

## FOOTPRINTS OF THE GODS



Detail: The Buddha's Footprint. Teak wood decorated with mother of pearl and glass. Lanna art, late 15<sup>th</sup> early 16<sup>th</sup> centuries. Restored by Phrachao Kawila; the first king of Chiang Mai in 1794. Wat Phra Singh Woramahaviharn.

Peter Jackson:

“As demonstrated in a recent study by George Thompson, an important focus of Vedic ritual hermeneutics was the observation that, just as humans and animals may be traced through the footprints they leave on the ground, the gods may be traced through the footprints they left in the verbal and kinetic precedents of memorized ritual. Hence the poet was held to be a *padajná* or "track- seeker." According to the competitive tradition of Vedic poetry, the footprint or *padá* was regarded as a hidden message to be deposited in the poem.”<sup>1</sup>

*Path*, is according to one Oxford online Dictionary: “. . . a way or track laid down for walking or made by continual treading. From: Old English *pæth*, of West Germanic origin; related to Dutch *pad*, German *Pfad*, of unknown ultimate origin.”

George Thompson:

“The term *padá*, which is etymologically equivalent with Greek *pedon*, 'place, ground', generally refers to a 'footprint, footstep, track', and occasionally 'place', and is ultimately related to our Indo-European word for 'foot' (Sanskrit *pad-*, Greek *pous*, Latin *pes*, German *Fuss*, etc.). What is peculiar about the term *padá* is the fact that certainly by the late Vedic period (perhaps 750 BCE) it came to have the sense 'word', i.e., an isolable unit of speech, and then among the later native grammarians it became the standard technical term for 'inflected word'.”<sup>2</sup>

The Zen Master Huangbo:

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Jackson, Light from Distant Asterisks. Towards a Description of the Indo-European Religious Heritage, *Numen*, Vol. 49, Fasc. 1 (2002), p. 65.

<sup>2</sup> George Thompson, "From 'footstep' to 'word' in Sanskrit." *Semiotica* 106, 1995, pp. 77-78.

“Just as a bird in flight all day long leaves no traces in the sky, you let everything go when you attain a penetrating awakening.”<sup>3</sup>

“The evidence sometimes points to *pada* as a line of verse, i.e., as a verse-quarter, but it also sometimes seems to refer to 'syllable', and perhaps even in particular to the sacred syllable OM.”<sup>4</sup>

"In Vajrayana Buddhism and Hinduism, the term *bīja* is used for mystical "seed syllables" contained within mantras. These seeds do not have precise meanings, but are thought to carry connections to spiritual principles. The best-known *bīja* syllable is Om, first found in the Hindu scriptures the Upanishads."

Madhu Khanna observes:

“ . . . the Sanskrit syllables inscribed on yantras, are essentially 'thought forms' representing divinities or cosmic powers, which exert their influence by means of sound-vibrations.”<sup>5</sup>

After a very technical discussion, Thompson notes:

“ . . . the footprint or track referred to is frequently said to be, on the one hand, *hidden* or *concealed*, and on the other hand *found* or *recognized*.” (81)

This resonates closely to the Tibetan *Terma* tradition, concisely defined by Tulku Thondup:

“In the Nyingmapa school of Tibetan Buddhism the tradition of concealment and revelations of teachings and materials of religious value through the mystical power of enlightened beings is most prevalent by far. This tradition of mystical discovery is known in Tibet as Ter (*gTer*, Treasures), Terma (*gTer-Ma* , Treasured Ones) or Tercho (*gTer-Chos*, Dharma Treasures or Treasured Teachings).<sup>6</sup>

“We can readily see why a god (or priest) who has mastered such esoteric sciences would be considered omniscient: these sciences require the *interpretation of the signs* of invisible, or at least transient, things”. (81-82)

“The crucial factor in the semantic development of the term, from 'footstep' to 'word', then, is the fact that the Vedic poets were, and knew themselves to be, *cryptanalysts*. The highly competitive and esoteric environment in which they performed compelled them to be self-conscious *seekers after signs*. Thus they were inclined to call themselves and their mythic ancestors 'knowers of the track' (*padajna*) or 'track seekers' (*padavi*). (90)

Buddhapada - the Buddha made 7 footsteps . . .

[BUDDHA FOOTPRINT@WIKIPEDIA](#)

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

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<sup>3</sup> A Bird in Flight Leaves No Trace: The Zen Teaching of Huangbo with a Modern Commentary  
By Seon Master Subul, Wisdom Publications, 2019.

<sup>4</sup> George Thompson, "From 'footstep' to 'word' in Sanskrit." *Semiotica* 106, 1995, pp. 79-80

<sup>5</sup> Madhu Khanna, *Yantra: The Tantric Symbol of Cosmic Unity*. Inner Traditions, 2003, p. 21.

<sup>6</sup> Tulku Thondup, The Terma Tradition of the Nyingmapa School, *The Tibet Journal*, Vol. 15, No. 4, Shakabpa Memorial Issue: Part I (Winter 1990), p. 149.

## THE PATH



"You, traveller, there are no roads,  
Only wind trails on the sea."

Antonio Machado

"The processes of the imagination follow paths that do not always coincide with the paths  
we follow in life."

Italo Calvino, *Hermit in Paris*, p. 246

"The path to our highest desires often lies through the undesirable."

Rene Daumal, *Mount Analogue*.

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"The middle road is the only one that does not lead to Rome."

– Arnold Schoenberg <sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Arnold Schoenberg quoted in Theodor W. Adorno, *Philosophy of Modern Music*, trans. Anne G. Mitchell and Wesley V. Bloomster, London: Sheed and Ward, 1973.

Chögyam Trungpa:

"The nature of the path is more like an exploration or an expedition than following a path that has already been built. When people hear that they should follow the path, they might think that a ready-made system exists, and that individual expressions are not required. They may think that one does not have to surrender or give or open. But when you actually begin to tread on the path, you realize that you have to clear out the jungle and all the trees, underbrush, and obstacles growing in front of you. You have to bypass tigers and elephants and poisonous snakes." <sup>8</sup>

Steven Goodman:

"Many people think that path means something like an already-existent road, as if someone already did the hard work and all one has to do is get his or her legs onto it, and as soon as they're on it, everything will go splendidly. But perhaps a more accurate translation would be journey. In fact, in the Indian Buddhist context, the Sanskrit word for path, *marga*, is often used with an instrumental grammatical ending (*margena*)—it is "by means of the path" that one goes. This has been interpreted to mean it is a journey, an inner process of finding our way—by means of intellect and heart—out of the thick forest of confusion and pain and into a clearing from which we can first glimpse, and then perceive more stably, a way of proceeding with a sense of confidence." <sup>9</sup>

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A favourite song of the child Gustav Mahler was "Eits a binkel Kasi," about a little wanderer:

"The title refers to his bundle, which "swung back and forth." The knapsack was "an accessory of artisans," who frequented wayside inns such as Bernard Mahler's, and young Gustav had plenty of opportunities to witness the drunken, dancing journeymen." . . . "Later the journeymen would reappear in Mahler's *Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen* (Songs of a Wayfarer)." <sup>10</sup>



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Rene Daumal:

<sup>8</sup> Chögyam Trungpa, Rinpoche, *The Truth of Suffering and the Path of Liberation*, Shambhala Publications, 2009.

<sup>9</sup> Steven Goodman, *The Buddhist Psychology of Awakening. An In-Depth Guide to Abhidharma*, Shambhala, 2020.

<sup>10</sup> Stuart Feder, *Gustav Mahler. A Life in Crisis*, Yale University Press, New Haven & London, 2004, p.18.

“Throughout the studio wound a pebble path, devious as the track of an ornery mule and bordered with shrubs and bushes in pots or in crates, cactus plants, small conifers, dwarf palms, and rhododendrons. Along the path, glued to the window panes or hung on the bushes or dangling from the ceiling, so that all free space was put to maximum use, hundreds of little placards were displayed. Each one carried a drawing, a photograph, or an inscription, and the whole constituted a veritable encyclopedia of what we call ‘human knowledge’. A diagram of a plant cell, Mendeleieff’s periodic table of the elements, the keys to Chinese writing, a cross-section of the human heart, Lorentz’s transformation formulae, each planet and its characteristics, fossil remains of the horse species in series, Mayan hieroglyphics, economic and demographic statistics, musical phrases, sample of the principle plant and animal families, crystal specimens, the ground plan of the Great Pyramid, brain diagrams, logistic equations, phonetic charts of the sounds employed in all languages, maps, genealogies – everything in short which would fill the brain of a twentieth century Pico della Mirandola.”<sup>11</sup>

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Oliver Sacks:

“Perhaps I was influenced here by something William James had written of his own teacher Louis Agassiz – how Agassiz “used to lock a student up in a room full of turtle shells, or lobster shells, or oyster shells, without a book or work to help him, and not let him out till he had discovered all the truths which the objects contained.”<sup>12</sup>

**THE ATLAS OF LOBSTER HISTOLOGY:** [[HERE](#)]

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Recently, when I was availing myself of a friend’s collection of books on the Kabbalah – I had something of an epiphany. Without excavating the profusion of details, the essence of the matter involves two interpretations of the Hebrew word for ‘*path*’. I have a tendency to siphon lexical interpretations into the experiential and subjective realm, as was the case in this instance.

These experiences are in essence ‘gnostic’ in the sense they involve, evolve and revolve around specific ways of ‘*knowing*’. It is difficult to transmit these *ways of knowing* in words. And difficult *outside* of specific conditions or modalities. Words are very inadequate. I would suggest it is also very connected to the ‘seeing’ of the SEERS! Like the *satori* of the Zen *koan*, you either get it or you don’t. Boiled down to basics, what I’m saying is there exists a specific ability to ‘see’ the path that one’s life takes. It is a matter of direction. Of discovering the *gestalt*. And in clumsy, dualistic terms, of *self-actualization*. [Without the *self!*] I also have the unfortunate proclivity of ‘seeing’ how other people have not found their ‘*path*’ in life. They are floundering around like fish in water. And this applies to most human beings, who only wallpaper over the existential uncertainties. Animals, by contrast, *live* their path, on an intrinsic, instinctual level.

The hidden core of this emerging essay, depends on an analysis on the two Hebrew terms for ‘*path*’ - which will be forthcoming in due time . . . for the moment, what I have the audacity to say is that I feel at this moment, more certainly than ever before, that I *see* the direction of my life’s path more clearly. And it is not even a case of ‘*seeing*’ . . . pieces of the puzzle just fall into place, rather in the sense of synchronicity. One feels that there is a Puppet master behind all this. As my mother used to say and live by the saying: “Thy Will Be Done.” The least we can do of this “will’ on earth, seeing that we have no opportunities, as yet, of doing this “will” in Heaven . . . or perhaps merely in the sense of “storing treasures” for some future eventuality.

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<sup>11</sup> Rene Daumal, *Mount Analogue*.

<sup>12</sup> Oliver Sacks, *On the Move. A Life*, Picador, London, 2016, Note 5, p. 182.

So again, the attention is moved away from the ego, to the idea of some great one Universal Macrocosmic Plan, of which we are *microcosmic* parts. And this is the true *Path* of all sentient beings . . . whether they are conscious of it or not. In fact, being conscious of your place in the Great-Scheme-of-Things-Without-a-Schemer . . . makes perfect sense. To me.

And to be honest, the epiphany, the revelation has not been revealed. I am keeping that *core*, the heart of the matter, under wraps for the time being. As we said, words cannot express these inner observations - but perhaps actions can. Hence:

By Their Fruits Ye Shall Know Them.

And perhaps our revelations, which are far and few between, are not gifted to us to be shouted from the highest rooftops. They remain *esoteric*, because they are the very energy from which future action is gestated.

Let me give you a more practical, exoteric example. The professional art historical revelations that I am making at this very moment, on the History of the Tarot in the Renaissance - started when I encountered the Egyptian Tarot at the age of 13 years. A seven year cycle ended when at age 19 I wrote a paper at the Johannesburg School of Art on the symbolism of Hieronymus Bosch using the Tarot and Alchemy as keys. In other words, that cycle bridges the teenage years, exactly. Now, over 50 years later, I am involved in exactly the same research, with the exception that a lot more water has flown under the proverbial bridge. .

Samten de Wet, Turin, October 30, 2007