

Part 1: The Path and the Art of Living.

Introduction

The way or the path is a very universal metaphor that we often encounter in many arts of living, contemplative disciplines and arts of movement. In this article, we will take a look at what this metaphor can tell us and why it is so often used. We will first be looking at a number of fundamental meanings of the metaphor itself. After that, we will address what appears to be the core of what the metaphor refers to: the ever changing perception of reality of the practitioner on his or her path and the influence this change has on our lives.

Aspects of the metaphor of the path

What are the different meanings that lie in the metaphor of the path? How come this metaphor is so widespread? It is because the art of living and spirituality concern a development of our humanity in a certain direction. That is the first suggestion given to us by the idea of a path.

It turns out that the practice of the art of living or spiritual disciplines can help us to determine that direction and help us to further develop ourselves in that chosen direction.

But to what does that direction relate? People sometimes say that life is a journey on its own, regardless of whether or not we practice an art of living or follow a contemplative tradition. Are we not on our way from the cradle to the grave anyway? Of course, the spiritual traditions do not deny this, but they have another message, which is that there is another journey we can make as humans, a journey with a different beginning and end than our biologically determined journey through time. Depending on the way in which we deal with the things we experience in our lives, this journey can go in two directions:

A direction in which we become more and more gripped by harshness, short-sightedness and fear of life or:

A direction in which kindness and understanding, joy and wisdom of life increasingly determine our view on life.

The core of this message is that we do not have to completely leave the course and direction of this journey up to chance (or maybe not at all). It is possible to deal with our existence in such a way that the fundamental realities of life – birth, disease, old age, death, interaction with our environment, each other and ourselves – make us milder and more friendly instead of harsher, and do not make us bury our heads in the sand from fear, but make us more realistic and honest.

It is so important to develop ourselves in this manner because the degree of happiness we experience as a person is highly dependent on the way in which we interact with each other as people. If we are gripped by fear of life and view life short-sightedly, it will affect our surroundings much more negatively than when we interact kindly, friendly and empathetically with others. Practising an art of living or spiritual discipline can help you to develop yourself in that way.

This possible development has everything to do with the possibility that we, as people, have to influence our "perception of reality" and shape it as we go down the Path. This is because going down such a road or path and the things we encounter throughout this journey both offer a constantly changing perspective of our reality and with it, the possibility to handle things that occur during our lives differently.

Another aspect of the Path can thus be that there are different stages in the development along that Path, and that a certain degree of guidance is possible by someone who has been on that path for a longer amount of time: a guide or teacher. This person can make sure that we actually stay on the path and do not (permanently) stray from it.

Going down the path

The development towards kindness and wisdom of life has to do with the development of a fundamental attitude or mentality towards our life as a whole, towards life with all its fortune and misfortune, happiness and sadness. Not just towards life as we would like to see it.

Going down the path involves learning to create or allow a certain mental space, a fundamental 'generosity' or open mindedness, which gives our life more sense and coherence and which will enable us and our fellow men to experience our lives more "completely".

The belief that it is actually possible to create such an open space in our own existence and continue to develop ourselves in that direction is the inspiration for the art of living and the contemplative disciplines. Moreover, it turns out that with help from our teacher or guide, we are capable of overcoming obstacles on the Path and that despite adversity, we can still continue in the direction we have chosen. This way, we will in time gain more and more confidence and courage regarding our path and the things we can learn on it.

If we take enough time to go down this Path and take the time and opportunity to absorb the art of living or spiritual disciplines, it will eventually lead to the possibility of achieving or allowing a genuine change or transformation of ourselves. A change towards benevolence and wisdom, with a high degree of durability. It will essentially become easier to live as such and we will experience the positive effects of it more and more in our daily lives.

Interaction with many people will become easier and we can better deal with all those things we encounter on our path, be it favourable or unfavourable. This development is at the core of practising contemplative/spiritual disciplines and the art of life.

All disciplines of the contemplative and Art of Living traditions – the spiritual and physical exercises – are practised to give our fundamental humanity space and to cultivate it in our words and actions. And that is possible, although not on its own and not without effort.

Practising an Art of Living or a spiritual/contemplative discipline can help you face life in a more positive and constructive way, and it brings you into contact with your true self and others in a pleasant and direct manner. A contact from person to person, very pure, without any devices. You will notice that this direct interaction with your fellow man will make it much easier to deal with the life questions that interest you.

The sides of the path

The idea of the Path also contains the idea of a certain limitation. After all, a path has two sides or verges, bordering it on the left and right. This limitation refers to the exercises that come with the arts of life and which impose certain restrictions on us, a certain form of discipline that relates to the cultivation of our mind and actions.

With regard to the mind, it mostly concerns the development of insight or wisdom of life; with regard to actions, it concerns the cultivation of compassion or humanity.

Part 2: The Road and the Landscape.

The path as changing perception of reality

One of the aspects of the metaphor of the path mentioned above was that it involves a constantly changing perspective of the landscape. Of course, it is not just our perspective that changes. Changes also occur in the landscape itself, whether we are on the path or not. The landscape here is a metaphor for the events in our lives, the ever changing situations we find ourselves in. We are thus dealing with two types of variability: the (outer) variability of our concrete life situation and the (inner) variability of our shifting perspective of it.

What the spiritual traditions in particular deal with is that shifting perspective of our life situation. After all, that perspective determines how we experience the events in our lives, and that perspective is not set. The experience, as well as the way in which it shifts, is different for each person. If two people are involved in the same event, they each experience it in their own way. That is nothing new. We know all this from our daily experience, although we do not yet know how far-reaching this fact is from moment to moment in our lives.

If we now ask what exactly 'travels on the road' and constantly develops, we can say that it is our perception of reality. This term is a fundamental starting point of the contemplative or spiritual psychology. What makes the term 'perception of reality' so useful is that the word 'perception' highlights the subjective side of our experience, while the word 'reality' emphasises the objective side. The combination indicates that what we experience as real is subjective, but that it is experienced objectively.

In the final analysis, the reality we live in is basically the reality as we personally experience it. That reality is relative to ourselves, although we often lose sight of that fact in the practice of our lives. At that moment, we experience our situation as if it is not relative, but absolute, i.e. objective and independent from ourselves.

For many people – and that also includes philosophers and psychologists – the story ends here. They regard the unmistakable relativity of our perception of reality as a fact that cannot be changed. There lies a crucial difference with the spiritual traditions. These traditions not only acknowledge this relativity, but also proclaim that man possesses, and can develop, the capacity for discernment to fully discover and eliminate its effects. So for the spiritual traditions, this relativity is not an *absolute* fact that we should just accept, but a *real* fact that is characteristic of *the blinded, unenlightened person*. Many disciplines of the contemplative/spiritual life are thus aimed at developing a clear-headedness, that allows us to discover, experience and overcome the how and where of the relativity in our perception of reality. Acknowledging relativity thus leads to an incentive to follow a spiritual path.

Perception of reality on our life path

Let's try and make this 'perception of reality', a term that might still sound theoretical, somewhat more concrete through a number of examples. Let's look at it using a classic Dutch example. As children, most Dutch people believed in Sinterklaas and Zwarte Piet (a Dutch tradition where children receive presents on 5 December from a figure similar to Santa Clause). That resulted in a certain perception of reality surrounding 5 December. It permeated everything around us. Now this childlike perception of reality no longer exists for us, as we no longer believe in it. We are no longer impressed by this duo, as we came to the realisation that they are both people in costumes. Our understanding of what is real, what does and does not exist, has changed permanently and will never change back again. Those costumed people have a more realistic existence than Sint and Piet.

At least in this respect we have become somewhat more realistic, and that can be seen in our behaviour towards them, when we no longer play along.

Of course, the spiritual-psychological question is how many Sinterklaases and Zwarte Piets we metaphorically have. Maybe it is still 5 December for us every day, each with other but equally powerful illusions as the ones that played a role around 5 December in our childlike perception of reality: illusions surrounding birth, education, coexistence, disease, old age and death. And of course: illusions about ourselves. Even if we are scientifically educated psychologists, theologians or philosophers, it is no guarantee that we are not subjected to various illusions in our daily (and professional) lives. Illusions that determine our perception of reality, with all emotional responses and manners of action that occur as a result.

Of course the end of this development is nowhere in sight: what we now perceive as real will have dissolved some time later. At that point, there will be other aspects from which we can derive our sense of reality and of being oriented. The reality in which we now live from day to day is also relative to the way of experiencing that we have made our own. The problem is that it is hard for us to see where that relativity is exactly, and how far it reaches.

Perception of reality on the spiritual path

What is the importance of the example above, that illustrates the relativity of our perception of reality on our life path? It is that this relativity is also addressed on the spiritual path. That is why the spiritual traditions are interested in the development of our perception of reality.

What matters is that our perception of reality can develop in two directions:

First, a direction that causes us to mentally wither. A direction that makes us harsh and defensive; that increases short-sightedness and fear of life, thereby causing endless suffering to ourselves and our fellow men.

Secondly, an opposing direction, characterised by an inner bloom, the fruits of which are expressed in our words and actions and form a blessing to ourselves and our surroundings. When we head in that direction, we are on the road of a spiritual life.

In spiritual terms, this concerns a conversion of our mundane perception of reality to an enlightened perception of reality. This conversion is also described as a transformation from a materialistic life vision to a spiritual vision.

Reading this, you might think that we would have to leave one behind in order to reach the other. But we are actually not really going anywhere. It is therefore important to know what is meant by the transformation of our relative reality to an absolute reality. It means that the reality we perceive, which initially seemed to be an absolute reality to us, turns out to be a relative reality. The practice of spiritual disciplines is aimed at accomplishing that change.

However, no matter what terms we use for the mental conversion that spiritual traditions are interested in, they always refer to a similar change, one that leads to the blooming of our fundamental humanity. The image of subsequent stages, which the metaphor of the road suggests, thus indicates a succession of perceptions of reality, which continue to carry us further away from a development that simply chokes our joy of life, compassion and clear-headedness.

Of course, such a spiritual development should not be underestimated. After all, our perception of reality involves all aspects of our lives. Our emotional life, our realm of thoughts, our expectations and memories, our spiritual values, our self-image, our image of mankind, our world view and our external living conditions.

And because we experience our perception of reality as realistic, letting go of it seems like we are letting go of reality itself, like a form of mental suicide, which can only lead to our downfall or psychosis. We are therefore often inclined to change our external circumstances instead of the way we experience them. We would, for example, be inclined to destroy or obtain the objects of our

aggression or greed, rather than give up our aggression and greed. To us that seems to be the only way of living our lives. But it can lead to us holding on to certain way of experiencing things for years, even if, in our minds, we know better and understand that this way of experiencing things harms us or others. We often lack the power or motivation to let go of a destructive perception of reality, particularly because we cannot recognise its illusory, relative nature.

As stated before, the spiritual traditions primarily concern a transformation of our perception of reality and not a transformation of reality. They are both independent from one another and related to each other. This means the following. The more transparent our perspective of (our) reality becomes, the more mental freedom we have to deal with these circumstances. This creates space to face our living conditions in a less compulsive and more detached manner. This detachment creates possibilities. What kind of possibilities? Possibilities to change our reality for the common good. That is how this detachment manifests itself in the world as involvement. The less we need to hold on to everything, the more we can mean to the world.

The development that the Road refers to is ultimately one that leads to an unconditional wisdom of life and compassion; a form of wisdom and humanity. For ourselves, our children and the world we all live in.

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