

Steps of the Path

C. W. Leadbeater



Sri Krishna's altar, Bhojanasala, Adyar, Chennai

(Originally published in *Lucifer* – a magazine founded by H. P. Blavatsky – October 1896.)

EASTERN books tell us that there are four means by which a man [or a woman] may be brought to the beginning of the path of spiritual advancement. 1. By the companionship of those who have already entered upon it. 2. By the hearing or reading of definite teaching on occult philosophy. 3. By enlightened reflection; that is to say, that by sheer force of hard thinking and close reasoning he may arrive at the truth, or some portion of it, for himself. 4. By the practice of virtue, which means that a long series of virtuous lives, though it does not necessarily involve any increase of intellectuality, does eventually develop in a man sufficient intuition to enable him to grasp the necessity of entering upon the path and show him in what direction it lies.

When, by one or another of these means, he has arrived at this point, the way to the highest adeptship lies straight before him, if he chooses to take it. In writing for students of occultism it is hardly necessary to say that at our present stage of development we cannot expect to learn all, or nearly all, about any but the lowest steps of this path; whilst of the highest we know little but the names, though we may get occasional glimpses of the indescribable glory which surrounds them.

According to the esoteric teaching these steps are grouped in three great divisions:

1. The probationary period, before any definite pledges are taken, or initiations (in the full sense of the word) are given. This carries a man to the level necessary to pass successfully through what in Theosophical books is usually called “the critical period of the Fifth Round.”
2. The period of pledged chelaship, or the path proper whose four stages are often spoken of in Oriental books as the four paths of holiness. At the end of this the pupil obtains adeptship – the level which humanity should reach at the close of the seventh round.
3. What we may venture to call the official period, in which the Adept takes a definite part (under the great Cosmic Law) in the government of the world, and holds a special office connected therewith. Of course every Adept—every pupil even, when once definitely accepted—takes a part in the

great work of helping forward the evolution of man; but those standing on the higher levels take charge of special departments, and correspond in a general way to the ministers of the crown. It is not proposed to make any attempt in this paper to treat of this official period; no information about it has ever been made public, and the whole subject is too far above our comprehension to be profitably dealt with in a magazine article. We will confine ourselves therefore to the two earlier divisions.

PROBATIONARY PERIOD.

Before going into details of the probationary period it is well to mention that in most of the Eastern sacred books this stage is regarded as merely preliminary, and scarcely as part of the path at all, for they consider that the latter is really entered upon only when definite pledges have been given. Considerable confusion has been created by the fact that the numbering of the stages occasionally commences at this point, though more often at the beginning of the second great division; sometimes the stages themselves are counted, and sometimes the initiations leading into or out of them, so that in studying the books one has to be perpetually on one's guard to avoid misunderstanding. This probationary period, however, differs considerably in character from the others; the divisions between its stages are less decidedly marked than are those of the higher groups, and the requirements are not so definite or exacting. But it will be easier to explain this last point after giving a list of the five stages of this period, with their respective qualifications. The first four were very ably described by Mr. Mohini Mohum Chatterji in the first Transaction of the London Lodge, to which readers may be referred for fuller definitions of them that can be given here.

Much exceedingly valuable information about them is also given by Mrs. Besant in her books *The Path of Discipleship* and *In the Outer Court*. The names given to the stages will differ somewhat, for in the books just referred to the Hindu Sanskrit terminology was employed, whereas the Pali nomenclature used in this article is that of the Buddhist system; but although the subject is thus approached from a different side, as it were, the qualifications exacted will be found to be precisely the same in effect even when the outward form varies. In the case of each word the mere dictionary meaning will first be given in parentheses, and the explanation of it which is usually given by the teacher will follow. The first stage then is called among Buddhists:

1. Manodvāravajjana (the opening of the doors of the mind, or perhaps escaping by the door of the mind)—and in it the candidate acquires a firm intellectual conviction of the impermanence and worthlessness of mere earthly aims. This is often described as learning the difference between the real and the unreal: and to learn it often takes a long time and many hard lessons. Yet it is obvious that it must be the first step towards anything like real progress, for no man [or woman] can enter wholeheartedly upon the path until he has definitely decided to “set his affection upon things above, not on things on the earth,” and that decision comes from the certainty that nothing on earth has any value as compared with the higher life. This step is called by the Hindus the acquirement of Viveka or discrimination, and Mr. Sinnett speaks of it as the giving allegiance to the higher self.

2. Parikamma (preparation for action)—in which the candidate learns to do the right merely because it is right, without considering his own gain or loss either in this world or the future, and acquires, as the Eastern books put it, perfect indifference to the enjoyment of the fruit of his own actions. This indifference is the natural result of the previous step; for when the neophyte has once grasped the unreal and impermanent character of all earthly rewards, he ceases to crave for them; when once the radiance of the real has shone upon the soul, nothing below that can any longer be an object of desire. This higher indifference is called by the Hindus Vairāgya.

3. Upachāro (attention or conduct)—in which what are called “the six qualifications” (the Shatsampatti of the Hindus) are acquired. These are called in Pali:

(a) Samo (quietude)—that purity and calmness of thought which comes from perfect control of the mind—a qualification exceedingly difficult of attainment, and yet most necessary, for unless the mind moves only in obedience to the guidance of the will it cannot be a perfect instrument for the Master’s work in the future.

(b) Damo (subjugation)—a similar mastery over, and therefore purity in, one’s actions and words—a quality which again follows necessarily from its predecessor.

(c) Uparati (cessation)—explained as cessation from bigotry or from belief in the necessity of any act or ceremony prescribed by a particular religion—so leading the aspirant to independence of thought and to a wide and generous tolerance.

(d) Titikkhā (endurance or forbearance)—by which is meant the readiness to bear with cheerfulness whatever one’s Karma may bring upon one, and to part with anything and everything worldly whenever it may be necessary. It also includes the idea of complete absence of resentment for wrong, the man [or woman] knowing that those who do him wrong are but the instruments of his own Karma.

(e) Samādhāna (intentness) — one-pointedness, involving the incapability of being turned aside from one’s path by temptation.

(f) Saddhā (faith)—confidence in one’s Master and oneself; confidence, that is, that the Master is a competent teacher, and that, however diffident the pupil may feel as to his own powers, he has yet within him that divine spark which when fanned into a flame will one day enable him to achieve even as his Master has done.

4. Anuloma (direct order or succession, signifying that its attainment follows as a natural consequence from the other three)—in which is acquired that intense desire for liberation from earthly life, and for union with the highest which is called by the Hindus Mumukshatva.

5. Gotrabhū (the condition of fitness for initiation); in this stage the candidate gathers up, as it were, his previous acquisitions, and strengthens them to the degree necessary for the next great step, which will set his feet upon the path proper as an accepted pupil. The attainment of this level is followed very rapidly by initiation into the next grade. In answer to the question, “Who is the Gotrabhū? Buddha says, “The man [or woman] who is in possession of those conditions upon which the commencement of sanctification immediately ensues – he is the Gotrabhū.”

The wisdom necessary for the reception of the path of holiness is called Gotrabhū-gnana.

Now that we have hastily glanced at the steps of the probationary period, we must emphasize the point to which reference was made at the commencement—that the perfect attainment of these accomplishments and qualifications is not expected at this early stage. As Mr. Mohini says, “If all these are equally strong, adeptship is attained in the same incarnation.” But such a result is of course extremely rare. It is in the direction of these acquirements that the candidate must ceaselessly strive, but it would be an error to suppose that no one has been admitted to the next step without possessing all of them in the fullest possible degree. Nor do they follow one another in the same definite order as the later steps; in fact in many cases a man [or a woman] would be developing the various qualifications all at the same time—rather side by side than in regular succession.

It is obvious that a man might easily be working along a great part of this path unconsciously to himself, and no doubt many a good Christian, many an earnest freethinker is already far on the road that will eventually lead him to initiation, though he may never have heard the word

“occultism” in his life. I mention these two classes especially, because in every other religion occult development is recognized as a possibility, and would certainly therefore be intentionally sought by those who felt yearnings for something more satisfactory than the exoteric faiths.

We must also note that the steps of this probationary period are not separated by initiations in the full sense of the word, though they will certainly be studded with tests and trials of all sorts and on all planes, and may be relieved by encouraging experiences, and by hints and help whenever these may safely be given. We are apt sometimes to use the word initiation somewhat loosely, as for example when it is applied to such tests as have just been mentioned; properly speaking it refers only to the solemn ceremony at which a pupil is formally admitted to a higher grade by an appointed official who in the name of the Occult Hierarchy receives his plighted vow, and puts into his hands the new key of knowledge which he is to use on the level to which he has now attained. Such an initiation is taken at the entrance to the division which we shall next consider, and also at each passage from any one of its steps to the next.

PERIOD OF PLEDGED CHELASHIP, OR THE PATH PROPER.

It is in the four stages of this division of the path that the ten Samyojana, or fetters which bind man [or woman] to the circle of rebirth and hold him back from Nirvana, must be cast off. And here comes the difference between this period of pledged chelaship and the previous probation. No partial success in getting rid of these fetters is sufficient now; before a candidate can pass on from one of the steps he must be *entirely* free from certain of these clogs; and when they are enumerated it will be seen how far-reaching this requirement is, and there will be little cause to wonder at the statement made in the sacred books that seven incarnations are sometimes required to pass through this division of the path.

Each of these four steps or stages is again divided into four: each has (1) its Maggo, or way, during which the student is striving to cast off the fetters: (2) its Phala (result or fruit) when he finds the results of his action in so doing showing themselves more and more: (3) its Bhavagga or consummation, the period when, the result having culminated, he is able to fulfil satisfactorily the work belonging to the step on which he stands: and (4) its Gotrabhū, meaning, as before, the time when he arrives at a fit state to receive the next initiation. The first stage is:

I. Sotāpatti or Sohan. The pupil who has attained this level is spoken of as the Sowanī or Sotāpanna—“he who has entered the stream,” because from this period, though he may linger, though he may succumb to more refined temptations and turn aside from his course for a time, he can no longer fall back altogether from spirituality and become a mere worldling. He has entered upon the stream of definite higher human evolution, upon which all humanity must enter by the middle of the next round, unless they are to be left behind as temporary failures by the great life-wave, to wait for further progress until the next manvantara. The pupil who is able to take this initiation has therefore already outstripped the majority of humanity to the extent of an entire round of all our seven planets. The fetters which he must cast off before he can pass into the next stage are:

1. Sakkāyaditthi—the delusion of self.
2. Vichikichchhā—doubt or uncertainty.
3. Silabbataparāmāsa—superstition.

The first of these is the “I am I” consciousness, which as connected with the personality is nothing but an illusion, and must be got rid of at the very first step of the real upward path. But to cast off

this fetter completely means even more than this, for it involves the realization of the fact that even the individuality can never have any interests opposed to those of its brethren, and that it is most truly progressing when it most assists the progress of others. For the very sign and seal of the attainment of the Sotāpatti level is the first entrance of the pupil into the plane next above the devachanic—that which we usually call the buddhic. It may be – nay, it will be—the merest touch of the lowest subplane of that stupendously exalted condition that the pupil can as yet experience, even with his Master’s help; but even that touch is something that can never be forgotten – something that opens a new world before him, and entirely revolutionizes his feelings and conceptions. Then for the first time, by means of the extended consciousness of that plane, he truly realizes the underlying unity of all; then first he gets some slight glimpse of what the love and compassion of the great Masters must be.

As to the second fetter, a word of caution is necessary. We who have been trained in European habits of thought are unhappily so familiar with the idea that a blind unreasoning adhesion to certain dogmas may be claimed from a disciple, that on hearing that Occultism considers *doubt* as an obstacle to progress, we are likely to suppose that it also requires the same unquestioning faith from its followers as modern superstitions do. No idea could be more entirely false. It is true that doubt (or rather uncertainty) on certain questions is a bar to spiritual progress, but the antidote to that doubt is not blind faith (which is itself considered as a fetter, as will presently be seen) but the certainty of conviction founded on individual experiment or mathematical reasoning. While a child doubted the accuracy of the multiplication table he would hardly acquire proficiency in the higher mathematics; but his doubts could be satisfactorily cleared up only by his attaining a comprehension, founded on reasoning or experiment, that the statements contained in the table are true. He believes that twice two are four, not merely because he has been told so, but because it has become to him a self-evident fact. And this is exactly the method, and the only method, of resolving doubt known to Occultism.

Vichikichchhā has been defined as doubt of the doctrines of Karma and reincarnation and of the efficacy of the method of attaining the highest good by this path of holiness; and the casting off of this Samyojana is the arriving at absolute certainty, based either upon personal first-hand knowledge or upon reason, that the occult teaching upon these points is true.

The third fetter to be got rid of comprehends all kinds of unreasoning or mistaken belief, all dependence on the efficacy of outward rites and ceremonies to purify the heart. He who would cast it off must learn to depend upon himself alone, not upon others, nor upon the outer busk of any religion.

The first three fetters are in a coherent series. The difference between individuality and personality being fully realized, it is then possible to some extent to appreciate the actual course of reincarnation, and so to dispel all doubt on that head. This done, the knowledge of the spiritual permanence of the true ego gives rise to reliance on one’s own spiritual strength, and so dispels superstition.

II. Sakadāgāmī. The pupil who has entered upon this second stage is spoken of as a Sakadāgāmin “the man [or the woman] who returns but once”—signifying that a man who has reached this level should need but one more incarnation before attaining arahatship. At this step no additional fetters are cast off, but the pupil is occupied in reducing to a minimum those which still enchain him. It is, however, usually a period of considerable psychic and intellectual advancement. If the psychic faculties have not been previously acquired, they must be developed at this stage, as without them it would be impossible to assimilate the knowledge which must now be given, or to do the higher work for humanity in which the pupil is now privileged to assist.

III. Anāgāmī. The Anāgāmin (he who does not return) is so called because, having reached this stage, he ought to be able to attain the next one in the life he is then living. In this step he finally gets rid of any lingering remains of the two fetters of:

4. Kāmarāga—attachment to the enjoyment of sensation, typified by earthly love, and
5. Patigha—all possibility of anger or hatred.

The student who has cast off these fetters can no longer be swayed by the influence of his senses either in the direction of love or hatred, and would be free from either attachment to or impatience of physical plane conditions.

Here again we must guard against a possible misconception – one with which we frequently meet. The purest and noblest human love *never* dies away—is *never* diminished by occult training; on the contrary, it is increased and widened until it embraces all with the same fervour which at first was lavished on one or two: but the student does in time rise above all considerations connected with the mere *personality* of those around him, and so is free from all the injustice and partiality which ordinary love so often brings in its train. Nor should it for a moment be supposed that in gaining this wide affection for all he loses the especial love for his closer friends. The unusually perfect link between Ānanda and the Buddha, as between St. John and Jesus, is on record to prove that on the contrary this is enormously intensified; and the tie between a Master and his pupils is stronger far than any earthly bond.

IV. Arahāt (the venerable, the perfect). On attaining this level the aspirant enjoys the consciousness of the buddhic plane, and is able to use its powers and faculties while still in the physical body; and when he leaves that body in sleep or trance he passes at once into the glory of the nirvanic plane. In this stage the occultist casts off the five remaining fetters, which are:

6. Rūparāga—desire for beauty of form or for physical existence in a form, even including that in Devachan.
7. Arūparāga—desire for formless life.
8. Māno—pride
9. Uddhachcha—agitation or irritability.
10. Avijjā—ignorance.

On this we may remark that the casting off of Rūparāga involves not only getting rid of desire for earthly life, however grand or noble that life may be, and astral or devachanic life however glorious, but also of all liability to be unduly influenced or repelled by the external beauty or ugliness of any person or thing.

Arūparāga—desire for life either in the highest and formless planes of Devachan or in the still more exalted buddhic plane—is a higher and less sensual form of selfishness, and must be cast off as much as the lower. Uddhachcha really means “liability to be disturbed in mind,” and a man who had finally cast off this fetter would be absolutely unruffled by anything whatever that might happen to him—perfectly impervious to any kind of attack upon his dignified serenity. The getting rid of ignorance of course implies the acquisition of perfect knowledge—practical omniscience as regards our planetary chain. Then the advancing ego reaches the fifth stage—the stage of full adeptship—and becomes

V. Asekha, “the one who has no more to learn,” again as regards our planetary chain. It is quite impossible for us to realize at our present level what this attainment means. All the splendour of the nirvanic plane lies open before the waking eyes of the Adept, while when he chooses to leave his body he has the power to enter upon something higher still—a plane which to us is the merest name. As Professor Rhys-Davids explains, “He is now free from all sin; he sees and values all things in

this life at their true value; all evil being rooted from his mind, he experiences only righteous desires for himself, and tender pity and regard and exalted love for others.” To show how little he has lost the sentiment of love, we read in the Metta Sutta of the state of mind of one who stands at this level: “As a mother loves, who even at the risk of her own life protects her only son, *such* love let there be towards all beings. Let goodwill without measure prevail in the whole world, above, below, around, unstinted, unmixed with any feeling of differing or opposing interests. When a man remains steadfastly in this state of mind all the while, whether he be standing or walking, sitting or lying down, then is come to pass the saying ‘Even in this life has holiness been found.’ ”

Beyond this period it is obvious that we can know nothing of the new qualifications required for the still higher levels which yet lie before the perfect man. It is abundantly clear, however, that when a man has become Asekha he has exhausted all the possibilities only moral development, so that further advancement for him can only mean still wider knowledge and still more wonderful spiritual powers. We are told that when man has thus attained his spiritual majority, whether in the slow course of evolution or by the shorter path of self-development, he assumes the fullest control of his own destinies, and makes choice of his future line of evolution among seven possible paths which he sees opening before him.

Naturally we cannot expect to understand much about these, and the faint outline of some of them which is all that can be sketched in for us conveys very little to the mind, except that most of them take the Adept altogether away from our earth-chain, which no longer affords sufficient scope for his evolution. One path is that of those who, as the technical phrase goes, accept Nirvana. Through what incalculable aeons they remain in that sublime condition, for what work they are preparing themselves, what will be their future line of evolution, are questions upon which we know nothing; and indeed if information upon such points could be given it is likely that it would prove quite incomprehensible to us at our present stage.

Another class chooses a spiritual evolution not quite so far removed from humanity, for though not directly connected with the next chain of our system it extends through two long periods corresponding to its first and second rounds, at the end of which time they also appear to accept Nirvana, but at a higher stage than those previously mentioned.

Others join the Deva evolution, whose progress lies along a grand chain consisting of seven chains like ours, each of which to them is as one world. This line of evolution is spoken of as the most gradual and therefore the least arduous of the seven courses; but though it is sometimes referred to in the books as “yielding to the temptation to become a god,” it is only in comparison with the sublime height of renunciation of the Nirmānakāya that it can be spoken of in this half-disparaging manner, for the Adept who chooses this course has indeed a glorious career before him, and though the path which he selects is not the shortest, it is nevertheless a very noble one.

Yet another group are the Nirmānakāyas—those who, declining all these easier methods, choose the shortest but steepest path to the heights which still lie before them. They form what is poetically termed the “guardian wall,” and, as the *Voice of the Silence* tells us, “protect the world from further and far greater misery and sorrow,” not indeed by warding off from it external evil influences but by devoting all their strength to the work of pouring down upon it a flood of spiritual force and assistance, without which it would assuredly be in far more hopeless case than now. Yet again there are those who remain even more directly in association with humanity and

choose the path which leads through the four stages of what we have called above the official period.

This then is the path which lies before us, the path which each one of us should be beginning to tread. Stupendous though its heights appear we should remember that they are attained but gradually and step by step, and that those who now stand near the summit once toiled in the mire of the valleys even as we are doing. Although this path may at first seem hard and toilsome, yet ever as we rise our footing becomes firmer and our outlook wider, and thus we find ourselves better able to help those who are climbing beside us.

Let no man therefore despair because he thinks the task too great for him; what man has done man can do, and just in proportion as we extend our aid to those whom we can help so will those who have already attained be able in their turn to help us. So from the lowest to the highest we who are treading the steps of the path are bound together by one long chain of mutual service, and none need feel neglected or alone, for though sometimes the lower flights of the great staircase may be wreathed in mist we know that it leads up to happier regions and to purer air where the light is always shining.