

PATHS PART 1**Different paths**

It seems timely to review some things about the direction we have been following. There are several elements to this: the nature of what we have inherited, the material and the methods; the kind of people we are, the kinds of aim we have.

To start with the different ways:

Christmas celebrates the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem, but it also reminds the believer of the need for the birth or rebirth of Jesus in the heart. Earlier in December the Mevlana Festival marks the death of the founder of the order of Whirling Dervishes; rebirth also features in the Sema, the turning ceremony, when the turners discard their black robes symbolising the tomb and come to life in the turning. These are examples of ways of the heart, the devotional path, though the Turning obviously has a physical aspect.

Another approach to transcending the ordinary self is to pursue the ultimate identity of the self. An example of this is the approach of the school of Ramana Maharshi, and of contemporary teachers such as Tony Parsons. It was probably also the main direction pursued by Shankara within the Vedic tradition. This is the way of the head, the mind, the knowledge path.

Predominantly physical ways are less common in the West than the other two ways. In the East the more physical yoga schools fall into this category.

These are just a few examples. Of course there are many other paths involving more than one way, though usually one predominates — as already noted, the Turning has devotional and physical aspects.

Another distinction between different paths is that some of them require the aspirant to renounce ordinary life and to undertake a more or less secluded life of obedience to a religious order or to a guru, and some do not.

We have some guidance from the System about different ways. It speaks of the paths available to a man wanting to develop his possibilities. It describes the three 'fulltime' traditional paths: the way of the fakir (physical), the way of the monk (emotional) and the way of the yogi (intellectual):

In this connection certain teachings compare man to a house of four rooms. Man lives in one room, the smallest and poorest of all, and until he is told of it, he does not suspect the existence of the other rooms which are full of treasures. When he does learn of this he begins to seek the keys of these rooms and especially of the fourth, the most important, room. And when a man has found his way into this room he really becomes the master of his house, for only then does the house belong to him wholly and forever.

The fourth room gives man immortality and all religious teachings strive to show the way to it. There are a great many ways, some shorter and some longer, some harder and some easier, but all, without exception, lead or strive to lead in one direction, that is, to immortality.

PDO. In Search of the Miraculous.

This controversial description raises a host of questions about the ultimate reason for seeking a path, which must also be closely related to the idea of Aim. (Incidentally it draws a sharp distinction between paths to enlightenment from approaches to personal self-development designed to make the individual happier and richer).

It was said that the ways used by fakirs, monks and yogis are the only ways, the only methods; for an individual who under no circumstances would ever join one of three traditional ways there was said to be no possibility of development.. Also, while there are limitations on the spiritual activities of householders because of responsibilities in life, jobs and families, nevertheless it was said that there are advantages, one being that the way starts further on than in the three traditional ways:

The conditions of life in which a man is placed at the beginning of his work, in which, so to speak, the work finds him, are the best possible for him, at any rate at the beginning of the work.

PDO. In Search of the Miraculous.

This, it was said, is because the conditions are natural for him or her, whereas the conditions on joining one of the three ways are artificial.. Moreover in the Fourth Way work can be individualized - each person can do only what is necessary for them and not what is useless for them. Progress can be faster than in the three ways: a fakir may take a month of physical suffering to produce certain substances, a monk a week in prayer, and a yogi a day of mental exercises, but someone on the Fourth Way 'simply prepares and swallows a little pill which contains all the substances he wants'.

The distinctive nature of the work in the Fourth Way is to work on the three rooms at once:

The method of the fourth way consists in doing something in one room and simultaneously doing something corresponding to it in the other two rooms.

This approach was contrasted with the one-sided nature of development in the three ways, where if the fourth room is reached much is left unfinished, so that for example the fakir is master of his body but not of his mind and his emotions. Lastly, the Fourth Way is the way of understanding: no faith, no guru.

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A lot has changed in the world since the System teaching was first given. There are now far more teachings and methods available to the householder, so at least in major western cities it is possible to pursue exotic paths within ordinary life, and spiritual tourism is commonplace. In the middle ground between ways of renunciation and ways in ordinary life, distinctions have become blurred, as they have between religion and psychology. How do the System ideas about the Fourth Way appear today? Do they still apply to us as individuals?

There is a final conundrum to be considered. We have had advice from the Shankaracharya that people must 'follow their star': some people seem to be fundamentally devotional and others fundamentally intellectual: their paths are supposedly different, as different as the path of the monk from the yogi.

In the following weeks we might consider the different paths in more detail, and find practical ways of understanding them. This might lead on to a new approach.

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