

BRIAN BOCKING

'If you meet the Buddha on the map . . .':
The Notion of Mapping Spiritual Paths

This chapter is about the notion of mapping spiritual paths, my thesis being that spiritual maps (maps of spiritual paths) are different in kind from ordinary maps. Another way of putting this is to say that a spiritual map is a map which differs from ordinary maps in the ways indicated below. Reading spiritual maps as if they were ordinary maps I would characterise as MAP or 'Mysticism for Academic Purposes'. MAP-ping is an interesting intellectual activity which is sometimes confused with mysticism itself.

THE GNAT AND THE WIND

In book three of the *Mathnavī* of Jalālu'ddin Rūmī, there is the story of a gnat appealing to Solomon for justice against the Wind whose strength oppresses him. Solomon agrees to hear the case provided that both parties are present, for 'until both litigants come into the presence, the truth does not come to light before the judge'. As soon as the Wind arrives at court, the gnat is blown away. Commenting on this parable, Rūmī says, 'Even such is the seeker of the Court of God: when God comes, the seeker is naughted' (Nicholson 1930: 258-60).

The gnat and the Wind cannot be present together, for where one is, the other is not. Even Solomon cannot do them both justice. Their coexistence cannot be mapped.

The Zen saying from which the title of this paper is derived runs, 'If you meet the Buddha on the road - kill him!' This means, do not be obstructed in spiritual progress by your limited conceptions of what Buddhism is. The spiritual teachings of many traditions include reminders that the true nature of things cannot be grasped by the intellect (that is, mapped). Buddhist teachings have an explicit concern with the relationship between the ordinary effort

to map reality (what we call scientific accounts of the nature of the world) and the rather different activity of producing and following spiritual maps (spiritual teachings). The Buddha applies to his own teachings the simile of a raft: once the river is crossed, the raft is abandoned. The Buddha's teachings are to be used for a particular purpose and then completely discarded, unlike ordinary theories about the nature of the world, which aim to be enduring. The raft analogy reminds the practitioner that Buddhist concepts (such as non-self) are useful, like a raft, but just as reaching dry land renders the raft redundant, so the (actual) attainment of non-self implies the extinction of conceptions of both self and non-self. In Rūmī's Sufi example, merging with God extinguishes thoughts of both self and God (the gnat is blown away entirely).

ORDINARY MAPS

An ordinary map is an accurate record or representation of a terrain. For example, Marco Polo goes to China, and produces a map which others can follow if they want to go there. In practice, however, an ordinary map is a very limited device because terrain changes, and maps are typically produced in the past to be used in the future.

Also, an ordinary map is static – it is a 'snapshot' of a terrain at one point in time. A map also necessarily shows some features but not others: the road, for example, but not where the bandits are today (or where the bandits are, but not where your vehicle is going to break down). To be a sufficient guide, an ordinary map needs updating by methods which include:

- 1 collecting additional information before departure (creating a new map);
- 2 acquiring supplementary information along the way;
- 3 taking as a guide one who has already made the journey;
- 4 relying on instinct (homing pigeons do not need maps).

Sophisticated 'ordinary' maps, such as the television weather map, are constantly updated in a variety of ways. Nevertheless such maps remain 'snapshots'. They are always out of date, and their predictive value is not 100 per cent.

SPIRITUAL MAPS

Spiritual maps, unlike ordinary maps, are evaluative and hierarchical. An ordinary map may show that all roads lead to Rome but it does not thereby imply that one should go to Rome. A spiritual map shows where we are now, and where we should be; such a map contains an imperative to transcend the present

location; the 'places' on the map embody an implicit hierarchy. Samsara and nirvana on the Buddhist spiritual map are not like North and South on an ordinary map; there is in the Buddhist case an implicit instruction or exhortation to move from one to the other.

Because spiritual maps are hierarchical, they incorporate their own redundancy. A spiritual map which charts the transformation of lust into divine love, or egotism into union with the Lord, or samsara into nirvana, apparently showing them both on the same 'map', is actually a projection of the spiritual path as seen from the start of the journey. The teaching addressed to the spiritual seeker at the start of the journey is not a description of the way things really are.

When we travel from London to Lhasa, London does not cease to exist because we have reached Lhasa. Both remain on the map. A spiritual journey is something different, for 'when the light dawned the darkness vanished' (Nicholson 1930: 259). The attainment of nirvana in Buddhism implies the complete cessation of samsara – samsara is no longer on the map. Union with God means that separation from God is no longer a feature of the terrain. A spiritual map, in other words, represents a process of refinement and transformation, rather than a straightforward journey from A to B. At each stage, were it to be mapped, the map of the remaining journey would become different.

Buddhist thought makes this self-negating characteristic of spiritual maps explicit in acknowledging that the Buddha provided a useful account of the spiritual path in the form of conventional Buddhist teachings about non-self, impermanence, the five skandhas, Mount Sumeru, etc. out of his compassion for living beings, while at the same time asserting that this map should not be grasped as a description of how things really are. It is a teaching by the Buddha which deals skilfully with the ignorant projections of unenlightened minds. To illustrate this point, a parable is told in the Lotus Sutra of a magic city, conjured up by a guide when travellers in a desert begin to lose heart on their journey. Encouraged by the appearance of the illusory city, the travellers hasten forward, thereby making progress on the real journey. The city is there on the map, but it is not there in reality; the travellers are making a journey, but it is not the journey they think they are making. The real journey is unmapped, because the travellers would never embark on the journey if they understood what it really entailed. In the same way, the gnat would never have asked Solomon for justice, if it had understood the real nature of the Wind.

The self-negating character of spiritual maps implies that a spiritual map is good for only a very tiny part of the spiritual journey – perhaps no more than the initial satisfaction of intellectual curiosity and the settling of doubts. As soon as any spiritual progress is made, the map changes, as the Lotus Sutra parable suggests. The temporary character of spiritual maps underlines the need for a personal guide on the spiritual path, a need which is emphasised in all spiritual traditions but which tends to be overlooked in purely intellectual MAP-ping, for all sorts of post-Enlightenment reasons.

FROM 'A' TO 'B'

In summary, a spiritual map may appear to be a representation of a journey from A to B, but the map of the journey, being a projection tailored by the teacher to the limited standpoint of the disciple at A, does not represent the real spiritual journey, though it has to be thoroughly convincing from the standpoint of A. Even the description of 'A' (e.g. that we are unenlightened) is an adaptation to the standpoint of one at A. With each step on the spiritual path perception changes and the map that initiated this particular step becomes redundant. This means that the spiritual journey is largely uncharted after the first step, which is why a spiritual guide is essential.

The goal of the spiritual path may appear on the map as 'B' (e.g. enlightenment) but the true reality of B cannot be represented on the same map as A. It is conventionally represented as 'B', to accommodate the standpoint of A, but 'B' on the map is not what B really is.

In Rūmī's parable, A is the gnat (the self), and B is the Wind (God). In theory, with the wisdom of Solomon, they can be brought together in harmony (occupying the same map), but once the two are actually brought together (once the self begins to approach God) it becomes clear that gnat and Wind, ego and God, are mutually exclusive. 'In this place of presence', says Rūmī, 'all minds are lost beyond control; when the pen reaches this point, it breaks'.

REFERENCES

- Nicholson, R. A. (1982). *The Mathnawī of Jalālu'ddin Rūmī*, vol. 4. Cambridge: Gibb Memorial Trust.