

The Path

by Reginald W. Machell

c. 1895, oil and gesso, 6'2" w x 7'5" h

The Theosophical Society, Pasadena, California

THE PATH is the way by which the human soul must pass in its evolution to full spiritual self-consciousness. The supreme condition is suggested in this work by the great figure whose head in the upper triangle is lost in the glory of the Sun above, and whose feet are in the lower triangle in the waters of Space, symbolizing Spirit and Matter. His wings fill the middle region representing the motion or pulsation of cosmic life, while within the octagon are displayed the various planes of consciousness through which humanity must rise to attain perfect Manhood.

At the top is a winged Isis, the Mother or Oversoul, whose wings veil the face of the Supreme from those below. There is a circle dimly seen of celestial figures who hail with joy the triumph of a new initiate, one who has reached to the heart of the Supreme. From that point he looks back with compassion upon all who are still wandering below and turns to go down again to their help as a Saviour. Below him is the red ring of the guardians who strike down those who have not the "password," symbolized by the white flame floating over the head of the purified aspirant. Two children, representing purity, pass up unchallenged. In the center of the picture is a warrior who has slain the dragon of illusion, the dragon of the lower self, and is now prepared to cross the gulf by using the body of the dragon as his bridge (for we rise on steps made of conquered weaknesses, the slain dragon of the lower nature).

On one side two women climb, one helped by the other whose robe is white and whose flame burns bright as she helps her weaker sister. Near them a man climbs from the darkness; he has moneybags hung at his belt but no flame above his head, and already the spear of a guardian of the fire is poised above him ready to strike the unworthy in his hour of triumph. Not far off is a bard whose flame is veiled by a red cloud (passion) and who lies prone, struck down by a guardian's spear; but as he lies dying, a ray from the heart of the Supreme reaches him as a promise of future triumph in a later life.

On the other side is a student of magic, following the light from a crown (ambition) held aloft by a floating figure who has led him to the edge of the precipice over which for him there is no bridge; he holds his book of ritual and thinks the light of the dazzling crown comes from the Supreme, but the chasm awaits its victim. By his side his faithful follower falls unnoticed by him, but a ray from the heart of the Supreme falls upon her also, the reward of selfless devotion, even in a bad cause.

Lower still in the underworld, a child stands beneath the wings of the foster-mother (material Nature) and receives the equipment of the Knight, symbols of the power of the Soul, the sword of power, the spear of will, the helmet of knowledge, and the coat of mail, the links of which are made of past experiences.

It is said in an ancient book "The Path is one for all, the means to reach the goal must vary with the Pilgrims."
— R.W.M.

[Inscribed on a wooden disk attached to the lower left corner is the following verse:]

If Wisdom thou wouldst gain,
Be Strong, Be Bold, Be Merciful.
But when thou hast attained
Then let Compassion speak.
Renounce the Goal,
Return to Earth
A Saviour of mankind.

Reginald Willoughby Machell (1854–1927) was elected a member of the Royal Society of British Artists in 1893, having exhibited at the Royal Academy. He had met H. P. Blavatsky and joined The Theosophical Society in 1888, after which his paintings began to reflect the mystical and symbolic themes inspired by theosophy. In 1900 he joined the staff of the Society's international headquarters, then at Point Loma, California, where he gave of his considerable talents in art, drama, and literature until his death.