’s religious action from empirical insight is to continue to allow the assertion of, and the search for, the wrongly posited absolutistic substance (*svabhāva*) to further create delusions that are in turn the propelling force of wrong actions and SAṂSĀRA.

On the other hand, Buddhist soteriological programs often conversely posit PRAJÑĀ (WISDOM) as the consummating finality of the *mārga* rather than the path’s initial guiding vision. This seeming ambivalence on whether cognitive exercise of insight or purificatory practice constitutes the body of the path gives rise to variant explanations of BODHI (AWAKENING) as, alternatively, the result of a gnoseological realization of reality, the overcoming and abandonment of mental defilements, or the spontaneous maturation

of wholesome karmic seeds. Take, for example, the penchant of mainstream Buddhist schools to define spiritually accomplished people in four distinct gradations: the so-called four noble persons of *stream-enterer*, *once-returner*, *nonreturner*, and *arhat*. At least within this scheme, the completion of the path is characterized as entailing both an epiphanic instant of insight *and* the extended application of explicit procedures of mental purification. The progression from the first to the fourth grades of perfection is usually defined in terms of the eradication of ten specific psychological “fettors” (*saṃyojanaprahāṇa*). The abandonment of the first three fettors—the view of an (abiding) personality, belief in the efficacy of rites and rituals (and other religious exertions that are causally irrelevant to the removal of suffering), and skeptical DOUBT—is associated with the establishment of right view and is said to be achieved at the very moment when supramundane knowledge is ignited (once the false view of personality is eliminated, the other two fettors vanish instantly). But the remaining seven fettors, such as lust and ill will, are generally said to be so deep-seated and lingering that they could only be subdued, attenuated, and eventually eradicated through the enactment of a full soteriological regimen.

Different models of the path

The path’s functionality can be understood structurally in several models. The first assumes the path constitutes the simultaneous cultivation of various mutually balanced activities, each indispensably addressing and governing a particular aspect of the spiritual life. One such soteriological program is the noble eightfold path (*ārya-aṣṭāṅgikamārga*) of right view, right intention, right speech, right conduct, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. Its layout of the constituent practices on the path does not necessarily imply the sequential order in which these stages are to be cultivated, but is rather an indication that the Buddhist path enjoins a holistic lifestyle that comprehensively tends to all facets of an individual’s daily activity, whether mental, physical, verbal, or spiritual.

The second model conceptualizes the path as a spiraling, self-augmenting process, with each step in the soteriological program being implicitly embodied and reinforced by subsequent steps. Each round of this spiraling path goes through the same constituent sets of practices, but with all of them becoming correspondingly strengthened in foundational and supportive power to the other sets. The rationale behind the work-

ing principle of the “three trainings” (*trīṇi śikṣāni*) is illustrative of this model of upwardly spiraling spiritual progression. The first of these trainings, *morality* (*śīla*, consisting of basic ethical codes like nonviolence, rules on the use of daily requisites, such as moderation in eating, and the restraint of the senses and of other grossly distracting and disquieting activities), is understood to condition one’s mental and physical states so that they become amenable to the second training: *mental absorption* (*samādhi*) or *tranquility* (*śamatha*), whose highly refined cultivation of concentration and equanimity requires a pliant and elated psychophysical state that is not dulled by immoderation or burdened with anguish. Minimizing mental hindrances correspondingly magnifies the mental clarity that is the direct result of tranquility practice; this makes possible the exercise of the third training: *prajñā* (wisdom) or *insightful discernment* (*VIPASSANĀ*; SANSKRIT, *VIPASĪYANĀ*) of the impermanent, unsatisfactory, selfless nature of existential reality. The transcendent wisdom kindled thereby in its turn deepens the practitioner’s conviction to establish himself or herself on a firm moral foundation, rendering in him or her a profoundly subtle and harmonious mindset that is reinforcing and naturally compatible with the first training. This positive loop feeds on itself, building momentum as each of the constituent trainings conduces to more advanced ones and, at the same time, injects new vigor into, and qualitatively reorients, the antecedent ones.

Since the noble eightfold path has often been organized and interpreted in the framework of the three trainings (e.g., right intention as belonging to the first training in morality, right concentration to training in tranquility, and so on), it shows that traditional Buddhist HERMENEUTICS sought to correlate at least some of these alternative mārga schemata. In fact, all these modular understandings of the Buddhist path have large areas of overlap and each soteriological scheme could be readily classified into more than one model.

Third, contrary to what the metaphor of a “path” would intuitively suggest, the Buddhist mārga has been depicted in a “sudden,” or subitist, model by some traditions, entailing a momentous spiritual vision that instantaneously transports the practitioner beyond the conditioned (*saṃskṛta*) realm of gradual, deliberate exertions. Robert E. Buswell, Jr., and Robert Gimello describe several scenarios in which such an “anti-mārga” model prevailed:

Thus do Buddhist texts abound in such seeming self-contradictions as the claim that the fruit (*phala*) of prac-

tice is actually a preventive cause (*hetu*) of its own causal practices, the assertion that practice and realization are really indistinguishable from each other, the claim that sudden realization precedes and enables gradual practice, and even the conviction that all prideful confidence in the sufficiency of one's "own power" (*jiriki*) as exercised in "difficult practices" (*nangyō*) must be relinquished humbly in the "easy practice" (*igyō*) whereby one accepts the "other power" (*tarikī*) of the transcendent. (Buswell and Gimello, p. 24)

The final proposed model conceptualizes the path as a linear sequence of increasingly refined stages of psycho-ethical amelioration from rudimentary to more advanced practices, with former steps succeeded by those that follow and abandoned after they have served their purpose. This pragmatic view of the nature of religious practice lends itself to the traditional Buddhist reluctance to assign absolutistic and overriding value to any set of practices as an end in itself. Like the individual footsteps that form a track, the different practices suitable at different points in spiritual development are not to be mistaken as definitive endpoints, but only as onward-leading phases in a continuous process of development that one passes through rather than abides in.

In this depiction of the path as a linear progression, the ultimate value of spiritual practices has little to do with insuperable religious ideals in and of themselves. Their worth lies instead in their value in producing and sustaining more advanced forms of cultivation. If one unduly clings to these transitional trainings after they have served their purpose, they would only become self-inhibiting affectations and conceptual burdens rather than the expedient, liberating devices they were meant to be—hence, the ubiquitous parable in Buddhist texts of the person letting go of the raft as soon as the river is crossed and the famous maxim "even what is good has to be abandoned, let alone what is evil" (*dhammā pi . . . pahātabbā pageva adhammā*).

Such a model of successive advancement is found in the so-called five paths paradigm: the path of equipment, the path of preparation, the path of seeing, the path of cultivation, and the path of completion (alternately called the path beyond instruction), with each "path" serving as a preparatory and prerequisite step to its immediately subsequent path. At the most elementary path of equipment, one is expected to engage in meritorious actions that will plant the wholesome karmic seeds that are conducive and necessary to spiritual maturation. But after one has arrived at the second path of preparation, where one is supposed to apply oneself to more refined, formal trainings, such

as mental cultivation, the actions appropriate to the first path would now be a distraction, rather than a help. Once one has entered the stage of cultivation, which entails the actualization and implementation of the proper dharma one "sees" on the preceding path, one need not revert back to the former stage to repeat the awakening experience, because the insight engendered thereby is generally held out to be final and not liable to regression.

It is practically inconceivable to try to understand the Buddhist doctrinal outlook and programs of practice without appreciating and making reference to their conception of the path. Its modal varieties and richness in meanings were naturally the result of many centuries of development, reflecting the perennial Buddhist fascination with the theme and its diverse interpretations, but the basic assumptions and spiritual ethos it carries, as outlined previously, have also given Buddhism whatever degree of consistency it has enjoyed.

See also: Psychology

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