

## Book II: Indian Thought

### I. The Religious Background

#### 1. THE ARYANS

When they divided the Man, into how many parts did they apportion him?  
What do they call his mouth, his two arms and thighs and feet?

His mouth became the Brahmin; his arms were made into the Kshatriya; his  
thighs the Vaishyas; and from his feet the Shudras were born.

Verses on the creation of the world  
from the Primal Man, *Rig Veda* 10.90: 11-12

*Karma* [i.e. action] which springs from the mind, from speech, and from the  
body, produces either evil or good results; by *karma* are caused the  
conditions of men, the highest, the middling, and the lowest.

*The Laws of Manu* 12.3.

In the popular imagination of the West, India is a timeless land, its society dominated for ages beyond memory by the Caste system, and its thought formed from the beginning by the belief in *karma* and reincarnation. But though these institutions are indeed old, we know something about their origins. There was no Caste before the Aryan migration into northwest India, in the middle of the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BCE. The Aryans were an Indo-European people speaking Sanskrit, a language closely related to Greek and Latin. The invaders of Greece and Italy about this same time originated among the same Indo-Europeans, whose homeland was somewhere in the Eurasian steppes.

The invaders did not bring with them the Caste system, or the beliefs in reincarnation and *karma*, that we associate with Indian culture. These developed in response to the situation they faced in their newly conquered lands. Caste arose after the invasion, rooted in class-divisions among the Aryans themselves as well as the division between the Aryans and the people they conquered. The indigenous peoples were physically very different from the Aryans, and the usual class divisions resulting from conquest were exacerbated by racial prejudice and fear of miscegenation. The hymns in the *Rig Veda*, our earliest source (ca. 1200 BCE), often rejoice in their gods' destruction of the indigenous people, especially in their use of vastly superior weapons,

speaks of these people as godless, or equates them with the Asuras (demons).<sup>1</sup> The early parts of the *Vedas* are as intensely nationalistic, and as pitiless toward those not part of the authors' religious culture, as the *Old Testament*. Like the Hebrews, the invaders had very different religious beliefs than did the indigenous peoples, not because it was monotheistic, but because of its promise of a far more favorable afterlife. Four Castes came to be distinguished. The three Aryan Castes were the Brahmins, priests and religious teachers, the Kshatriyas, aristocrats and warriors, and the Vaishyas, farmers, traders and merchants, craftsmen, owners of property. These were said to "twice-born" because of the initiation their young men underwent when they began their study of the *Vedas*, the Aryan sacred scriptures, under a Brahmin master. From the *Vedas* they learned their duties (*dharma*) in life, both the general moral duties that all men have and those specific to their caste. Women neither studied nor participated in the religious life, and their initiation occurred at marriage. Once initiated, if they observed their duties they could expect an afterlife in the Heaven of the Fathers, where they would feast with the gods forever. The non-Aryans, the 'Shudras', were the conquered. They were not initiated, nor even permitted to study the *Vedas*. According to their own traditional beliefs, they could expect nothing better in the afterlife than a half-conscious existence in the underworld, like that traditionally expected in Mesopotamia. In theory, they would have been day laborers without property, serfs and the like, and subservient to the twice-born. In fact, probably the upper classes of the non-Aryan groups were absorbed into the Kshatriyas and Vaishyas, and a pre-existing class system prepared people for the Caste arrangements later imposed. By the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE there were also Untouchables, who seem to have been, originally, an aboriginal hunting-gathering group with its own language, shunned by Aryans and non-Aryans alike. Criminals and other Outcastes also became Untouchable, and the group eventually constituted nearly a quarter of the population. In theory one could not leave one's Caste, and a male could not marry into a higher Caste, though lower Caste women were available to higher Caste males. If there was no other option one was permitted the work of a lower Caste, and the Shudras came to be allowed to practice handicrafts.<sup>2</sup> This is the way it is *supposed* to be, of course, and there has always been illegitimate social and occupational mobility. The five major divisions are supplemented by detailed classifications covering all the important occupations, religious systems, races, languages, and whatever else might mark one as a member of a group, particularly if its members conceive themselves to have peculiar obligations not binding on other groups, or has any tendency to endogamy. Wherever social mobility

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<sup>1</sup>For instance, *Rig Veda* III 34.9; IV 5.14; I 31.6, 42; II 20.6-8; IV 17.10-11; I 100.18.

<sup>2</sup>*Laws of Manu* 10.80, 10.100.

threatened to destroy the boundaries between the conquered and the conqueror, barriers were erected.<sup>3</sup>

Old customs and religious practices that distinguished Aryans from non-Aryans assumed enormous importance to the conquerors, due to the profound fear of losing racial and cultural identity through mixture with the more numerous indigenous Indians. The priestly Shamans who took advantage of the situation developed an unusually powerful religious establishment, organizing the initiations they conducted into a mandatory educational institution. The conservative hysteria apparent in such works as the *Laws of Manu* emphasized the authority of the teachers and preservers of the sacred literature, and the precise observance of traditional laws and customs. A similar phenomenon can be observed in the development of Jewish culture after the Dispersion, for the Jews also had a salvation in prospect not available to the gentiles, but the Jews, of course, were not conquerors, but conquered, and so evolved, not into a Caste society, but into a single Caste isolated within an alien culture.

The Caste system is not apparent in the earliest written records of Indian culture in the *Rig Veda* I–IX (perhaps as early as 1200 BCE), and neither is the doctrine of *karma* and reincarnation. According to this view every human being leads a series of lives, experiencing rebirth in a new body after each death. One's fortunes in life, and in rebirth, are determined by good and bad *karma*, and good or bad *karma* is acquired by adherence to or neglect of one's *dharma*, or duties, whether they be duties all men must fulfill, or duties specific to one's Caste. The doctrine rules out a beginning to one's past lives, for those without previous lives would have no accumulated *karma*, so that nothing could happen to them. Believers in the doctrine will, if they are reasonable, accept what happens in life as their due rather than the fault of God or their neighbor, and attend to the future rather than dwelling on the past. For although people must work through the bad *karma* they have already accumulated, they need not acquire any more, and may get good *karma* to counterbalance the bad. Improved behavior will inevitably improve one's lot, and improvement is always possible, for although the karmic consequences of an act are inevitable, one's response to these consequences, though not uninfluenced by habit and character, remain ultimately within the individual's power.<sup>4</sup>

But whatever beneficial influence these doctrines might have on one's striving for a better life, it is

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<sup>3</sup>"Caste" is from a Portuguese word for *varna*, the Indian term, meaning "color." The finer divisions are called *jati*. In theory, even occupation is determined at birth, which would have been reasonable, of course, when a person learned his occupation from his parents. For the whole paragraph, see Koller (1982) 69-73.

<sup>4</sup>This account of the beneficial effects of belief in *karma* and reincarnation on one's life depends on Zimmer (1951), who clearly intends to refute the usual accusation that such doctrines sap the will to improve oneself or one's life.

clear that they also support the Caste system and work against social change. They justify one's place in the system as the fitting outcome of past lives, and produce acquiescence in inequalities as they direct one's efforts to the fulfillment of duties defined within the existing social order. It might reasonably be objected that it is the ideal social order, not the actual one, that defines one's duties, so that considerable room is left for criticism of actual practice in terms of the ideal, but still, since it forbids any attempt to leave one's caste or evade its assigned duties, or to gain power or privilege not traditional for one's caste, no room is left for the revision of the ideal conception of the social order. Though, as we shall see, the doctrine of *karma* and reincarnation seem to have originated outside the Brahmanic priesthood, they were made to serve the Caste system very early, and as taught in the classical Hindu texts are inseparable from it.

## 2. THE RIG VEDA

I will extol the most heroic Indra who with his might forced earth and sky  
asunder;  
Who hath filled all with width as man's upholder, surpassing floods and  
rivers in his greatness.  
Surya [the Sun] is he: throughout the wide expanses shall Indra turn him,  
swift as car-wheels, hither,  
Like a stream resting not but ever active: he has destroyed with light the  
black-hued darkness.

*Rig Veda* 10.89 vv. 1-2<sup>5</sup>

For our purposes the most important of the sacred books recognized by the orthodox among the Indians are the *Samhitas* and the *Upanishads*, the first and fourth parts of the *Vedas*, and the *Bhagavad-Gita*, contained in the national epic poem, the *Mahabharata*, Book VI.

The date of the existing rendition of the Vedic hymns collected in the *Samhitas*, the first part of each *Veda*, is conjectural, though all the poetry can be placed before 600 BCE. There are a number of different strata—perhaps the earliest material, in the *Rig Veda*, goes back as far as 1200 BCE. There are four *Vedas*, the *Rig*, *Yajur*, *Sama* and *Atharva*. The *Samhitas* in the first three agree in language and much of their content. The *Rig Veda* contains 1,028 hymns praising various gods, divided into ten books. The tenth book, which, judging from its doctrine and language, was composed some centuries later than the rest, is generally regarded as the

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<sup>5</sup>Translated by R. T. H. Griffith, in Radhakrishnan (1957) 5.

first document of Indian philosophy.<sup>6</sup>

The oldest collections of Vedic hymns were originally the property of one or another of the ancient families of priests attached to the great Aryan clans.<sup>7</sup> They had supposedly been revealed to members of these clans, and their ritual power was jealously guarded. In particular, the Shudras, the lowest, non-Aryan caste, were forbidden to study the *Vedas*, and the early *Dharmashastras* command that a Shudra who has overheard the recitation of a Vedic hymn should have his ears filled with molten lead.<sup>8</sup> Such protection was demanded by the supposed power of the hymns within Vedic ritual, which could accomplish all the aims of life, and by the wealth to be gained by chanting them for a fee.

The religion of the *Rig Veda* is polytheistic, and its world-view is strongly reminiscent of that of the eastern Mediterranean in the second millennium BCE. The gods are nature-gods, gods of the wind (*Vayu*), of fire (*Agni*, whose chief function is to carry the sacrifice to the gods), of the earth, sun (*Surya*), moon, stars and planets, and they are described in terms of their roles in the natural world, largely without stories involving interpersonal relationships among them—these are myths of the second generation, like those of the early Greeks. The universe was divided into heaven, where the gods dwelt with the souls of the righteous dead, the earth, and the region below the earth, including a hell for the spirits of the unrighteous. There is no sign as yet of any belief in transmigration or multiple lives. Despite the indefinite multiplicity of the gods, the particular god whose praises are sung in any particular hymn is often magnified to the source of all things. The key to understanding this is the fact that each god represents some aspect of the powers of the One breath-spirit of the Universe. The Aryans identified the soul with the breath, and so with air or fire. *Vata*, the wind-god, is “the *atman*” (breath or self) “of the gods, the germ of this world.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>A.L. Basham (1989) 7-8. Generally, when a Western source mentions a *Veda* with no further specification, it is the *Samhita* that is meant.

<sup>7</sup>They mention horses and chariots frequently, which entered India with the Aryans, and cities and tigers not at all, so are clearly the property of the Aryans rather than the indigenous Indus Valley people.

<sup>8</sup>Gautama, *Institutes of the Sacred Law* 12-4. (Sacred Books of the East II, Part I, p. 236.) Cited in Zimmer (1951) 59; for the whole paragraph, see Zimmer (1951) 58-60.

<sup>9</sup>*Rig Veda* X 168.4. (Radhakrishnan (1957) 15) There are three words for soul in the *Rig Veda*: *atman* and *asu* indicate the breath, while *manas* indicates the seat of thought and emotion. Both seem to be located in the heart, or at least the chest. In later science it receives the information gathered by each of the five senses, like Aristotle’s common sense. Perhaps it is to be compared to the Greek *thumos*, the hot breath responsible for desire and purpose that dwells in the chest. Note that Aristotle’s common sense is located in the heart. *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* 2.3 suggests that Brahman is two-fold, formed and unformed. The formed Brahman is the Sun, source of heat and light, a mortal, stationary, and actual thing. The unformed Brahman is the wind, which is moving, unformed, not yet any actual thing, and immortal.

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### Main Divisions of Indian Religious Literature

*Sruti* (considered of divine origin, revealed to the *rshi* who introduced it)

*Vedas*: *Rig Veda* – *Yajur Veda* – *Sama Veda* – *Atharva Veda* Each Veda has four parts:

*Samhita*: *Rig* – a collection of old hymns (*mantras*)

*Yajur* – a collection of *mantras* to be uttered in sacrifices

*Sama* – a collection of stanzas from *Rig*, with melodies

*Atharva* – a collection of spells and incantations

*Brahmanas* — later prose commentaries on the meaning of the rituals, ethical rules. *Aitareya Brahmana*. The *Satapatha Brahmana* is lengthy and summarizes the thought of other *Brahmanas*. (7<sup>th</sup> BCE)

*Aranyakas* — “Forest Treatises”, interpret rituals in terms of meditative practice. *Brihadaranyaka* is the oldest. (None for the *Atharva Veda*)

*Upanishads* — Speculative treatises, sometimes called *Vedanta*. 108 are canonical, the 13 earliest are the “Principal Upanishads.”

*Bhagavad Gita* contained in the *Mahabharata* (below)

*Kalpa Sutras* — considered appendices to the *Vedas*

*Srauva* and *Sulva Sutras* — formalizing Brahmanic rites, the latter with geometrical content as it describes how to lay out the holy area in which the rites take place.

*Grhya Sutras* — formalizing household rites, including the 40 *sanskaras*.

*Dharma Sutras* — legal and ethical material, 7<sup>th</sup> to 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries BCE

*Smriti* (considered of human origin)

*Itihasas* — Histories including the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*.

*Puranas* — Mythology

*Dharma shastras* — Legal and ethical codes, so *Manu Smriti*, or “Laws of Manu” developed from *Dharma Sutras*, put into verse and expanded.

*Agamas* and *Tantras* — Sectarian writings: *Vaishnava*, *Shiva* and *Shakti* the chief groups.

*Darshanas* — Speculative, the *Sutras* of the six Orthodox Schools, which are the official founding documents of the schools:

*Brahma Sutras* — Vedanta

*Mimamsa Sutras*

*Nyaya Sutras*

*Vaishesika Sutras*

*Sankhya Sutras*

*Yoga Sutras*

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The identification of Indra, a young storm-god and god of battles, as the founder of the present world order establishes a connection to later Mesopotamia and early Greece. In the Mesopotamian tale, the storm-god Marduk is commissioned by the younger gods to slay the dragon Tiamat, the leader of the elder gods who would keep all things in stillness and darkness, and then constructs the world from her body—so in the Indian tale Indra is commissioned by Varuna and the other gods to slay their elder, Vritra, also a dragon, and, slicing open her belly and making heaven and earth of her upper and lower half, Indra looses the seven streams of life-bearing waters that give birth to all the things of this world.<sup>10</sup> Indra (and later Vishnu, who takes his place), like the Babylonian Marduk, is asked to do the work by the father of the younger gods, an omniscient, but forgiving high god of justice, Varuna, who is identified as a god of the sea. This figure was once the ruler of the gods, but becomes relatively unimportant once Indra appears on the scene.<sup>11</sup> The view is the same one we find in the Middle east—the storm-god forces the waters above and below earth apart, creating a bubble of air in the primordial depths of the fertile and life-giving waters, and thus, with the growth of land at the lower

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<sup>10</sup>This is the oldest creation myth in the *Rig Veda*. See Koller (1982) 29, Basham (1989) 12-13. Just as in the Mesopotamian myths, the younger gods are associated with the salt waters of the sea, and the elder gods with the fresh waters which they had kept up in the mountains, and which Indra now released for the uses of men. The primal life force must be pressed into the service of this cosmos. In later retelling of the myth Indra incurs the bad *karma* of Brahminicide by slaying the dragon, and ways are found to spread his immense guilt throughout creation so that it will be bearable (it can be moved around, but will have its effect on *someone*). So the creation is an injustice all creatures must suffer for. Compare Anaximander, and note the ascetics' alliance later with the gods lying behind this world, and their opposition to Indra and his creation. (For these later accounts, see Wendy O'Flaherty, trans. and editor, *Hindu Myths* (New York: Penguin Books, 1975), selections 24, from the *Rig Veda*, and 25 and 26 from the *Mahabharata*.)

<sup>11</sup>*Rig Veda* X.89.1-2, cited at the beginning of this section (Radakrishnan (1957) 5). (A similar passage sets up the same scheme with Vishnu as the god in I.154 (Radakrishnan (1957) 8.) Indra is also said to have destroyed the darkness with his light. A god of light sometimes stands in for the wind god as separator of heaven and earth (for instance, as Shu does in one Egyptian cosmogony), and generally the separator creates lights, the Sun and Moon, after he separates heaven and earth. Here, as among the Egyptians, the rising of the Sun every morning is viewed as a repetition of the first creation. Indra-Vishnu is, like Shamash in Mesopotamia, and his Greek analogue, Apollo, associated with the Sun. *Rig Veda* I.185.5-6 (Radakrishana (1957) 12) reminds us especially of Sumerian conceptions, mentioning as it does the navel of the world, where Heaven and Earth are joined, the one the abode of the gods, the other of men. These conceptions were perhaps indigenous to the Indus valley civilization. A different, but related view, is presented in the *Chandogya Upanishad* 3.19.1-4, where it is suggested that at first nothing was, then something came to be and developed into an egg, out of which the world hatched, the bottom and top parts of the shell forming the earth and sky—something like this occurs in the Orphic cosmology in Greece. In another, presumably later section of this composite work (6.2.1-3) it is argued in a very different vein that the world was just being at first, for nothing could arise from non-being. Rather, the world was just one being, which then procreated itself and became many. (This seems to foreshadow Samkhya thought.) For the general picture, see Hirianna (1940) 10-13. Varuna punished sinners, as the guardian of the cosmic law, with disease and incarceration in “the house of clay” below the earth. Varuna may be modeled on Ahura-Mazda, for he is pictured as a civilized king, with a palace, spies, and messengers. The god Dyaus, a sky god apparently equivalent to Zeus and Tyr, has only four hymns addressed to him, and drops out of sight in later thought. (Basham, *Origins...*, 11-12) (It must be emphasized here how much such remarks as these simplify the mythological literature. Hindu mythology is enormously complex, and continued to develop and grow well into the medieval period. Here we pick up on a few themes only, which seem to bear on later philosophical thought, or its origins.)

surface of the bubble, the cosmos is established.<sup>12</sup>

Indra is the universal breath as storm-wind. Elsewhere breath in another form, Vak, the god of speech, is said to hold together all existence, while breathing a strong breath like the wind.<sup>13</sup> It is not entirely clear how speech accomplishes what it does here, but it is probably because of its power of command and persuasion. In any case the equation of speech with the wind, the breath of the universe, suggests that breath was thought of as mind in part because of the association of breath with speech, and so with cognition, judgment, and persuasive power. There may also be a connection here to Iranian tendencies of thought that make the outer fire of the heavens the soul-stuff, and look forward to a reunion of the individual soul with the great mass of fire that forms the soul of the world. So in one place it is hinted that souls soar up to the sun, Surya, on their death.<sup>14</sup>

The most prominent representation of the universal breath in the later *Vedas* is Prajapati, who was the first of things, “he who gives breath, who gives strength, whose command all the gods wait upon.”<sup>15</sup> Prajapati is life-breath, which provides strength and speech, the power of command. His name means the “Father God.” He is born of *rita*, the law of the cosmos, and it is he who reduces the primal chaos into order by entering into things with form and name.<sup>16</sup> For a while, in the later Vedic hymns and the *Brahmanas*, he seems to have been considered the highest God, but is replaced by Brahman in the *Upanishads*.

In the *Brahmanas*, Prajapati is sometimes said to be self-created:

Verily, in the beginning, Prajapati alone was here. He desired, “May I exist, may I be generated.” He wearied himself and performed fervid devotions: from him thus wearied and

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<sup>12</sup>Indra strengthened himself for his task by drinking three great draughts of soma (*Zoroastrian haoma*). The entire ninth book of the *Rig Veda* is devoted to Soma, a god personifying a drink prepared from a plant with hallucinogenic powers. The drink prepared today by those few Brahmins who try to keep up the old rituals is mild stuff made from a sort of wild rhubarb. The original soma plant perhaps grew only in central Asia, from whence the Aryans came, outside India. Soma was consumed only during sacrifices, and apparently produced hallucinations of superhuman power, and visions of visiting gods. Basham (1989) 14.

<sup>13</sup>*Rig Veda* X.125.8. (Radhakrishnan (1957) 16). Note the parallel to air in Anaximenes, which holds together the body as its soul, and the universe as a whole. Koller (1982) 47-51 makes too much of the hymn, which he cites in full, seeing in it a reference to Idealist views that would ground all existence in a primordial consciousness which is of its essence self-illuminating and naturally knowable, and therefore capable of speaking and being spoken of, and so of understanding and being understood. What is is what is knowable, and what is knowable can be *said*. This is reading later speculation illicitly back into the early poems, however much such interpretations are common among Indian scholars.

<sup>14</sup>*Rig Veda* I.50.10. (Radhakrishnan (1957) 13).

<sup>15</sup>*Rig Veda* X.121.2. (Radhakrishnan (1957) 24). Hiriyanna (1940) 14-15.

<sup>16</sup>*Taittiriya Brahmana* 2.2.7.1. See Kalupahana (1975), 7.

heated, the three worlds were created—the earth, the air and the sky.<sup>17</sup>

In another place a sacrificial oblation is identified with exhalation of Yajña (the god of sacrifice), and is likewise said to be self-made, and “self-creating” occurs as an epithet for the creator God in many other places in the *Brahmanas*.<sup>18</sup> One of the four false theories about causation listed in early Buddhist works is the view that something can be the cause of itself. In a variant on this, we find in *Rig Veda* X (900 BCE) the Aditi hymn,<sup>19</sup> in which Aditi is the mother of Daksha, and Daksha of Aditi, and in another hymn Purusha is born of Viraj, and Viraj of Purusha.<sup>20</sup>

Brahman, though he plays a large role in later speculations, does not occur in the Vedic Hymns, unless one counts the use of the word *brahman* for the sacrificial food offering, sacrificial chants and magical formulas. Only in the *Satapatha Brahmana* does Brahman appear. It

created the Gods, and having created them, made them ascend these worlds, Agni this world, Vayu the air, and Surya the sky... Then the Brahman went up to the sphere beyond. Having gone up to the sphere beyond, it considered, “How can I descend again into these worlds?” It then descended again by means of these two, form and name.<sup>21</sup>

Brahman in the *Brahmanas* is the spirit of the magical and the sacrificial act that created the world, and to make Brahman the source of things is to say that ritual, sacrificial and magical, lies behind all things. Like Prajapati, Brahman is found in all things and is the source of their form and name. As for the second descent into the world, perhaps Brahman first created the elements of the natural world, the kinds of stuff (by bringing about their separation in a bubble in the primal waters?), and then entered into their midst, forming and shaping particular things that could be named from this stuff.

These hymns assume a dualism of gods (*daevas*), who uphold the cosmic order, and demons (*asuras*), who attempt to undermine it. This dualism is placed at the center of religious speculation in Iranian thought, and although it plays a peripheral role in India, it is an important part of Hindu mythology and popular beliefs.

<sup>17</sup>*Satapatha Brahmana* 11.5.8.1. The heating of the breath might have been conceived to produce a bubble, as in boiling water, in the endless waters that were alone present in the beginning. In that case, Prajapati creates himself in making himself evident in separation from the waters.

<sup>18</sup>*Satapatha Brahmana* 4.1.1.22; 13.7.1.1.

<sup>19</sup>*Rig Veda* 10.72.

<sup>20</sup>*Rig Veda* 10.90.

<sup>21</sup>*Satapatha Brahmana*

One cosmogonic tale in the *Mahabharata* speaks of these two groups cooperating in the creation of the world. To bring the cosmos into being a great world-mountain is sunk into the sea, which is filled with milk, and the world-serpent wraps itself around the mountain many times. The Daevas (the bright, younger gods) and the Asuras (the dark, elder gods) then take hold of the head and tail, respectively, and, pulling it back and forth, spin the mountain like an agitator in a churn, stirring the sea into a froth from which the moon, cattle, and everything else in the world is generated, including, no doubt, lands at the edge, accumulating like curds. Finally the milk of the sea, stirred too much, generates a poison and turns to salt water (rather like whey, perhaps), and Shiva, to save creation, takes the poison into his throat and holds it there, neither swallowing it so as to suffer its full effects, nor releasing it to destroy the new world order. As a result he turns blue.<sup>22</sup> Perhaps we could say that the opposites, in their eternal tug of war, driving the natural order, are represented by the Devas and Asuras. But, as we shall see, the vision of the eternal struggle of opposites, though present in Indian thought, was not developed in the same way as it was in Greek speculation. Moreover, a moment of reflection shows that the writer of the tale, though possibly influenced by some naturalistic account, is very far from the beginnings of Greek scientific speculation. The vortex of Anaximander is a serious scientific proposal—the cosmic churn, on the other hand, is more interested in being picturesque. It is irrelevant to explanation of observable phenomena. The author wants to entertain, to pass on wisdom, but he has no interest in scientific explanation. Indian mythology is lush, dramatic and humorous, a product of the artistically creative mind. It is not the spare, literal stuff of people obsessed with getting the *truth* down.

### 3. SKEPTICISM AND THE *HYMN OF CREATION*

One and another say: “There is no Indra. Who hath beheld him?”

*Rig Veda* 8.89 v.3.<sup>23</sup>

Who for ten milch-kine will purchase from me this Indra who is mine?  
When he has slain Vritra let the buyer give him back to me.

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<sup>22</sup>*Mahabharata* I. (Buck (1973) 5-6.) It does not look like this churning is homologous to the Ionian vortex, since it goes back and forth, has apparently come to an end at the present time, and functions only to produce land, as butter emerges from the milk, leaving the sea as whey.

<sup>23</sup>Radhadrishnan (1952) 34.

*Rig Veda* 4.24 v. 10<sup>24</sup>

The so-called “Hymn of Creation” (ca. 900 BCE), a much discussed proto–philosophical document, is best understood in terms of this mythological background. An emergent skepticism concerning Indra and the role of the gods in creation is reflected in the hymn, and some attempt is made at a new style of literal cosmology presenting the truth contained in the old myths plain and unadorned.

The hymn begins:

Then even nothingness was not, nor existence,  
 There was no air then, nor the heavens beyond it.  
 Who covered it? Where was it? In whose keeping?  
 Was there then cosmic water, in depths unfathomable?<sup>25</sup>

The poet’s opening lines seem to mean that the things that exist in the present world order could not have been said to be in the beginning, nor even not to be, for even though they were not, it was not as if they could be but somehow had died or failed to grow into being. The third line raises the question, perhaps, whether their existence was to be found hidden away in their causes as potential existence. The natural order that supports the possibility of their being, involving the bubble of air and light in the midst of the waters, was not yet. Perhaps that natural order was hidden away as potential in vast generative waters.

Then there was neither death nor immortality;  
 Nor was there then the touch of night or day.  
 The One breathed windlessly and self-sustaining.  
 There was that one then, and there was no other.

There was neither death nor life, that is, none of the things that exist now could be said to live, or to have died. What has never been is not dead, after all, and nothing had yet been. If non-being is conceived in the same way as death, then one can see why the poet denied in the first line that there was any non-being before this world order for the things of this world order. The possibility of a thing’s non-being, like the possibility of death, would depend on the thing’s having been at some time.<sup>26</sup>

So what was going on in the very beginning? It seems something must have been going on, so that we

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<sup>24</sup>Radhakrishnan (1952) 35.

<sup>25</sup>*Rig Veda* X.129. The translation is taken from Basham (1989) 23, but follows O’Flaherty (1981) instead in some crucial places. See Koller (1982) 37-38.

<sup>26</sup>Perhaps, so that we can refer to it and say of it that now it is not. What has never been cannot even be talked about, and so cannot be said not to be.

can account for the present state of things, but it needs to be as little as possible, so that as little as possible is left unexplained by the earliest state of things. The poet's suggestions embody the notion prevalent in the Near East, and in the earliest known Greek speculation—the original state of things consisted of an immense expanse of water, with nothing to differentiate one part of it from another. The world arose when light (and so day and night) and wind (and so air and the sky beyond it) arose, making a space in the water for a world to form. A vast expanse of water with no worlds, no bubbles of air, in it, breathes windlessly. Perhaps it swells and contracts without any air arising in it, but however that may be it was, but not in the way that things are now, with breath-souls shaping them. Nothing was happening yet. It *must* breathe to live and be, but it breathes without change or structure.

At first there was only darkness wrapped in darkness,  
All this was only water, with no distinguishing sign.<sup>27</sup>  
That One which came to be, enclosed in nothing,  
Arose at last, born of the power of heat.

That which came to be (as opposed to that which always was) is surely the seed of the present-day world order. The nothing that encloses it might be the gap or void introduced in the expanse of waters, or is perhaps the darkness and the water without distinguishing signs, the first thing arising in the gap due to heat. Perhaps the process in question is revealed in miniature in boiling water, in which heat gives rise to a void in the water, a bubble containing breath-soul. (Perhaps something on this order is the mythic ancestor of the Pythagorean One arising in the unlimited—after all, the One is associated with fire—but, of course, the Pythagoreans transformed the story into an abstract, mathematical one.)

In the beginning desire descended upon it—  
That was the primal seed of mind.<sup>28</sup>

(Here we can compare some other passages from the tenth book of the *Rig Veda*:

What time the mighty waters came, containing the  
universal germ, producing Agni (fire).

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<sup>27</sup>O'Flaherty (1981), translates "unilluminated" as "with no distinguishing sign." O'Flaherty's translation is more literal than Basham's.

<sup>28</sup>O'Flaherty has "Seed of mind" in place of "seed born of mind." Does this seed arise from mind, or is Basham's translation wrong, so that desire is rather the first seed from which mind or thought later arises? The second view would seem to fit with the commonplace notion (expressed, for instance, in Heraclitus) that thought and awareness are, not mere breath, but fire, that is, superheated breath, whereas desire is breath at a lower temperature.

Thence sprang the Gods' one spirit into being.<sup>29</sup>

and

The waters, they received the germ primeval wherein  
the gods were gathered all together.  
It rested upon the Unborn's navel, that One  
wherein abide all things existing.

Ye will not find him who produced these creatures:  
another thing hath risen up among you.)<sup>30</sup>

The poet is still speaking about the world forming in the bubble of air, and desire and thought are the natural function of the heated air, which is the One, the world-order, at this phase. Desire gives rise to thought, as its heat increases. The physical correlate of thought is likely brightest fire, light. (The presence of desire and thought represent the victory of the later gods, with their noisy activity, over the elder generation, resting in mere potentiality and darkness.) Our poem goes on:

The sages who have searched their hearts with wisdom,  
Know that which is kin to that which is not.

This sums it up. The sages have discovered that which is kin to being (potentiality for being) in the not-being of the dark, undifferentiated, primeval waters.<sup>31</sup>

And they have stretched their cord across the void,  
And know what was above and what below.  
There were seed placers, there were powers.  
Below was impulse, and above was giving forth.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>29</sup>*Rig Veda* X 121.7, translation from Ralph T.H. Griffith, *Extracts from the Hymns of the Rig Veda, Translated with a Popular Commentary* (3d ed.; Benares: E.J. Lazarus & Co., 1920-26). "Spirit" here seems to translated the same word as "mind" above in Basham's translation.

<sup>30</sup>*Rig Veda* X 82.6-7, translation from Griffith, *op. cit.*

<sup>31</sup>That what is could not have arisen from nothing is asserted in the *Chandogya Upanishad* 6.2.1-3, and that it *did* arise from non-being is asserted at 3.19.1 in the same work. The author of the Vedic hymn here seems to go with the latter opinion, though his "nothing," if I have interpreted him rightly, is actually something after all. The interpretation of the poem is my own, and arises from an attempt to see if it squares with the ordinary Middle Eastern account of the origins of the world that we know to be represented elsewhere in the *Vedas*. On my reading the first two stanzas suggest that the Upanishadic and Buddhist tendency to see absolute reality as something transcending even the most basic oppositions has a very early basis. The later view is that whatever fundamental reality underlies individuals cannot be characterized by opposites such as being and non-being, which are applicable to individuals alone. (Koller (1982) 37-38 seems to agree with this element of my reading of the poem.)

<sup>32</sup>Following O'Flaherty here.

The poet explains the beginnings of a more immediate potentiality for the production of the world as the creation of seeds. The seeds are given forth above, in the bubble of air, but the impulse and power giving rise to them is below, in the waters, perhaps as they are moved by desire, the primal heat. What has happened to the myth of Indra and Vritra here? The mythology has been restated in literalist terms, and the suggestion has been broached that an explanation of the world can be evolved in terms of natural processes rather than the actions of the gods. The beginning of natural science takes the same shape here that it did in Thales, and the poem provides our earliest evidence of a naturalistic trend emerging in the 10<sup>th</sup> century BCE and after in India.

But after all, who knows, and who can say  
Whence it all came, and how creation happened?  
The Gods themselves are later than creation,  
So who knows truly whence it has arisen?

And here we have a Xenophanean codicil. Knowledge of the beginning of the world could only be gained by experience of the event, so that we must rely here on testimony from the gods. Indeed, the poet goes beyond Xenophanes, suggesting that even the highest god, Prajapati, may not know how the world arose:

Whence all creation had its origin,  
He, whether he fashioned it or whether he did not,  
He who surveys it all from the highest heaven,  
He knows—or maybe even he does not.

The God in the highest heaven controls things at present, and he *may* have created them, but whether he did or not, he might still be ignorant of the origins of this world-order. If he did create the world, perhaps he has forgotten, or it may be his act of creation was unconscious. If he did not, then he may not have been a witness to it, particularly since he may have arisen in the act of creation. The poet does not deny that there must be an explanation of the world-order here, but he embraces skepticism on the question exactly what the explanation is, because only an eye-witness could settle it.<sup>33</sup>

As for the possible ignorance of the One, the Indian tradition does not show the gods the unqualified

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<sup>33</sup>Other instances of such skepticism in the *Rig Veda* are to be found in Radhakrishnan (1957) 34-36. *Rig Veda* I.185.1, III.54.5-6, express doubts like those here. VIII.89.3, X.86.1 and II.12 all tell us that there were some who doubted Indra's existence. I.164.4, 17-18, asks how a boneless One could support or give rise to the bony, that is, how something unlike this natural world could give rise to it, and then again, questions where the life and spirit of the earth is, and asks rhetorically who could answer such queries. These questions are fundamentally naturalistic, suggesting that any explanation of the beginning of things must be in terms of observable natural processes. The skeptical attitude in the "Hymn of Creation" is more primitive, for it is not rooted in any a priori notion as to how an explanation must go, but in the simple empiricism of one who does not take anything that is not witnessed to be knowable.

respect they typically received in the West. The Indian attitude is something like that of the Neoplatonists toward lower Daimones. The gods are not the creators of the world, and they may be ignorant of some matters. There is even something of a tradition of ridicule of the gods, rooted in two opposed tendencies, the skeptical tendency represented here, reinforced by the problem of evil and a suspicion that the Brahminic teachings are too self-serving to be fully credible,<sup>34</sup> and a tendency, even on the part of the Brahmins themselves, to regard the ascetic as superior to the Gods. This tendency carries over into Buddhism, which treats the gods very much like rich, long-lived neighbors who think rather too much of themselves, and suggests that Brahman, though he was born and will die, like all things, supposes that he is eternal and made this world simply because he was the first thing to arise in the present world order. All of this disrespect is rooted in the expectation that the ascetic could escape this world and the rule of the gods by merging with the One which underlies them. The gods themselves, who hope to achieve happiness by staying always on top, are deluded about the sufficiency of their powers and the eternity of their bliss, and so inferior to the sage in his ascetic wisdom.

#### 4. LAW (*RITA*) AND DHARMA

Law has varied food that strengthens; thought of law  
removes transgressions.

The praise-hymn of law, arousing, glowing, has opened  
the deaf ears of the living.

Firm-seated are law's foundations; in its fair form  
are many splendid beauties.

By holy law long lasting food they bring us; by holy  
law have cows come to our worship.

Fixing law he <Indra> too upholds it: swift moves the  
might of law and wins the booty.

To law belong the vast deep earth and the heavens:  
milch kine supreme, to law their milk they render.

*Rig Veda* IV.23.8-10<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup>So *Rig Veda* IX.112, and VII.103, the former suggesting with no respect at all that the Brahmins rejoice in a worshiper for the same reason that a medicine man rejoices in an accident, the latter likening the Brahmins gathered round a vessel at their rites to frogs congregating round a pool to honor the beginning of the rains. (Radhakrishnan (1957) 35-36) This last image appears satiric enough, but it is interpreted more seriously by the Hindus—all nature makes sacrifice in gratitude, just as the Brahmins do.

<sup>35</sup>Radhakrishnan (1957) 25.

Another set of hymns approaches the problem how the world arises in a somewhat different way, which brings us back to social issues. For example:

From fervor kindled to its height law (*rita*) and  
 Truth were born,<sup>36</sup>  
 Thence was night produced, and thence the billowy  
 flood, the sea arose.<sup>37</sup>  
 From that same billowy flood of sea the year was  
 afterwards produced,  
 Ordainer of the days <and> nights, Lord of all who  
 close the eye.<sup>38</sup>  
 Dhatar, the great creator, then formed in due order  
 the sun and moon,  
 He formed in order heaven and earth, the regions  
 of the air, and light.<sup>39</sup>

*Rita*, the Law that governs the world, and Truth (conceived as conformity with the Law), were originally upheld by Varuna, the father of the gods, very much as Ma'at, Law or Truth, was guarded by Osiris in Egypt. *Rita* was conceived to specify the obligations of men and the structure of the social order, including the place of gods and men in the world, and, by prescribing and limiting the actions of the gods who represented the great natural forces, it also served in the place of natural law. In later thought this Law was called *dharma*.

How does the poet think the Law arose? Probably as a natural concomitant of the new world generated by heat within the primal waters. Heat led to the opening up of a space in which the breath dwelt alone, and the world formed in that space, informed by Law. So the Law is an expression of the organizing function of the world soul, the breath of the world.

The Law here strengthens and instructs the one who contemplates it, just as contemplation of the Law of Yahweh strengthened the Hebrew. More to the point, its social and ethical content upheld the social order

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<sup>36</sup>Truth is perhaps to be conceived as adherence to the law. Before there is a standard, there is no meeting the standard.

<sup>37</sup>Perhaps we are to conceive the night as the void produced in the waters, and the billowy sea as the resultant lower surface of the waters in the void.

<sup>38</sup>Perhaps this is a reference to the beginning of time, for now there was change, as the billows of the sea swelled and became calm again, say. Before this, all was water, and all continued water, and nothing else could be said about it.

<sup>39</sup>*Rig Veda* X.190.1-3 (Radhakrishnan (1957) 25-26). In the *Bhradaranyaka Upanishad* 3.6, a disciple is reproved for questioning too much when she asks for the roots of Brahman, for this is a divinity about whom no further questions should be asked. The solution is difficult to accept if no explanation is forthcoming as to *why* no further questions can be asked. They seem to make sense, and so surely have answers, do they not?

and guaranteed the Brahmin his offerings by enforcing participation in his ceremonies, many of which, involving marriage, childbirth, and the like, were unavoidable if one was to be a member of society at all. Indeed, the social order on earth was continuous with the larger order of the universe, and the performance of the great Brahminic sacrifices were as necessary to keep the world going as the lesser ceremonies were to maintaining the social order.<sup>40</sup>

The inherent conservatism of the Brahminic conception of natural law is apparent when we compare it to early Greek views. For the Greeks the cosmic law did not specify any particular social order or particular actions, but only that the social order and one's actions grant appropriate privileges and power to everyone with the power to benefit the community (and so also to make trouble for it). Thus it left room for social protest, and the alteration of institutions. There is none of this in the Indian account. The law of the cosmos does not rest on the balance to be maintained between opposites. Rather it insists on a specific hierarchic social order, with the Brahmins at the top.

### 5. SACRIFICE AND *PURUSHA*, THE PRIMEVAL MAN

Come let me offer myself in living things, and all living things in myself.  
Then, having offered himself in all living things and all living things in himself, he acquired greatness, self-radiance, and sovereignty.

Brahma speaking in *Shatapatha Brahmana* 13.7.1.1.1<sup>41</sup>

The earliest sign of the existence of the four Castes is found in a hymn in Book Ten of the *Rig Veda*, the “Hymn of the Primeval Man” (*Purushasukta*), composed about, 900 BCE, the same time as the “Hymn of Creation.”<sup>42</sup> The primal man, who was at first the only thing in existence, *Purusha*, felt lonely, split itself in two, and so produced a woman, *Viraj*. The two together produced *Purusha* (probably not a second *Purusha*, but the first over again, who is in this way self-created), and the other gods. These decided to make a sacrifice, and

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<sup>40</sup>The sacrifices were viewed as a form of magic, inevitably bringing about their intended result as long as they were properly performed. They were not a matter of seeking the aid of a god, but in fact could overcome even the gods if done correctly, though it is to be noted that even a very small mistake might vitiate or even reverse the effect of the sacrifice. The word *Rita*, “the course of things,” was used to indicate a sacrifice or rite, as well as the natural law behind all things.

<sup>41</sup>Translated in Kohler (1982) 42.

<sup>42</sup>*Rig Veda* 10.90. (Koller and Koller (1991) 7-8.) *Bhradaranyaka Upanishad* 1.4. See Basham (1989) 24-26.

chose the *Purusha* “born at the beginning” as a suitable sacrifice, and thus created the world. Brahmin was made from the man’s mouth, Kshatriya from his arms, Vaishya from his thighs, and Shudra from his feet. The moon arose from his mind, his eye became the sun, Indra and Agni came from his mouth, and the wind from breath, and so on. The seasons were the clarified butter, the fuel and the oblation. The sacrifice is an image both of creation and the ongoing processes of nature.

The *Brahmanas*, composed after the poems of the *Vedas* and before the *Upanishads*, perhaps 900-600 BCE, follow the “Hymn of the Primeval Man”, explaining that since the world originated in a great sacrifice, continual repetitions of this sacrifice are needed to keep it working.<sup>43</sup> Indeed, the gods themselves depend on the sacrifices for their continued existence. Thus the Brahmins, in charge of the sacrifices, claimed the highest status. In a way, they were above even the gods. The *Vedas* and *Brahmanas* lay out in great detail exactly how each of the sacrifices is to be performed supporting its particular aspect of nature, and these injunctions were taken as self-validating, and absolute dictates of duty, *dharma*, to be fulfilled by the Brahmins. The performance of the ritual was part of the eternal order of things and inalterable. Since the utterances to be made in the sacrifices were also specified, the Vedic hymns and formulae, as well as the language they were in, Sanskrit, were viewed as part of the eternal order of things as well, and the formulae and the language were jealously guarded secrets of the Brahmins. In addition to the Brahmin sacrifices there were the daily householder’s sacrifices, for Agni was a household deity dwelling in the hearth, like Hestia among the Greeks. There were also a number of seasonal communal sacrifices of comparative simplicity that could be performed by ordinary tribesmen, as long as they had gone through the necessary initiations. But where the Brahmin gained real power in society was not in these affairs, but in private sacrifices for the rich, often involving a large number of animals, for private goals. Such sacrifices, when conducted by a king, went through many stages and could last as long as a year. The royal sacrifices included a consecration ceremony upon his inauguration, a rejuvenation ceremony to be performed later in his reign, and the horse sacrifice, an enormously expensive affair that guaranteed one of going to a heaven after death, and insured prosperity for the kingdom, and, of course, a great deal of prestige for the king who was able to afford such expense. A sacred horse was allowed to wander about for a year, and a band of warriors followed it. If it left the king’s dominions, the warriors would demand tribute

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<sup>43</sup>The *Brahmanas* first invest the *mantras* of the *Vedas*, recited at the sacrifices, with the mantle of divine revelation. Sometimes they speak of them as eternal and self-subsistent, the thought followed up in *Purva Mimamsa*, and sometimes, especially in the later *Brahmanas*, as the creations of Prajapati, head of the pantheon. The hymns are said to be learned by some special insight, not composed. Reasoning in the *Brahmanas* is generally by analogy to the sacrifices. So, when it is required to be explained why a boy’s seed does not impregnate, an analogy is made to the fore-offerings of ghee, which is, like water, not biologically productive. (Jayatilleke (1963) 29-30.)

and homage from the local rulers, and give battle if they did not receive it. So the sacrifice betrayed a certain confidence in the subordination of one's neighbors. These royal sacrifices were great public occasions, involving holidays and festivals for the whole population.<sup>44</sup>

Westerners have tended to view the sacrifice metaphysics of the *Brahmanas* as self-serving, priestly ideology, and there can be no doubt that there is a good deal in that view of the thing, but there is a more legitimate religious side as well.<sup>45</sup> The Indian tradition might be viewed as beginning in the same place as the Mediterranean tradition, with the story of the younger gods' overcoming of the oldest of the gods, Indra-Marduk's destruction of Vritra-Tiamat, the dark and passive one in whom the fertile source of creation resides, and their construction of the world from the god's body. But whereas the Mediterranean took the younger gods as the heroes of the story, the active protagonists of the contemporary world order, the Indians, more subtly, took the oldest god, the source of all things, as the hero. The fertile source of nature, the ultimate reality behind the world, is the real source of things, not the rulers of this world-order, all of whose power is, in the end, rooted in the one they supposedly overcame, and who are, in reality, only manifestations of the one they destroyed. So, in effect, Indra drops out of the picture completely, and is replaced by Purusha, who both creates and sacrifices himself to make the world. It is probably not too anachronistic to view his self-creation and self-sacrifice metaphysically. He creates himself by producing a second, moving from the primitive situation in which no one thing is distinguished from any other to the distinction of individuals. Only as something distinct from others, here, from his wife, can he come to be *something*. He creates the world by cutting himself, in his newly created form, into a myriad pieces, dividing into opposed things of every sort. He sacrifices his integral being and his self-awareness to produce this variegated world, everywhere at odds with itself, each fragment of it with only a limited awareness of the whole, and a sense of itself opposed to the whole. Still, the poem tells us, three-fourths of him remains uninvolved in this world, and so he never really destroys himself, but remains intact. In the course of the sacrificial ritual, the Brahmin, if he does things right, will, through reenacting the original sacrifice, become aware of his connection to the whole, through a sacrifice of self corresponding to that of Purusha. He will lose the sharp awareness of his individuality in the actions of the sacrifice, come to an awareness of himself as a mere part of the sacrifice. Aside from the intrinsic value of the sense of connectedness and freedom from self here, it is perhaps reasonable that the Brahmin should make this

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<sup>44</sup>Basham (1989) 30-35.

<sup>45</sup>The following comes from my reflection on Koller (1982) 38-42, which, following the Indian historical tradition, ignores the ideological content of the doctrine entirely, and focuses on the religious meaning.

sacrifice in gratitude for the sacrifice made by Purusha to create him.<sup>46</sup> The escape from the narrowness of self becomes the basic aim of Indian religion.

The Vedic texts and the *Brahmanas*, then, reflect something more than the politics of a civilized priesthood. They speak of personal salvation, the sort of thing we have already seen associated with the Shamanic tradition in Greece, and that salvation is something other than attainment to the Heaven of the Fathers. But the merger of the two approaches to religion was incomplete. There was real friction between the two, and it may not be too much to say that the element of personal salvation in the sacrificial image of the world of the *Brahmanas* was introduced into the priestly ideology in defensive response to a powerful opposition to the Brahmin sacrifices, an opposition rooted in the expectation of a personal salvation attained outside the conventional religious order. We shall examine this opposition next.

## 6. THE UPANISHADS

Now, take these rivers. They flow towards the ocean and, upon reaching it, merge into the ocean and lose their name and visible appearance; one simply calls it the ocean. In just the same way, these sixteen parts of the person who is the perceiver proceed towards the person, and upon reaching him, merge into that person, losing their names and visible appearances; one simply calls it the person. He then becomes partless and immortal. . . This is everything I know about this highest *brahman*, higher than which there is nothing.

*Prashna Upanishad* 6.5<sup>47</sup>

There are one hundred and eight canonical *Upanishads*, but only thirteen are early, and these are called the principal *Upanishads*. The earliest, the *Brihadaranyaka* and *Chandogya Upanishads*, were composed in the 7<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE, and the rest somewhat later, but before, say 500 BCE, though the *Maitri Upanishad* is perhaps no earlier than 300 BCE.<sup>48</sup> The name “*Upanishad*” seems to have come from a phrase meaning “sitting by

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<sup>46</sup>In the beginning the identification of the Brahmin with the highest god, who lies behind all things, no doubt had the less presentable motive of giving him magical power, even over the gods. Compare the theory of magic in Neo-Platonism, which held that all things are one, and it is because of the magician’s consequent identity with them that the ritual act of the magician can affect the things he targets in his magic.

<sup>47</sup>Translation of all passages in the *Upanishads* are from Olivelle (1996) unless otherwise noted.

<sup>48</sup>Of the later *Upanishads* some repeat the doctrines of the the principal *Upanishads*, while others give Shaivite, Shakta, Yoga, and Vaishnavite doctrines. Some were composed as late as the 14th or 15th century. These works are usually attached as appendices to the *Aranyakas*, which are concerned with the symbolism of the mythology of the sacrifice that we looked at briefly in the *Brahmanas*.

devotedly,” suggesting that these were instructions given by teachers at private meetings with their students. Later they came to be called *Vedanta*, meaning that which comes at the end of the *Vedas*, or that toward which the *Vedas* tend.

At the time the principal *Upanishads* were composed the Aryan tribesmen had settled down into civilized monarchic states, occupying the great triangle formed by the Ganges, the Indus, and the Narmada Rivers of northern India.<sup>49</sup> The Caste system had become well established, though the status of Shudras could now be considerable, and some even became kings. The growth of urban culture with export economies, and perpetual warfare, which came to an end only with the Empire of Chandragupta about 325 BCE, led to the pessimism and world-denial characteristic of a period of contending states, the same tendencies found in the Greece of Plato, and the China of Chuang Tzu. The *Upanishads* are the work of ascetics living in the great forests to escape the growing civilization, and they advise withdrawal from a world full of struggle, frustration, and delusive pleasure.

The Brahmin religion formed part of what the ascetics wanted to escape, and well it might, if we believe all the accusations directed against it. The caste system reinforced the monopolistic claims of the hereditary priesthood to performance of the rites, as did the progressive complication of the sacrifices to the point where a householder could no longer perform them without help. The recitation of the Vedic hymns at the sacrifices had to be very exact to achieve the desired effect, and since the hymns were, of course, maintained by the Brahmins in a private oral tradition, one could not dispense with a Brahmin to chant them.<sup>50</sup> The priests assigned the *Vedas* divine origins, and even held them to be older than, and the basis for, the physical world, further raising their own prestige. The insistence of the *Upanishads* that only meditation and asceticism, not sacrifices, lead to freedom from pain clearly undermines these questionable practices, though the

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The *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, “The Highest Aranyaka” exhibits for us the one literature evolving out of the other. The interpretation of the *Upanishads* and Vedic hymns in Indian sources, such as Shankara’s famous commentary on the *Upanishads*, is confused by the Orthodox view that the entire body of literature represents but one revealed truth stated from different viewpoints. The early date of the principle *Upanishads* is assured by their influence on Buddhist thought. For the date of the *Maitri Upanishad*, see 7.8-9, which clearly refers to the Buddhists (Jayatilleke (1963) 65-68).

<sup>49</sup>The scale is larger, but these rivers make up a fertile crescent of sorts, just as the Tigris and Euphrates do, surrounded by desert and mountains. Here as elsewhere things begin in the river valleys, spreading to the rainlands only later.

<sup>50</sup>As a matter of fact, the text of the *Vedas* were transmitted orally right down to the 18<sup>th</sup> century, when in the 1780’s some Brahmins in Calcutta were persuaded to recite the *Rig-Veda* for Westerners. A number of other versions were then collected from all over India, and it was found that the text was almost exactly the same in the other recitation-traditions. This is especially remarkable since the reciters had little idea what their words meant, since its language was 3000 years old, and intelligible only to one trained in classical Sanskrit. In fact, the earliest discussion of the Vedic hymns, the gloss of Yaska, had already lost the precise meanings of many words. The hymns were preserved for their power, their holy sound. Basham (1989) 6-7, 9.

documents we have made a sort of peace with the traditional system, and accept the authority of the *Vedas* and the *Brahmanas*.<sup>51</sup>

The asceticism of the *Upanishads*, together with the more secular Yoga movement, probably developed from shamanistic practices such as those employed by certain *munis*, who, according to the *Rig-Veda*, worshiped the wild storm god of the mountains, Rudra (a form of Shiva).<sup>52</sup> After a long training involving the use of hallucinogens, they would be accepted by the god, and taught his secrets. These *munis* flew through the air, and were “clothed in mind,” which, suggestive as the phrase may seem to be, probably means only that they went about naked. The *Upanishads* sometimes refers to ascetics in general as *munis*, and the Buddha was later called “Shakyamuni,” the *muni* of the Shakya clan. The group might conceivably have been non-Aryan in its origins, but its practices are surely descended from those of Central Asian Shamanism. They aimed, initially, to accumulate *tapas*, a supernormal power that developed in a man as a direct result of ascetic practices, such as fasting and holding painful postures for long periods of time. No doubt the power was at first thought to come from a god or spirit-guide whose favor the Shaman gained by self-mortification, but the view reflected in the *Upanishads* was that asceticism produced the powers of itself. The preparation of the priest for his ritual was originally a matter of guarding oneself from harm by contact with the god’s powerful mana, or avoiding insult to the divine. But purification through fasting, celibacy, vigils and the like, was now seen as means to an accumulation of power for the performance of the ritual. The ultimate root of things is not the activity of the gods, nor, as the *Brahmanas* would have it, the power of sacrificial ritual in its own right, but the power to be gained by austerities.

The chief figures in this ascetic reformation of the 8<sup>th</sup> to the 4<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE, those in the *Upanishads*, Gautama Buddha, and most of the other anti-Brahminical leaders we know about, were members of the Aryan Kshatriya caste. The Brahmin religion had become oppressive to the twice-born, and the revolt against it, as was to be expected, was led by those with some power and intellectual independence, the secular nobility.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>51</sup>The *Mundaka Upanishad*, typically, identifies knowledge of the *Vedas* as “lower knowledge”, “that by which one grasps the imperishable” as higher knowledge (1.1.4-5), and criticizes the pursuit of what can be had by sacrifice and merits, following the lower knowledge (1.2). Only rebirth in the heavens is gained thus, and even then one eventually dies again and is reborn into lower worlds. (1.2.10)

<sup>52</sup>*Rig-Veda* X.136. Basham (1989) 16.

<sup>53</sup>It has been suggested that the ascetic and meditative practices lying behind the *Upanishads*, and all later Indian religion, may have been present among the native descendants of the aboriginal Indus Valley civilization (ca. 2700-1700 BCE), and alien to the Aryan invaders from the North. An image of Shiva in an early form perhaps appears on three Indus Valley seals, in a difficult posture later used in Yoga. If the asceticism of later Indian religion was present in the Indus civilization before the Aryans arrived, we can only

The Aryan Shamanistic tradition would scarcely have been entirely suborned by the Brahmin priesthood. Those Shamans that were not absorbed into the state cults, pushed to the margins by more powerful families, or reacting against the Brahmin defense of cultural and racial purity, would have felt some antipathy to the public religion, and there may have been divisions within the public religion itself. At no point in India does one find the tightly organized priesthood, or the degree of hostility to speculation, that we find among Christians in Classical and Medieval times, so there was room for dissidents to develop their own views and institutions. Moreover, the rather individualistic Shamanistic religion preceding the state cults surely survived in something like its original form as an extra-governmental institution, providing services for individuals. Such residual Shamanism could claim equal antiquity with the Brahmin religion, and assert its own authority, and it thrived on independent speculation and idiosyncratic, private fervor. Those in the tradition might naturally have been disturbed by the Brahmin sacrifices intended to gain individual prosperity in life and translation to the Heaven of the Fathers at death. Such sacrifices, unlike the public rituals aiming at fertility, victory in warfare, the welfare of the king, and the like, intruded on the private Shaman's customer base, and may have seemed shallow, materialistic, and grasping, drawing people away from more adequate spiritual ideals.

There are many parallels between the earliest forms of the *Upanishads'* doctrine and Iranian religion. Most notably, the earliest reports of the revelation of secret doctrines tell us not only the great truth that one's self is the world-stuff, with its associated discussion of reincarnation, but also of a funeral ceremony built around cremation for the attainment of heaven. Such a funeral was the mark of Zoroastrianism in Iran. Moreover, Zoroastrianism was originally a proselytizing religion that criticized the established priests and the slaying of cattle in sacrifice. In much it coincides with later Hinduism. Nonetheless the basic drive of the new doctrines of the Kshatriyas in the *Upanishads* is antithetical to Zoroastrian doctrine, and it is significant that in the generational conflict among the gods between Asuras and Daevas the Hindus and Zoroastrians took opposite sides. Zoroastrian and Upanishadic speculation may be rooted in a common background of protest,

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speculate what beliefs lay behind it. Certainly they would not have been later notions about reincarnation, though a Shamanistic background of some sort might be supposed. Perhaps a union was desired with the breath-Spirit that animates the universe. The religious beliefs of the Middle East could have supported such a practice, and some form of breath control, as later in Yoga, might have seemed to answer to the purpose. See, in particular, Zimmer (1957). Much earlier, Archibald Gough, in the first chapter of his *Philosophy of the Upanishads and the Ancient Indian Metaphysics* (London: Truebner, 1882), argued that the doctrine of transmigration came from the pre-Aryan tradition. But all this is very speculative, and it seems best by far to follow the evidence of the texts, and assume that the practices and doctrines of the *Upanishads* developed without significant input from the indigenous people among the twice-born. Moreover, the aim of merging with the source of things is present in Greek thought, as is the doctrine of *karma* and transmigration, and so it seems reasonable to trace these back to the central Asian Shamanistic tradition lying behind both Orphism and the *Upanishads*, rather than independent local traditions.

and it may be that Zoroastrian missionaries laid part of the groundwork of protest within which Upanishadic thought developed, but in their developed forms they represent two very different world views.

### 7. KARMA AND TRANSMIGRATION

This knowledge has never before been in the possession of a Brahmin. Nevertheless, I shall disclose it to you, Gautama, lest you or an ancestor of yours cause me harm. Besides, who can refuse a man who speaks like that?

*Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 6.2.8*

The Kshatriya Jaivali, speaking to the Brahmin Gautama, after he has asked for instruction.

“Yajñavalkya . . . when a man has died, and his speech disappears into fire, his breath into the wind, his sight into the sun, his mind into the moon, his hearing into the quarters, his physical body into the earth, his self (*atman*) into space, the hair of his body into plants, the hair of his head into trees, and his blood and semen into water—what then happens to that person?” Yajñavalkya replied: “My friend, we cannot talk about this in public. Take my hand, Artabhaga: let’s go and discuss this in private.” So they left and talked about it. And what did they talk about?—They talked about nothing except action (*karma*). And what did they praise?—They praised nothing except action. Yajñavalkya told him: ‘A man turns into something good by good action, and into something bad by bad action.’ Thereupon Jaratkarava Artabhaga fell silent.

*Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 3.2.13.*

The doctrines of *karma* and transmigration began their lives in secret. The earliest references are in the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*. The sage Yajñavalkya is being questioned in public debate by another sage, and he answers, until he is asked where a man is after he dies. This he refuses to answer in public, the two go off together, and the doctrine of *karma* and reincarnation is revealed in private.<sup>54</sup> Later in the work, Yajñavalkya tells King Janaka openly about the new doctrine:

There is the following verse: “A man who’s attached goes with his action, to that very place to which his mind and character cling. Reaching [out to] the end of his action, or whatever he has done in this world—from that world he returns back to this world, back to action.” That is the course of the man who desires. . . Now, a man who does not desire—who is without

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<sup>54</sup>*Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 3.2.* Perhaps among the hostile Brahmins some care was necessary to conceal one’s views, while things were more favorable at the King’s court among the Kshatriya

desires, who is freed from desires, whose desires are fulfilled, whose only desire is his self—his vital functions do not depart. Brahman he is and to Brahman he goes.<sup>55</sup>

A person who dies may go to a heaven, then, but if he has unfinished business here on earth, and is attached to earthly aims when he dies, he will return to this world, just as, in folklore everywhere, a spirit will be unwilling to pass on to the next world if it has urgent unfinished business in this world, and so hangs around here as a ghost. So it is one's attachment to action or freedom from it that determines one's afterlife, not the sacrifices of the Brahmins. Asceticism and virtue is required to attain freedom from this world, not magic.

Another text by a different author in the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* relates how a Brahmin's son, Shvetaketu, was questioned by a Kshatriya chieftain, Pravahana Jaivali, when he approached him looking for largesse. The Kshatriya demanded to know where a person goes when he dies, how it is that the heavens are not filled up with souls (clearly the intention is that the souls in the heavens are reborn here, making room for more), and how to attain to the heavens. The boy could not answer, and went to his father to complain of the chieftain. His father, Uddalaka, suggested they go back and find out the answers, since he did not know them either. The young man refused to humiliate himself, so his father went alone, and was told that no Brahmin had ever been told these things, but since he had come in order to know them, he would be answered lest he take some revenge—and so he received an account of *karma* and rebirth. According to the account, a child is produced through the gods' sacrifice of Soma (here, a god, not a plant) in fiery rain clouds full of lightning, the rain producing food, and hence semen, and finally the child, whose soul is thus drawn ultimately from the fiery breath soul of a god. When the child dies, the outcome rests on whether he understands the mystery, and meditates upon it in the forest in faith, leading the life of the ascetic recluse.<sup>56</sup> If he does, he merges with the flame of the funeral pyre, which eventually reaches the sun, and in flashes of lightning, travels to the heaven of Brahma, from which there is no return. If the person does not know the mystery, but is righteous after the Brahmin way, and is properly cremated, he goes to the world of the Fathers, and remains there until his stock

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<sup>55</sup>*Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* 4.4.6.

<sup>56</sup>One might ask how understanding these facts about one's origin would change the outcome after death, and, of course, it is very difficult to imagine how it could. But the shift in viewpoint on what one's true self is when one believes this story leads one to regard the events after death differently, so that one finds oneself in the fire that joins Brahman rather than in the portions of one's being that are recycled through the world. The very same things might happen, but one identifies the future career of one's self differently. Which means that for *you*, things in *fact* happen differently. We shall find this pregnant confusion between how one views the world and how it is playing an important role throughout Indian thought. Perhaps the more sophisticated Buddhist thinkers saw through the confusion here, and this led them to abandon histories of the self and claim there is no self, really, to have a career, and that recognition of this fact leads to cessation of suffering.

of merit is exhausted, then passes to the moon, where the gods eat him, and then into space, the wind, the rain, and finally to earth, where he becomes food, and semen, and is born again. Depending on their conduct, these people are reborn into one or another of the three Aryan castes, or as a pig, a dog, or an outcaste. But those who do not know enough even to receive a proper cremation when they die are reborn as insects and other lower forms of life.<sup>57</sup> So we find attached to the doctrine of *karma* and reincarnation a second doctrine, identifying the stuff of the self with a portion of the world-stuff, and specifying a new ritual of cremation that will purify that self and allow it to escape its *karma*. This *karma* is conceived, no doubt, as itself a kind of breath, a breath of desire mingled with the fiery breath of the self, whose weight drags it back down toward this world. That one is freed by virtue and austerities rather than a ritual sacrifice is not at all clear, but the sacrifice specified is taken, as we shall see, as an image of the requirement of ascetic practices to purify the self of desire and sensory distraction in the later *Katha Upanishad*.

In the *Kaushitaki Upanishad*<sup>58</sup> the doctrine of *karma*, even more entangled with the notion of a breath soul, is learned by the same Uddalaka from another Brahmin. Here the souls go to the moon, where they are asked who they are. If they give the right answer, namely “I am you,” they pass on to the heavens, and otherwise are reborn on earth. Thus the waxing and waning of the moon is explained, for it gathers in the souls and then dispatches them abroad again. In the heavens there are many tests and ordeals before the throne of Brahman is reached, and union with Brahman is finally achieved after the assertion of one’s identity with the god. In the course of the journey the fellow will shed all but his mind, and loses his *karma* as well, his good *karma* going to relatives he likes, the bad to the relatives he does not like. By the shedding of *karma*, no doubt, rebirth is avoided.<sup>59</sup> It should be observed here that the assertion that one is in fact Brahma is not a merely ritual pronouncement with magical effects. One has to *mean* it, that is, one has to view his real self genuinely as Brahman, and no longer identify with any earthly desires or uncompleted actions. If one can say *honestly* “I am you,” he may pass on.

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<sup>57</sup>*Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* 6.2. The story also occurs in the *Chandogya Upanishad* 5.3-10. For a very similar view see the *Taittiriya Upanishad*, 2.6, and 2.8 at the end.

<sup>58</sup>*Kaushitaki Upanishad* 1.

<sup>59</sup>The recycling of souls through the moon and sun is found in Iranian religion as well, and in Manichaeism, a later syncretistic offshoot of Christian and Zoroastrian doctrine, the souls escaping this world are gathered up in the moon, and then sent from there on their way to the high god. The declaration who one is should remind us of the similar declaration of one’s divine origins among the Orphics in Greece. For the analysis of *Brihadaranyaka*, *Chandogya* and *Kaushitaki Upanishads* to this point, I depend on Basham (1989) 43-48, but take my own way on some matters.

*Karma* is literally one's deed, which remains with a person after it is performed, and eventually produces good or ill. Originally it was simply a kind of independent power believed in by most preliterate peoples, called *mana* by anthropologists, borrowing a Polynesian term. It could be absorbed, passed to another, or otherwise manipulated, and it might be generated by one's deeds, emotions, or station in society, or any unusual trait. So a chieftain would have great *mana*, and his *mana* might be communicated to others if they ate his leftover food, say. This would be a dangerous thing to do for someone not a chief, who could not handle *mana* of such power. Among the Indians there were many ways to transfer *karma* once it had been created by a person's actions, some of them involving magic or sacrifice, others involving things as commonplace as eating and sexual intercourse. Indeed, *karma* would be passed on naturally to one's children, that is, if it is not pressing the rationality of all this too far, one's children naturally take over one's *karma*-creating roles, and suffer the consequences of one's actions. But to be truly free of *karma*, one must truly relinquish one's worldly goals, and so the practice of renunciation, in which one goes so far as to be declared legally dead so that he can be free of all the concerns of this world in his last years, became a part of Indian asceticism.

*Karma* might be shed, then, but this purification from *karma* can only happen through the knowledge of (identification with) one's true self, which remains unaffected by the deed. *Karma*, it was thought, cannot really be destroyed except by taking its natural effect, for every impulse will carry through to its end, so the one who would be joined with Brahman must first pass his *karma* on to his relatives. All along, of course, it would have been thought that the *karma* gained in this life controlled rebirth in the heavens, at least to the extent that the heavens were seen as a reward of virtue, or were obtained through the magical manipulation of one's *karma*. But now *karma* leads to an endless cycle of birth and death, interrupted only when we recognize and somehow identify with our true self, a self immune to *karma* all along.<sup>60</sup>

There are a number of primitive elements in these accounts that reveal them as early forms of the doctrine, in particular the connection of the doctrine of union with Brahma to the physical breath soul of the world, and the peculiar manner in which recycling is accomplished.<sup>61</sup> Following the account of Uddalaka's

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<sup>60</sup>On this topic, see the essays in O'Flaherty (1980). On the materialistic conception of the mind as a kind of stuff we have been considering, *karma* would be viewed as a kind of material contamination. The stuff of the mind must be purified of the contaminant before it can rise to the highest places and rejoin the world-soul. It seems as though the contaminant is something taken into the mind-stuff through its mixture with lower things. It can be in the body and remain pure, but as it acts, it is contaminated through its interaction with the body, and so loses its knowledge and awareness.

<sup>61</sup>Ninian Smart, "Karma," in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by Paul Edwards, Vol 4, p. 324, asserts that the Jain account of *karma* and reincarnation is the most primitive one, following the opinion of Zimmer (1957), who traces the ascetic tradition and the doctrines of *karma* and reincarnation to pre-Aryan elements. In fact, the claims of the Jains to great antiquity are more than

reception of the doctrine in the *Chandogya Upanishad* we are told how he passes it on to his son, and the same account in outline is now rationalized. Uddalaka begins with an argument *a priori* to the effect that all this arose from being, since non-being cannot produce being. It is assumed that this being is one thing, a stuff, like clay, which is perceived and understood universally, just as clay is when just one lump of it is perceived. The things we observe in the world are not realities, just as in a figure made of clay, for “the transformation is a verbal handle, a name—while the reality is just this, ‘it’s clay’.”<sup>62</sup> Uddalaka accepts the tradition at face value when he explains how the various worlds arose, saying that Being wished to multiply, and so produced heat, which produced water, which produced food.<sup>63</sup> The matter is pushed further in the direction of the science of the time as it is reflected in Samkhya thought, as these three, heat, water, and food, are assigned three colors, and made out to be the three elements of all things. These three have coarse, medium, and fine constituents, and the finest constituent of food, which tends to rise, becomes mind. Food is apparently conceived to be carried down by water, and to be the element responsible for life. Refraining from food for some time will lead to an absence of mind, the sage observes. The outcome is that we are produced from being, though we do not know it, and return to being at death, the mind returning to breath, breath to heat, and heat to its source. The mind thus merges with the one and loses its individuality, so that we do not know we have merged with it. But this occurs only if one knows the doctrine. Those who do not are reborn.<sup>64</sup> The situation, if we take the *Chandogya Upanishad* at face value, is this: Uddalaka obtained his new views from a Kshatriya, who represents it in mythological terms appropriate to a Shamanistic tradition, and he provided some rudimentary moves against skeptics and a partially demythologized version of the tradition to his son, who would not have anything to do with the doctrine of the disreputable and uneducated Shamans in its original form. In particular, it is to be noted that Uddalaka does *not* offer the experience of the Shamanistic trance as evidence for the views he defends, but rather presents arguments, some metaphysical and some empirical, to support them.

The *Katha Upanishad* (ca. 550 BCE or later), reports the situation somewhat later. There are many

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suspect, and their doctrine appears to be very much an invention of the Indian scientific Enlightenment of the sixth century. One envisions a guild of scientifically minded Shamanistic ascetics at the origins of the cult.

<sup>62</sup>The *a priori* argument is found at *Chandogya Upanishad* 6.2.1-3, the argument from clay at 6.1.4. The account here of Uddalaka’s rationalization of the traditional account he has received depends on Jayatilleke (1963) 34-36.

<sup>63</sup>*Chandogya Upanishad* 6.2. Water is perhaps originally the surface of the sea, as we have noted above. Alternatively, it may be that a thunderstorm is envisioned. Food arises from water, of course, which nourishes all things.

<sup>64</sup>*Chandogya Upanishad* 6.2-10.

parallels between the thought of this *Upanishad* and Buddhist and Jain doctrines, which were developing at this time. The doctrine of *karma* is now no secret, but there are many who do not believe it. So the boy Naciketas asks the god Death about the matter. Some say that when a man dies, he is not, others that he is. Which is true? In reply Death lays out the doctrine of *karma*. But unlike Uddalaka, he suggests that theoretical knowledge will not by itself lead to union with the One—Yogic meditation is also required. He speaks of the *atman* or self as the owner of and rider in a chariot. The driver is *buddhi*, that is, consciousness or awareness, and he holds in his hands the reins, *manas* or the mind-organ, a sixth, inner sense that receives the input of the five outer senses and accounts for awareness of those inputs. The horses are the five outer senses, and the chariot the body. For the self to achieve the highest state and avoid rebirth and death, *buddhi* must learn to control the senses, and Yogic discipline is envisioned for this end. The account of the structure of a person is clearly a version of the Samkhya doctrine, which was associated with Yogic meditation, and so it appears that the meditative discipline was now associated with science, that is, a demythologized view of the world intended to be taken literally so that it may explain observed appearances.<sup>65</sup>

### 8. THE PERCEPTION OF SELF

This body, Maghavan, is mortal; it is in the grip of death. So, it is the abode of this immortal and non-bodily self. One who has a body is in the grip of joy and sorrow, and there is no freedom from joy and sorrow for one who has a body. Joy and sorrow, however, do not affect one who has no body.

The wind is without a body, and so are the rain-cloud, lightning and thunder. These are without bodies. Now as these, after they rise up from the space up above and reach the highest light, emerge in their own true appearance.

In the very same way, this deeply serene one after he rises up from this body and reaches the highest light, emerges in his own true appearance. He is the highest person. He roams about there, laughing, playing, and enjoying himself with women, carriages or relatives, without remembering the appendage of this body. The lifebreath is yoked to this body, as a draught animal is to a cart.

*Chandogya Upanishad* 8.12.1-3.

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<sup>65</sup>*Katha Upanishad* 1.1-2. In 6.7-11, mind (*manas*) is above the senses, *Sattva* above the mind (i.e. the Brightness-strand or *Bodhi*?), above that the Great Self (the *ahamkara* of the Samkhyas?), above that the unevolved (*prakriti*?), and above that an all-pervading spirit with no distinguishing mark (*purusha*?). Keith (1918) 9.

One might wonder if knowledge of the true self is in fact only a kind of theoretical knowledge of the self as the intrinsically universal breath soul, and if this is right, why that would be sufficient to prevent further rebirths. Of course, one might say that this knowledge is only *really* believed when there has been a transformation of the will so that one no longer desires earthly things, but the earlier *Upanishads* seem to present the essentials of the doctrine without any such theoretical knowledge being involved in the affair at all.

Setting aside any theory of the physical constitution of the self, we are apparently aware of ourselves in everyday experience, and we may have reason to think that whatever we are aware of here is not the body, even if we have no clear picture what it in fact is. In the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*,<sup>66</sup> the self in the dream state is identified as the true self, and the same self as the self in waking life. This person passes back and forth between dream and waking life. But in the dream state the self constructs a world for itself, and is actually between two worlds, the world in which it lives alone, aware only of itself, and the waking world in which it is aware of other things due to its contact with the body. If upon death it crosses over into the other world entirely, no longer manufacturing dream images, it becomes aware that it is alone, that in this world it is all. Thus, self embraced by the self becomes oblivious to all this without, like a person embracing his beloved, and, dwelling self-sufficient within the self, attains bliss. This is the world of Brahman, and is like dreamless sleep. One does not remember dreamless sleep clearly upon return to the waking world, just as one does not remember the waking world clearly in a dream, for the other world does not “stick to” the traveling self. Attachment to action leads to rebirth, apparently because one has business to complete. Or perhaps one does not want to leave the pleasures of this world for the higher pleasures of the Brahman world, and so returns. In any case, there is a way in which the return is voluntary, for it is rooted in one’s reluctance to leave the world, despite all its suffering, and one need only see through the illusion that it is worth the trouble to return, and renounce worldly desires, to enter the world of Brahman.

How are we to take this talk of two worlds? Well, it is not asserted that the world of external things does not exist, but only that it does not exist for the self in the world occupied by it alone, and the reason it does not exist in this world is that it has no effects on the self in that world. So we might identify the world a person is in as the collection of things that person can perceive and act upon. Sometimes these things are self-constructed, as in a dream world, sometimes independent of oneself, and a world may contain nothing other than oneself. How does one move between worlds? This is trickier, but it appears that the self that moves is

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<sup>66</sup>*Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* 4.3.9-32. *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* 2.1.16-20 gives the same picture, explicitly identifying the self in the state of dreamless sleep as the true self.

simply a continuing center of consciousness, which is sometimes affected by (conscious of) one set of things, sometimes by another. How it is that this is so receives an explanation only if we note that this center of consciousness is identical to something in the physical world, a quantity of fire, the size of a thumb, which is capable of perceiving external things, always, but only does so when associated with the rest of the structure of the body in a certain way. When it withdraws somewhat from its usual seat in the heart it no longer receives impressions from without, and is asleep and dreaming, and if it withdraws yet further into the pericardium, it enters into dreamless sleep.<sup>67</sup> Finally, to escape altogether, it must leave the body upon death through the top of the head, and merge with the fire of Brahman above the heavens, which has no body associated with it. So it seems that an explanation could not be envisioned without identifying the center of consciousness with something physical and located in space, which interacts physically with other things, but is also aware of itself. The underlying reality is the physical world, and the possibility of soul travel to other worlds is explained in physical terms.

In the *Chandogya Upanishad* the self is identified not as that which travels between worlds, but as that which has perfect bliss, on the ground, no doubt, that attainment to this self is supposed to provide us with freedom from suffering and death. The confidence that there is such a self may be rooted in observation in the course of Yogic meditation. One sometimes realizes as one meditates, trying to achieve the perfect awareness of self, that the world as it is experienced is something to rejoice in, and is always so, even when we are wrapped up in our problems and so in our suffering fail to realize it. We don't realize it precisely because we are not paying attention to our experience of our selves and the world, but rather attending to our thoughts and imaginings, fears and anticipations, the theater of our own minds and the picture of the world and our place in it that we have constructed for ourselves. The experience can happen to a persistent meditator even when not meditating. When we turn our attention away from the mental show for a moment, and experience directly the wonder of existence even through the real pain of our present state, we might well be inclined to say that this experience, and hence the experiencing and blissful self, was always here. The bliss is always there, it does not arise when one meditates, but is noticed.<sup>68</sup> We are tempted to claim that any being that is aware or has a mental life, that exists at all as a conscious being, is aware of the reality of themselves and their experience, even if turned away from that awareness. So there must be a persisting blissful self, the one aware

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<sup>67</sup>*Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* 4.4.22; 2.1.17–19

<sup>68</sup>At least this is the idea. I have not personally experienced it to be so, though I shouldn't mind saying that the world we experience is always something that it is reasonable to rejoice in, and I know that many people would withhold assent to that as well.

of reality, of which we are, for the most part, unaware, because we are too distracted to attend to it. In deep meditation, and no doubt also in dreamless sleep, it is by itself aware only of itself and is its whole world. Sometimes we have a sense of it even when wrapped up in affairs in this world, to the extent that we can cease to be attached to these affairs.

So the Gods and the Demons sent representatives to Prajapati to discover the way to ultimate bliss, and he suggested first that the self is the image in water, because this image takes on all the properties of the self, appearing well dressed when one is well dressed, and naked when one is naked.<sup>69</sup> The identification of one's true self or soul with one's image is commonplace in folklore, so that the dead vampire who has no soul does not appear in a mirror, and departed persons and spirits are sometimes seen by those sensitive to them in mirrors. This self appears to be something other than the bodily self, and is perhaps the self that one is aware of in dreams, which travels to other worlds, or is the self which matter imitates. The demon was satisfied and adopts this view, but Indra, the representative of the gods, had a doubt, for it seemed that this image of oneself paralleled one's life in every way, and would even be dead when one was dead. He saw no profit in this. The Self must be blissful, and so this could not be the self. He returned to put his doubt to Prajapati, and Prajapati put him off with the view that the self in the dream is the real self, but Indra also rejected this notion, for this self, too, can suffer, even if the suffering is not real (that is, presumably, it does not arise from what is real, for it is real enough as suffering, or perhaps the intention is that the suffering is itself unreal, perhaps because the dreamed self that one identifies with in the dream is not real). So one in a dream state is not the subject of eternal bliss.<sup>70</sup> Nor is the one who is in a dreamless sleep, *for he does not know himself*, and in a dreamless sleep "it has become completely annihilated."<sup>71</sup> Thus the self is at least a center of awareness, and must know at least itself to exist at all, and it can only know itself as something particular and qualified within its world. It must interact with other things to continue as an existing self.

The self, then, is not any empirically observable thing in this world. Even if its life underlies the life of the body and the mind to which it is yoked, given that the action and experience of the body and mind involves them in suffering, and this self is blissful, this self must have a life of its own, in a world of its own,

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<sup>69</sup>*Chandogya Upanishad* 8.7-12.

<sup>70</sup>For the arguments of Prajapati in the *Chandogya Upanishad* and their close relationship to the Buddhist search for the self, see Jayatileke (1963) 36-39. One who, like the Buddha, rejected the knowability and relevance to life of anything that is non-observable in principle, would conclude here that there was no self, not that the self was non-empirical.

<sup>71</sup>*Chandogya Upanishad* 8.11.1.

other than their life. Body and mind cannot be the blissful self. In the denouement the body is asserted to be the support of a bodiless self, bodiless in the way that air or lightning is, and that this bodiless self, at least sometimes, “rises to the highest light and appears in its own form” and appears in a heaven where it leads a life very like our earthly life, but without the hindrance of the body.<sup>72</sup> The view of the forest ascetics is abandoned by this conservative author. It is not loss of individuality and merging with the world-soul that is the aim, an aim that amounts to a nihilistic search for non-existence, but simply freeing one’s breath soul from the body so that it can lead an empirical life free of body-generated ills in its own place. The aim is to go to a heaven after one dies, Brahman’s heaven, and a heaven in the usual sense, that is, a world with external things in which one can lead a life.

In one passage in the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*<sup>73</sup> Yajñavalkya follows the author of these passages in the *Chandogya Upanishad* in the assertion that awareness must always be of something other than awareness itself. He instructs his wife Maitreyi in spiritual matters before leaving to follow the hermit’s life in the forest. He argues that the self is indeed the underlying stuff that is the center of awareness, but it is not knowable to itself. In the first place, such a self would include all reality within itself as one thing, the knower, and all knowledge, including its putative knowledge of itself, is necessarily of something other than the knower. He thinks awareness can only arise through a causal relation between knower and known, and identity is not a causal relation. In the second place, not even an individualized self located in a world of external objects can know itself, since it is a knowing subject if it enjoys such knowledge, and so only the object of its knowledge, not itself, is known. As soon as something is known, it is distinguished from the knower. The issue here is not that one’s true self is not really blissful, but rather that it is the center of awareness, considered precisely as such, and if we make the self an object of awareness, then we have the self, not as it is, but as it is experienced. As it is, it is the subject, not the object, of experience. Yajñavalkya does not intend to deny that there is any self, and he in fact seems to think that one can show that there must be such a self, even if it is not experienced, since where there is knowledge, there is a knower, even if it cannot be the subject of its own awareness. So, he says, this great being from which one arises, and into which one disappears at death, is a mass of knowledge, not knowledge of itself, but of other things. The ultimate reality is the knower. It is also ungraspable, indestructible, unattached to things, not bound by *karma*, not capable of being injured, because it is not the

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<sup>72</sup>*Chandogya Upanishad* 8.11.3.

<sup>73</sup>*Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* 2.4.1-14, 4.5.15. Jayatilleke (1963) 40-41.

empirical self, the body and mind, which we mistake for the real self. The function of the world-stuff is to be aware, aware of other things. The true self not in a blissful state, but beyond both bliss and suffering.

How does this bear on the state of the self when all false consciousness of other things as the self is removed? Yajñavalkya insists that upon death, if we have gotten free from attachment to this world, we vanish into the mass of knowing stuff that underlies the world, and, in the absence of the false consciousness of the empirical self, we have no consciousness at all of anything. This is not a Brahman world in which we live a kind of perfect dream life, for there is no dreaming here. Nor is there a blissful self-awareness. The self achieves consciousness only by opposing itself to other things, its objects, and it can do this only by becoming individual, so that it distinguishes itself from what is not itself, that is, by becoming an empirical being with body and mind, opposed to other selves. Or rather, to speak more correctly, the self, if it is indeed all there is, achieves consciousness only by raising an illusion of something else opposed to itself, the world of its experience, which it does when a portion of itself is separated (physically) from the rest of itself.<sup>74</sup> Indeed, Yajñavalkya denies at least the transmigration of an enlightened person, on the ground that when such a one dies, one is not like a tree, which can spring up again from its root. In this place, indeed, he may intend to deny transmigration altogether. There is no root left from which the individual can spring up again.<sup>75</sup> All that is left after death is

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<sup>74</sup> At *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* 4.3.6-10, 30-31, the view is attributed to Yajñavalkya that if there *seems* to be another, then this illusory other is knowable, even if it is not other than the self that knows it. This occurs in dreams. 4.3.30 says that this knowing in a dream is knowing, but not strictly speaking knowing, presumably because, although there is awareness of another, it is an illusory other. It is argued that there is no cessation of the knower in a dream (for he has not yet died), and so he continues to know. Apparently Descartes's view of the matter is intended, and as long as one is alive he is aware of something, since it is his essence to be aware. But it is also insisted that this act of knowing is himself, not some act other than himself that belongs to him. He is just a mass of knowing or a continuous activity of knowing, and this activity of knowing or awareness is not something separate from the self that may be known by it. Though the passage may well suggest idealism, and in it the dreaming self is said to be the creator of his dream world, the author is not himself an idealist, and insists not only that the waking world is independent of the self, but that the private dream world is constructed from materials taken from the common ("all-containing"), waking world. The individual self is presumably an isolated batch of the stuff that makes up the world. The author of these views agrees with Yajñavalkya that there is no transmigration, and states that one who dies leaves behind the evils he came to when he was born and gained a body. Death apparently leads to union with Brahman for everyone, not just accomplished meditators. Upon death, it seems, one becomes an "ocean, a seer alone without duality," "one whose world is Brahman." There is no indication of any personal survival after death. The views in this passage may be squared with the Yajñavalkya of 2.4.14 if we take it that his principle that the knower must be other than the known is to be read taking "knowing" as awareness, merely, not implying the actual existence of the object of the awareness. Indeed, in some sense, all individuals may be supposed to be less than fully real, so that the object of awareness must always be non-existent either in the sense that they are not the underlying, one, reality, the knower, or else in the stronger sense that they are illusory, like dream objects.

<sup>75</sup> *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* 3.9.28. *Majhima Nikaya* II 231 seems to refer to Yajñavalkya's views here. It says that some Brahmans hold the view that normal consciousness is a disease, a thorn, while unconsciousness is bewildering (an apparent reference to the bewilderment of Yajñavalkya's respondent when he states that after death there is no consciousness). So the state of neither consciousness nor unconsciousness is the peaceful and excellent state. There seems to be some adaptation of the *Upanishad's* ideas to the Buddhist manner of expression here, but Yajñavalkya does respond by saying that what he says is not bewilderment, but understanding. In any case, Yajñavalkya could be said to hold that after death there is neither one's individual consciousness, nor

the universal, everlasting *atman*, the potentiality of awareness, and although it continually becomes actual experience in other individuals, no reconstitution of an individual that has been utterly destroyed can be expected from what, although it underlies the individual, is not strictly any part of it. An individual can grow back from some fragment of itself, but once it is utterly destroyed, it cannot be recovered.

The middle and later *Upanishads*, no doubt as a result of such arguments as these, came to hold that, although the self could not be known by perception,<sup>76</sup> nor from the testimony of the scriptures<sup>77</sup> or other kinds of tradition,<sup>78</sup> nor by reasoning,<sup>79</sup> still it can be known through a kind of non-sensory perception. One sees the self while in meditation, through the purification of knowledge, and so not through the sense organs.<sup>80</sup> In this vision, the Self reveals itself when one's senses are at last quieted.<sup>81</sup> The solution of the difficulty suggested by Yajñavalkya requires that this non-sensory perception of the self not occur through the natural means employed by the senses, since those means require that the thing affecting the senses be different from the knower who is affected. A sort of direct awareness of self is postulated, that does not occur through any natural process, and which is normally overwhelmed by the experience produced by the senses, which draws all our attention to itself. It would, of course, be very difficult to refute the claim that such awareness is possible, since any failure to have it could be attributed to failure as a yogic meditator, and the difficulty in conceiving what the experience would be like might well have led many honestly to claim such an experience of self in many different situations. The Buddha's insistence that no such experience of the self was to be had had to be backed up with the claim that he had accomplished every type of yogic awareness, carrying out all the austerities and meditations of all the other sects, so that he had verified for himself its nonexistence, and clearly a faithful Hindu might hesitate to believe that he had in fact carried out this task in the face of Yogis who claimed to have

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unconsciousness (that is, complete absence of consciousness), since there is a potentiality for consciousness in the self, and actual consciousness in illusory, empirical selves will continue to arise, but, presumably he agrees with the Buddhists on this—none of those selves can be identified as the reincarnation of the enlightened sage who has died.

<sup>76</sup>*Katha Upanishad* 2.3.12.

<sup>77</sup>*Katha Upanishad* 1.2.23.

<sup>78</sup>*Katha Upanishad* 1.2.23 = *Mundaka Upanishad* 3.2.3.

<sup>79</sup>*Katha Upanishad* 1.2.8-9, 23; *Maitri Upanishad* 6.17.

<sup>80</sup>*Mundaka Upanishad* 3.1.8, cf. *Svetasvatara Upanishad* 1.4, *Katha Upanishad* 1.3.12.

<sup>81</sup>*Katha Upanishad* 1.2.23, *Mundaka Upanishad* 3.2.3. For this paragraph, Jayatilleke (1963) 61-62.

had the crucial non-sensory experience of the self.

### 9. UNION WITH BRAHMAN

Brahman is breath...

*Kaushitaki Upanishad 2.1*

The gatherer, clearly, is the wind. So, when a fire goes out, it is into the wind that it passes; when the sun sets, it is into the wind that it passes; when the moon sets, it is into the wind that it passes; and when water evaporates, it is into the wind that it passes. For it is the wind that gathers all these. That was with respect to the divine sphere. Now, with reference to the body (*atman*)—the gatherer, clearly, is the breath. So, when a man sleeps, it is into his breath that speech passes; it is also into the breath that sight, hearing and mind passes. For it is breath that gathers all these.

*Chandogya Upanishad 4.3.1-3*

The doctrines of *karma* and reincarnation are used to justify their ascetic and meditative practices by the writers of the *Upanishads*. The aim is to attain freedom, *moksha*, from this endless karmic round of births and suffering, by realizing the identity of the self with the Brahman. This realization, in all of the *Upanishads*, is rooted, as it was before the introduction of the ascetic side of the doctrine, in knowledge. Thus freedom from *karma* is obtained by a special knowledge, knowledge of something eternal lying beyond the phenomenal, natural world. Now if the supernatural here becomes an object of acquaintance, this cannot be through any natural process of sensation—the acquaintance itself must have a supernatural source. The usual suggestion in the Indian tradition is that it is due to our identity with the supernatural being experienced, not to any causal interaction with it. This acquaintance is *always* present, though we are perhaps distracted from it by our absorption in sensory experience and the natural world, and in the ever changing naturally based thought processes that are part of that world, which we mistakenly identify as ourselves.

With asceticism and the doctrine of reincarnation, monism forms a third element of the Upanishadic doctrine. We have seen how it is rooted in the universal ancient notion of a breath soul of the world, to which one's own soul reunites under the right circumstances. Taking note of this helps make comprehensible an idea paradoxical to modern ears, for we don't speak of a stuff quite in the same way that we speak of a thing. When speaking of a quantity of water, we can go two ways, either referring to it as an individual quantity, *this* pint

of water, or referring to it simply as water. The isolation as an individual quantity is accidental to the water, and we have no difficulty with saying that this pint of water is water. A thing, on the other hand, such as a particular houseplant, is not merely accidentally endowed with individuality. The notion that this is houseplant before us, as opposed to *a* houseplant, does not sit with us nearly as well as the notion that this is water before us, as opposed to *a pint of* water. We think of water as there, ready to be divided into pints. We don't think of houseplant as there, somehow ready to be divided into individual houseplants. Moreover, if you divide a houseplant into a number of parts, they are very likely *not* houseplants, but leaves, root fragments and the like—dividing up a pint of water into parts (ounces of water, say) results in several quantities of water. And it is very hard to imagine how a houseplant could merge with the more extensive, universal *Houseplant* in such a way that, even though it still was, it had lost its individuality and could no longer be separately identified, but a pint of water might easily merge with the ocean, and, though still in existence, thereby lose its individuality and be no longer be separately identifiable. We tend to think of our selves as something like the houseplant, but the writers of the *Upanishads* thought of themselves as something like water, as accidentally isolated quantities of the ultimate stuff that makes up the world, that could lose their individuality without ceasing to be if merged once more with the source of that stuff.

Many of the *Upanishads* identify the one source and underlying reality of all things as Brahman, and Brahman as the Person, from whom the universe arose.<sup>82</sup> This conception provides a reconciliation of the doctrine of the *Upanishads* with Brahmin ritual, since Brahman was originally an objectification of the magical power of the ritual. The idea is that the power called up in the ritual is the underlying power behind all natural phenomena. Now the *Upanishads* reject ritual as a way of utilizing this power, the only value of ritual inhering in the meditation associated with it, in which some approach is made to the truth that one is indeed Brahman. So Brahman in these works is no longer the power of ritual, except insofar as the power of the Self to realize itself is captured in the ritual, it is rather the true Self taken as the reality lying behind this world, and as self-consciousness, and perhaps the self as the one who practices austerities to gain power, as the Person did in the production of the universe.

The composite view here identified became even more complex in later works, in particular, the *Katha Upanishad*, written about a century after the *Brihadaranyaka* and *Chandogya Upanishads*. The *Katha Upanishad's* thought is rooted in a new, naturalistic demythologized turn of thought reflected in the Samkhya and Yoga

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<sup>82</sup>*Mundaka Upanishad* 2.2, 3.1; *Taittiriya Upanishad* 2; *Aitareya Upanishad* 4.10; *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* 2.12-13, etc.

schools, discussed below in Chapter 3. It introduces not only Yogic concentration into the picture in connection with an account of the structure of the soul, as we have noted above, but also a certain ambiguity whether the Self is one and the same in all things. The Self of one person is indistinguishable from the self of another, for no sensible qualities or active roles in the world make it particular, but it appears that it is a particular thing, like a houseplant, not a sort of stuff. It may be a single particular individual lying behind all things, and in that case the *Katha* reflects a new theistic teaching of the sort we find explicitly stated in one strand of the *Bhagavad Gita*. Or perhaps each one of us is conceived as a separate, numerically distinct, bare, particular center of awareness, in itself indistinguishable from the others and standing outside the natural order, as in Samkhya. Let us look at the *Katha Upanishad* in more detail.

### 10. FREEDOM AND KNOWLEDGE OF THE REAL SELF IN THE *KATHA UPANISHAD*

Arise! Awake! Pay attention,  
when you've obtained your wishes!  
A razor's sharp edge is hard to cross—  
that, poets say, is the difficulty of the path.

It has no sound or touch,  
No appearance, taste, or smell;  
It is without beginning or end,  
undecaying and eternal;  
When a man perceives it,  
fixed and beyond the immense,  
He is freed from the jaws of death.

Death speaking to Naciketas  
*Katha Upanishad* I.3.14-15.

The objects of sense turn away from the embodied soul who abstains from feeding on them, but the taste for them remains. Even the taste turns away when the Supreme is seen.

*Bhagavad Gita* 2.59.

The doctrine of the *Upanishads* is intellectualist. That is, it holds that will is directed by belief, and, in the end belief rests upon experience. If we are to change our will, we must change our beliefs. A similar view can be found, for instance, in Thomas Aquinas, and in Socrates, as he is described in Plato's *Protagoras*. Both

hold that all men want precisely the same thing at bottom (pleasure, according to Socrates, the good, according to Aquinas), and differ in their aims only insofar as they differ in their opinions about the best way to get it, and perhaps, about what it is. According to such a view, any difference in behavior reflects a difference in beliefs. So, in the *Upanishads* it is assumed that everyone wants to avoid death, and to enjoy perfect bliss and freedom from pain and sorrow as much as possible. When one perceives the self at last, one sees that he has these things perfectly in his experienced identity with Brahman, and loses all further desire for worldly goods, which bring only an inferior bliss, mixed with pain and destined to end. Anyone who continues to be concerned with worldly affairs must not yet have realized that the self is the same as Brahman, or have experienced the bliss of Brahman. Those who know they are Brahman through the experience of that identity would find such attachment to sensory satisfactions nonsensical.

If we are to justify a spiritual life based in ascetic practices rather than intellectual reflection, it might be thought necessary to reject intellectualism, and recognize the influence on our attitudes and behavior of habit and individual autonomous desires that are not simply a product of beliefs about the good. Surely the point of asceticism is to provide emotional training where intellectual reflection fails. If we desire wine not because we think good wine a necessary part of the good life (indeed, we may think it antithetical to the good life), but simply because some rationally inaccessible part of ourselves has come to desire it, then rational insight is there, but it does no good. We must practice asceticism to overcome the desire, rather than reflecting on the nature of the good, which we already know well enough. We must learn self-control, or break the habit of desire. But, though they favored asceticism, the authors of the *Upanishads* had a different notion about its usefulness. For them, asceticism is one technique for altering belief, for eliminating a persistent illusion. The idea (originally at least) is that one must eliminate distractions in order to shed the illusion and become aware of and therefore united to the true Self in meditation. Desires, plans, pride in oneself, all such are distractions. As long as we are conscious of this false self of the natural world, we will continue to be distracted by its affairs, considering them of intrinsic importance, and so take it as our self, and remain under *karma*. These distractions must be eliminated or controlled, then, *at first* by ascetic denial, self-discipline, meditative practice and the like, but once we see the truth, the illusion in which these desires are rooted will be gone, and they will no longer pose a problem.

The *Katha Upanishad* is based on the story in the *Taittiriya Brahmana* about Vajashravasa, who makes a sacrifice of all his possessions in hope of gaining a favorable afterlife. But what he in fact offers is poor enough, and he secretly withholds much, so his son, Naciketas, observing this, repeatedly asks his father to whom he

himself, one of his father's possessions, is to be given. Finally, in anger, his father snaps, "to Death." The story tells of the father's anger at his son's sarcastic criticism of a hypocritical sacrifice, and no doubt comments on the foolishness of "sacrificing" possessions in order to gain yet more possessions in another life. In its background, perhaps, is a version in which a father gave his boy to Death in his initiatory sacrifice at puberty. One dedicates a boy to one deity or another in a Shamanistic puberty initiation, after which the deity appears to the boy in dreams or visions, and gives him various gifts. To dedicate the boy to Death is to take a great risk, from which the greatest possible gain is to be expected if it works out, since Death is a very great deity. Indeed, in the *Katha Upanishad* it appears that Death is the deity ruling the entire world of *karma* and rebirth. Whoever reworked the tale may not have understood it in its original form. In the new prologue he introduces what he thought a possible motivation for the man's incomprehensible act of giving his son to Death, and also manages to get in a criticism of the old Brahminical sacrifices to attain to the Heaven of the Fathers. In effect, the fellow has been devoted to Death himself all along, given his pursuit of a successful life in this world, and implicitly had devoted his Son to Death already. This-worldliness is simply the practice of death. If we are to question this manner of search for a favorable afterlife, Death is the deity most likely to know something relevant. Indeed, it may even be suggested that we must learn to reject the life of this world from this world, and so from its ruler, Death, for it bears its disadvantages on its face, if we will only attend.

The dedication works out, for Naciketas arrives at Death's abode while he is away, and so is granted three gifts in return for the lack of hospitality he has had to endure for three days while awaiting his host. He asks to return to his father on earth, and to have explained to him the sacrifice that attains the heaven where Death is not present. Thus he is extricated from his dilemma, and attains for his father what he had wanted. Perhaps that was the end of the matter in the original tale, a Brahminic story explaining how a certain ritual of cremation was learned by human beings, a new ritual which attains, not the Heaven of the Fathers, or even the pleasant heaven of the Gandharvas, but the heaven of Brahman.<sup>83</sup> But Naciketas then asks on his own behalf that Death answer a question that only Death can answer, and throws into doubt the whole point of the sacrifice about which he has just learned: Does a man go on to exist after his death or not? Even the Gods have had doubts about this, Death confesses, and offers all sorts of worldly goods in exchange for the requested boon. They are rejected, for they are made worthless by the prospect of death. There seems to be an inconsistency here, for surely the attainment of Brahman's heaven, granted in the second wish, would avoid

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<sup>83</sup>*Katha Upanishad* 6.1–5 seems to relate this path of sacrifices, which seeks the highest possibilities within the cosmos. Those who follow this way are called "light" in 3:1–2.

death entirely! Naciketas must have suspected that even those in this heaven eventually die, if only when the present cosmos dissolves back into its elements. Of course, even those dwelling in the heavens, the gods, might hesitate over this. How could they know the present order of things of which they are a part is everlasting?<sup>84</sup> So Naciketas, observing that the world itself may come to an end, and the highest heaven is still part of the world, wishes to know what happens to the souls in that highest heaven when the world ends.

Death observes that the boy is seeking eternal knowledge, the true good, rather than what is pleasant (what satisfies one's desires) or the empirical knowledge that leads to the pleasant.<sup>85</sup> He then instructs the boy in a second way, a way of "shadow" in which one seeks within for the real self.

The primeval one who is hard to perceive, wrapped in mystery, hidden in the cave, residing within the impenetrable depth—Regarding him as god, an insight gained by inner contemplation, both sorrow and joy the wise abandon. When a mortal has heard it, understood it, when he has drawn it out, and grasped this subtle point of doctrine, he rejoices, for he has found something in which he could rejoice.<sup>86</sup>

One escapes death entirely, even the death of this world itself, only by following this way of the shadows, not by seeking the light.

To complete the metaphysical view here, it seems that there are three things found higher than this current world order. First, there is the "immense self, which is "all-pervading," that is, is present in all things. This is a single thing spread throughout space, the same in everyone, it seems, probably equivalent to the "mahat" or "immense self" of the Samkhya school. It underlies the current world, and is that from which the new world will arise in the next world-cycle.

The wise one—he is not born, he does not die; he has not come from anywhere; he has not become anyone. He is unborn and eternal, primeval and everlasting. And he is not killed, when the body is killed.<sup>87</sup>

Death then locates the Unmanifest above the Immense Self. The Unmanifest is to be understood as *prakriti*,

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<sup>84</sup>There is a passage in the *Satapatha Brahmana* that indicates that people had begun to fear that one might die even in heaven—if one greets Death with a "Hail!" when one meets him, one will escape his power and remain always a god. (Basham (1989) 43.) This could easily be read metaphorically, of course—death is only death for those who fear it due to their attachment to individual self and failure to recognize their true self.

<sup>85</sup>*Katha Upanishad* 2.1-5.

<sup>86</sup>*Katha Upanishad* 2.12–13.

<sup>87</sup>*Katha Upanishad* 2.18.

which is in Samkhya the underlying stuff of the universe before it is shaped by its desire for consciousness to become the Immense Self. The *purusha*, the Person, is above even the Unmanifest, but nothing is higher than that.<sup>88</sup> In Samkhya the Person would be a particular, not found in space, and in no way material, a kind of stuff, but rather a center of self-awareness. It is unclear what the *Katha* intends, but it seems that it is at least a particular and a center of awareness, as opposed to stuff of some kind.

The author of the *Katha* has identified a problem with supposing that mind might be simply a kind of stuff. Mind is more like the houseplant, for it seems to have a particularity rooted in its own point of view. The point of view is essential to it, since awareness is. The true self, then, knowing which one attains freedom from death, must be a particular. What particular? Not even this present world order taken in its entirety, Brahman, will do. Moreover, one surely is not identical to Brahman in any straightforward way. So is the best we can hope for rebirth in the heaven of the Brahman, which lasts until the end of the present world order? No, for we can identify as our true self the Immense Self, which never came into being and never will die, unlike the present world order, precisely because it is in itself completely unformed, except for being a center of consciousness. This is a particular mass of stuff, with an underlying order or nature inasmuch as it is conscious, imitating somehow the Person. We cannot identify ourselves with the stuff making up the Immense Self, for that is merely stuff, and we are a thing, nor with the Person, for that is merely particularity, point of view, and not a thing. We are stuff with a point of view, a composite of sorts, but an eternal one, from which one world order after another arises. In this way the particularity of the self can be granted, and yet all selves can still turn out to be the same thing, as in the earlier view that the self is just the breath that makes up the world.

How is it that each of us is to be identified with the Immense Self, rather than some much smaller portion of breath making up a particular soul? Here the argument seems to be that we are the thing which is aware, and that thing taken in its essence, not described as possessing accidents. You are not the male thing weighing 180 pounds that is aware, for you could lose weight, and might be reborn as a woman. What it is that persists through all our lives in all the worlds in which we live is what we are. This awareness is identified as a property of something, the Self located in the heart, from which awareness of the body and all the particulars of this life arises. But this something is simply aware, and is ourselves, and can pass on to a new body, or, as we have observed earlier, into another world, even the Brahman world in which it is aware of nothing except itself. The only thing it *must* take with it when it does all this is awareness itself. Considered in itself, it is not

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<sup>88</sup>*Katha Upanishad* 3.3–15, 6.6–15.

even burdened with *karma*. So, considered in ourselves, we do not differ from one another at all, but are simply that one Immense Self, the stuff that is aware. At this point one may ask whether there may not be many such selves, indistinguishable from one another, and the author of the *Katha Upanishad* seems not to have considered this matter one way or the other. Those trying to understand and interpret the work later within the Vedantic tradition, as we shall see, did ask this question, and evolved several different answers to it.

There is a kind of repetition of the content thus far discussed in the last chapter of the *Katha Upanishad*, which may seem to bring us to a slightly different outcome. There it seems that it is not the Immense Self, but the Person, the highest thing, which is to be known if one is to attain freedom. But upon reflection one notes that it is only said that the Person must become known to attain the end, not that the Person is in fact oneself. The sense, then, assuming the work is self-consistent, is that one must come to know the Person, self-awareness with its point of view as such, in order to know one's self, the Immense Self. That, of course, is plausible, since this Person is the essence or nature of one's Self, even if it is not identical with it.

How does one come to know this Immense Self, and how does this knowledge lead to *moksha*, freedom from death and the round of reincarnations? It is clear that one cannot grasp this self through the senses, or through mind (*manas*), which relies on and organizes the data of the senses. Is there another way of knowledge? One answer, perhaps related to views later found in the *Bhagavad Gita*, claims that we must learn of this self from "the Creator."<sup>89</sup> The creator of this world is Death, who, of course, revealed all this to Naciketas. The Immense Self cannot be grasped by intelligence or learning.<sup>90</sup> One must be free of evil ways before the creator will do this, and calm and of tranquil mind. Later in the text the knowledge of the Self is gained when one controls his senses by *yoga*, and is freed from distraction.<sup>91</sup> What must be said, of course, is that Death does not show his grace to a person as a reward of virtue, but rather Death, that is, the unsatisfactory impermanence of our situation as long as we do not identify our true selves as pure awareness, is what drives us to the interior meditation and Yogic self-control that leads us finally to identify our true selves. What seems to be required, then, is a meditation which will lead one to identify himself as a pure spectator without any interest in the things seen. One watches one's actions, one does not identify with them. Moreover, one must come to identify oneself with, or care about, the awareness alone, not its content, or even the particular point of view from

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<sup>89</sup>*Katha Upanishad* 2.20–21.

<sup>90</sup>*Katha Upanishad* 2.19–25.

<sup>91</sup>*Katha Upanishad* 6.9–15.

which it is enjoyed. One is awareness, and so long as there is that, everything is fine. Even here, one might doubt, thinking that awareness depends on something of which we are aware, but even that problem can be finessed. The awareness one identifies with is present so long as it is aware of itself, of awareness, and that means that no end is possible for this awareness.

The *Mandukya Upanishad*, returning to some themes we have already encountered, approaches the nature of this consciousness from a somewhat different angle. It describes four states of consciousness: (1) waking, within which we are in touch with the external object of awareness that is common to all men, (2) dreaming, which is characterized by consciousness turned inward to what is not common to all, (3) dreamless sleep, in which the knower is revealed, rather than what is outside the knower, and (4) a state beyond this, which is the fundamental reality, in which self-awareness without any differentiated content at all occurs. The third state, dreamless sleep, is described as “one . . . a single mass of perception; consisting of bliss, and thus enjoying bliss, and having thought as his mouth . . .”<sup>92</sup> What seems to be intended is that which is capable of cognition, that of which cognition is an accident. This thing is in itself blissful, or content, and is the “lord of all, . . . the knower of all, . . . the inner controller . . . the origin and the dissolution of beings.”<sup>93</sup> By this the author seems to mean that it is the source of all objects of knowledge external to itself. It is quite unclear if he means to affirm Idealism, the view that a non-material mind is the source of all, though. This is because it is unclear that the originator of beings produces beings through cognition. Brahman is probably conceived here not only as what is capable of cognition, but also as the underlying *stuff*, as it really is and not as it appears to us, so not as the bearer of any particular sensible qualities. It is as the stuff that constitutes them that it gives rise to all beings. It can be cognized by us, not through the senses, but simply through the fact that we are identical to it, we are the knower, but the senses must be quieted for us to take note of it.

Even this knower is not the final, underlying reality, though, since it retains nameable qualities. The real self *is*, but has no further characteristics. The ground of all things is a state which is related as cognizer to no particular content, but contains in itself only the possibility of external cognition. It is free from

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<sup>92</sup>Verse 5. The *Mandukya Upanishad* consists of just twelve verses. For a translation and commentary on it, see Zimmer, *Philosophies of India*, 372-378. I go somewhat beyond Zimmer’s analysis, and demur from his insistence (following Shankara) that Advaita Vedanta is intended here.

<sup>93</sup>Verse 6. Here one might compare the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* 2.1.15-20, where the breath, with its function of sensation, intelligence and the like, collects back in on itself in sleep, moves about in its own worlds, which it created in its dreams, and is all collected together at the heart in deep sleep, like Brahman in bliss. At *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* 1.5.23 air is identified as the one deity that never fails, and it is suggested that only one practice was necessary—to breathe in and out with the thought “let not the evil of death get me,” a practice that leads to union with air, so that one resides in the same world as air.

development, tranquil, and has no second. Its sole essence is “the perception of itself alone.” It is a self-awareness without any content to its awareness of itself. It is not aware of the self as this or that (as a woman, or a student, or a thinker). To emphasize the ungraspability of this reality, it is compared to the fourth letter, as it were, of the utterance “Aum”, the one that sounds when the ‘m’ dies away. (The *Chandogya Upanishad* says that the Brahman is life, joy and *the void*, the first two being just the same as the third.)<sup>94</sup> This is where differentiated, relative existence comes to rest, the Self. The fourth stage, in a way, returns to the first, for in the first the object that is common to all, the “real world” was the common object of awareness. We then passed through two stages in which private objects of awareness, and then a private knower, were the focus. In this last stage we have the knower, but once more it is common to all, the undifferentiated self-awareness *without a second*.<sup>95</sup>

The Reality behind the appearance of self is sought here by looking for what remains when all the accidents of the self, the thoughts and perceptions, desires and feelings, are removed. One’s self, it is assumed, is the reality subject to these accidents, the reality which travels from world to world, and so some underlying, permanent thing that persists through accidental changes. After all, such a permanent thing must remain through any given change, else we have not a change, but a replacement, and any given change is plausibly treated as a mere rearrangement, say, of the permanent stuffs that underlies it, or as a transformation of some stuff that nonetheless remains, the same stuff, but in another form,<sup>96</sup> or as something that happens to, but does

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<sup>94</sup>*Chandogya Upanishad* 4.10.4-5. In the same, composite, work, 6.11.1, the state of bliss in dreamless sleep is said to be Brahman, and the *Mandukya* seems to accept this view, and place *the void* in the fourth state.

<sup>95</sup>*Mundaka Upanishad* 3.2.7 The Self is said to be without parts (3.1.5, 8), as a consequence of the insistence on placing the self beyond everything that can be experienced through the senses. It is experienced in meditation. The Self is also identified with light, and from this light proceeds fire from the Sun, which is converted to rain in the Moon, then to plants by the Earth, and to seed by the man who eats the plants, from which arises human beings, who thereby contain the light within them. (2.1.5). An Iranian connection is indicated here, for Zoroastrianism held that the fire rose to the moon again when one died, only to fall with the rain again if one’s soul was impure, otherwise to return to the light; and the Manichaeans held similarly that the moon was an engine to purify the light of the God that had been mixed in with the matter of this world, and return it to its source.

<sup>96</sup>So the *Chandogya Upanishad* suggests that the One produced light and heat, which produced water, which produced food, from which all else arises (6.2.4). In the Samkhya school, these three materials are the only real things, all else, that is, individuals as opposed to kinds of stuff, and mixtures of the three primal kinds of stuff, being merely names for arrangements of these materials. In the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* light and heat are equated with death, since all individual things of this world order return to it, and it, in the end, returns to water, from which light and heat, and then this world order, first arose (3.2.10). In the *Chandogya Upanishad* 4.3.1-2, the wind takes the place of light and heat as the one stuff from which all arises and to which it returns. The one stuff from which all else arises is fire, Prajapati, in the *Prashna Upanishad*. The notion of this one underlying stuff need not imply that only that stuff is ever real, since other kinds of stuff could arise from and return to the primal stuff by transformation, so that water, for instance, is something real on its own, something that fire and heat turn into, not merely fire and heat rearranged in some way, but a different form of heat and fire. The one primal element from which the others arise by transformation need remains present in the new stuff since the new stuff is just a new form of the old, and it is responsible for its character and its being, so that fire, for instance,

not effect anything essential to the existence of, an underlying subject.<sup>97</sup> We should be able to become aware of the real self underlying these passing accidents if we can cease to be distracted by the play of passing accidents. It might be asked at this point why our persisting bodies might not count as our real selves, and as something of which we are always aware behind the passing parade of thoughts, perceptions, actions and the like. One problem with assigning the body this role is that it changes so dramatically in the course of its history. The body of an old woman is scarcely recognizable as the same body she had as a new-born child. There is no reason, perhaps, even to suppose that it is composed of the same material as that new-born's body. Is it the continuing organization of what may be ever new material into a human body that makes it the same body throughout its history? But then there is either no underlying *thing* that is the single subject of the entire history of the woman at all, or else that thing must be something other than her body, which is responsible for maintaining the body's organization. The latter hypothesis was the one assumed by the authors of the *Upanishads*, of course. Something, the breath soul, remained through all the changes, and was responsible for the organization of the rest. It need not, by the way, be supposed that this breath was the same chunk of stuff throughout its history. It was probably conceived to be enough that it be the same sort of stuff, even though it might be replenished periodically, say from the reservoir of air around us. As long as it is the same sort, it will exercise the same sort of organizing activity, and keep the bodily and observable self in being.

There is a second source of this inattention to our physical being as a candidate for our real self, and that is the conviction, deeply implanted in all of us, that if anything at all is real, it is our own *mind*. One can throw the reality of all else into question, treating even the physical world as a dream and illusion, but one cannot doubt the ultimate, rock bottom reality of one's own awareness of these appearances, and of the one who is aware.<sup>98</sup>

Now, since all our waking thoughts, perceptions and actions are passing accidents, which need not occur in the way they actually do occur, no one of them being essential to our continued existence, we must look at what remains of the self when we are asleep to track down and become aware of this elusive real, underlying self. Dreams suffer the same problems as waking perceptions, so perhaps one must look at what is

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in whatever new forms its takes, remains responsible for the active power, life, and awareness of what arose from it.

<sup>97</sup>This notion is suited to a primal *thing* as opposed to a primal stuff, and enters when the One is considered as a mind instead of soul-stuff.

<sup>98</sup>The physicalism of early thought makes this one who is aware into a piece of the underlying stuff that makes up the universe of course, and so preserves the physical world as an ultimate reality.

going on in dreamless sleep for this permanent, unchanging ground of the Self. But there is no awareness of anything here, and so we need to seek some fourth state, one in which we have simple self-awareness, but no awareness of any particular sort of self, awareness rather of oneself as the reality underlying all accident and change, simply as being.<sup>99</sup> This self need not be non-physical, for it could be the primal stuff before it becomes the organizing center of a sentient organism, but in any case it is identified as the source of the world, since it is capable of and prepared for cognition and action, and the world consists in the cognizer and what it cognizes, what acts and what suffers action, and nothing more. Thus, one escaped this present unsatisfactory world order by merging with its primal, undifferentiated source. Originally, this merging of the soul-stuff at the center of one's being with the great mass of undifferentiated soul-stuff was conceived quite literally as a physical merging, like water flowing into the ocean, and it involved the actual breakdown of the organization of the accidental, temporary self of this world.

A recipe for meditational practice is found in these metaphysical moves. We are to sit, and, through concentration, remove our attention from those changing things that are not the self one by one, arriving at a state free from thoughts, desires, even, perhaps, sensory awareness, until all its covers have dropped away, and a pure awareness of the self remains. Such a practice might well have consequences for our mental well-being, due to relaxation, the interruption of obsessive thoughts and desires, and the like, leading to tranquillity and detachment in our everyday life when not meditating. The writers of the *Upanishads* attribute these good results to the realization that our empirical self is not our real self, so that we no longer are desperate concerning its fate, and the recognition that Brahman is our true self, which gives us perfect security and bliss. The point of the practice is to come to awareness of the state of consciousness that is always present in the primal, undifferentiated soul-stuff, no matter what its circumstances, and underlies and is presupposed in all our more developed and differentiated consciousness of the things of this world order. When we attain that state of consciousness, we recognize the original Self.

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<sup>99</sup>The *Taittiriya Upanishad* describes five “sheathes” of the Self, Food (i.e. the body), Breath (the foundation of the physical world), Mind (discursive thought?), Intellect (*vijnana* = awareness of specific things?), and Bliss (*ananda*, perhaps awareness of the Self, which is not the Self itself). A meditative practice is envisioned, in which one focuses progressively on the five sheathes, that is, one's self as it is ordinarily conceived is displaced from attention by focusing on the body, then, once that is accomplished, one focuses on the breath, and so on, until pure blissful awareness is at the center of one's attention. In the *Chandogya Upanishad* even bliss is to be left behind, and pure awareness of awareness, the foundation of bliss, is the final achievement. The meditational practice is supposed to bear fruit when one dies, and is able to pass on through the sheathes to identification with the true Self (2.8). The *Upanishad* takes a general interest in lists of five, as does Buddhism. One might be tempted to say the *Taittiriya Upanishad* 2.1 identifies space as the knower and true self, but this is probably not quite right. Various sorts of stuff, air, fire, and so forth, arise successively from this true self, and so it needs to be taken as what fills space, but without indication of its sensible qualities, so that these other things can arise from it through differentiation. The *Maitri Upanishad*, 6.17 is to be read in the same way.

11. THE GERM OF IDEALISM IN THE *UPANISHADS*

...if the particles of being did not exist, there would be no particles of intelligence... if the particles of intelligence did not exist, there would be no particles of being, because from either independently no image would be produced.

*Kaushitaki Upanishad* 3.8.

Metres, sacrifices, rites, religious observances, the past, the future, and what the Vedas proclaim—from that the illusionist creates this whole world, and in it the other remains confined by the illusory power. One recognize the illusory power as primal matter, and the illusionist, as the great Lord.

*Shvetasvatara Upanishad* 4.9–10.

We have seen thus far that the *Upanishads* assume an ultimately real physical world, and make the self a physical thing, whether a kind of stuff, or total mass of this stuff that embraces the whole universe. Only so, it seems, can they explain how the self can migrate from one bodily life, and most especially from one world, to another. The self is identified as what persists throughout the journey, but the journey is then real, and the physical side of the self is necessary to give a proper account of this journey, and of the journey ahead for one who would attain to freedom from *karma* and rebirth. But there are several elements that emerged in this complex of thought that pushed it to the verge of an idealism that would deny the reality of the physical world.

One, rather abstract, consideration occurs in the *Kaushitaki Upanishad*, which suggests that intelligence can exist only if it has something that is for it to understand, and vice versa. So the ten elements of being, namely, speech, odor, visible appearance, sound, taste, action, pleasure and pain, the bliss of procreation, movement and mind, depend for their being on intelligence, and intelligence depends on them for its being. The reason given for this is that without both, an image, that is, a subjective awareness of something, could not occur. So appearance is all, but the appearance has a double aspect, that which appears, being, and that which apprehends what appears, intelligence, *prajna*, or breath, which is identified both as the self, and the Lord, who lives in immortal bliss and directs the universe. There is no genuine diversity here. Intelligence and what is known are in truth but one thing—apparently they must be because they depend on one another for their existence, and therefore cannot but be aspects of some one thing. This may come close to Idealism, for the identification of the true self as the center of consciousness might well lead one to think the true nature of physical realities resides entirely in their being objects of awareness. Nonetheless, the *Kaushitaki Upanishad*

remains as physicalist as the rest of the Upanishadic literature, insisting that intelligence and all that arises from it is breath. It feels the need to take the physical as real so that it can give a proper explanatory account of awareness and the journeys of the self to its various worlds.

The *Shvetasvatara Upanishad* reflects Samkhya thought as well as the theistic bent found in the later portions of the *Gita*. In one strand of its thinking, the world consists of material nature (*prakriti*), conceived as female, joined to an active, but unknowing, masculine force, a single knowing Lord who activates and controls material nature, and the Self, the enjoyer who is aware of all this, who is explicitly distinguished from the Lord, on the ground that it is subject to pleasure and suffering.<sup>100</sup> Material nature is joined to the enjoyer, as well as the objects of enjoyment, apparently because the enjoyer is the breath (Brahman, the immense one hidden in all beings), which also constitutes the objects it is aware of. Yoga is enjoined that one might come to perceive the true nature of the self, solitary and free from sorrow,<sup>101</sup> which suggests the classical, naturalistic Upanishadic view of the self as Brahman, the breath of the world. But it is also suggested that we must come to know the Lord, and thereby become immortal, and it is the supernatural Lord, not the inherent nature of things, or the passage of time, that makes the wheel of Brahman go round.<sup>102</sup> Like the *Gita*, the text merges two contradictory approaches.

At one point a third image intrudes, identifying material nature as an illusory power, and the Lord as an illusionist.<sup>103</sup> The image smacks of idealism, but it is clear that we must not press it too hard here. The illusions that are created seem to be sensory imagery, and insofar as material nature produces that in the enjoyer, the reality of the physical process seems to be maintained. As in the *Kaushitaki Upanishad*, though, sensory appearances are made the lynch pin of the cosmic process. The notion that things behave as they do because of their “inherent natures,” and that the world arose simply in the course of time, in short, naturalism,

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<sup>100</sup>*Shvetasvatara Upanishad* 1.2, 8-9, 12.

<sup>101</sup>*Shvetasvatara Upanishad* 2.14.

<sup>102</sup>*Shvetasvatara Upanishad* 3.7, and the entirety of Chapter 6, which explicitly rejects the naturalistic view (6.1), asserts that suffering cannot come to an end before one has seen the Lord and taken refuge in him (6.18, 6.20), and insists that this new doctrine of the Lord was proclaimed in a former world cycle, before the Vedas arose (6.22)!

<sup>103</sup>*Shvetasvatara Upanishad* 4.9-10. The *Brihadaranyaka* 4.3.9-10 compares the natural world to the world of dreams produced by the sleeper, who is called the creator of that world, but it is not idealist, for it continues to regard the natural world as a reality independent of the knower. So the *Maitri Upanishad*, a late work, describes the world as a “mass of perception” (6.17), as do some of the other *Upanishads*, echoing, it seems, Yajnavalkya’s description of the individual as a mass of thought (*Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* 2.4.12).

is explicitly rejected.<sup>104</sup> It is Brahman who is the ultimate cause behind development and change in the world. The idea is that the physical world is a public dream, the dream of Brahman, as it were, and so shared by all the different selves with different viewpoints that are the same as Brahman. Thus Brahman creates the public world in the way we have seen that an individual creates a private world in his dreams. Behind the dream of Brahman, which is apparently identical to the physical processes producing the world, lies the activity the Lord. We are still some distance from Idealism, though, for the productive activity of the Lord is still seen as working itself out in a physical reality. Material nature and its companion force may not be the ultimate source of things, but they play a role in producing appearances. Nonetheless, There is fertile material in both *Upanishads* for a true Idealist to seize upon, and take as metaphor for his own doctrine.

## 12. THE WORSHIP OF SHIVA AND VISHNU

In roughly the period of the *Upanishads* and somewhat later, there occurred several other important religious developments. One was the establishment of the cult of Shiva. In the Vedic hymns the god Rudra, “the Howler,” was worshiped as a personification of the destructive powers of nature. He was a very old, pre-Aryan god, who may appear among the relics of the Indus Valley civilization. He lived in the mountains, wore a hide, and braided his hair. He was invoked in order that he might become auspicious, or *shiva*, and he is usually called “Shiva” in later parts of the *Vedas*. He came to be seen as the patron and pattern of the ascetics, and in the *Svetasvatara Upanishad* he is said to be knowable through *bhakti*, or loving devotion. His grace is earned through this devotion, and is necessary for salvation. This is merged with the notion that one must come to know the One ground of all things to escape from *karma*, for Shiva is identified with the Atman and Brahma behind all things.<sup>105</sup>

The cult of Vishnu also arose in the period after the *Upanishads*. Vishnu is the Vedic Sun god, regarded as the supreme god in the Brahmanas and some of the older *Upanishads*. A second contribution to later Vaishnavism is to be found in the cult of the god Narayana, “the abode” or “resting place” of men. In the *Mahanarayana Upanishad*, a late work, he takes the place Shiva holds in the *Svetasvatara Upanishad*. The third element that entered into Vaishnavism was the religion of the *Bhagavad Gita*, a theistic worship of a high creator

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<sup>104</sup>*Svetasvatara Upanishad* 6.1-2.

<sup>105</sup>See Hiriyanna (1940) 33-34.

god of justice, the “Bhagavan” or “Worshipful.” These elements were all merged in a strict theistic religion without the monism sometimes found in Saivism, when it was suggested that Vishnu-Narayana assumes various forms or incarnations, his *avatars* (descents), and that Sri Krishna was such an avatar. An Avatar arrives whenever things grow bad enough to need God’s intervention (4.7). The syncretistic drive found in Indian religion is furthered by this theory, for the gods of the other religions can be viewed as Avatars of Vishnu. Even the Buddha is regarded as one of the ten principal incarnations of Vishnu. The religion emphasized loving devotion to the God as the means of redemption, and condemns animal sacrifices (that is, the chief ritual of Brahmanism).<sup>106</sup>

The cults of Vishnu and Shiva represent popular movements, rooted largely in the Shamanistic underworld of Aryan religion, and, at least initially, they were opposed to the Brahmanism served by the *Vedas*. As they developed, the ritualism of Vedic religion was systematized and intensified. The *Kalpa Sutras* in particular, voluminous works, are divided in theory into three parts. The first, the *Srauta Sutras*, described and systematized the ritual of the Brahmanas. The associated *Sulva Sutras* gave directions for measuring and constructing the sacrificial ground and the altars, and form the first Indian treatment of geometry. The second, the *Grhya Sutras*, treated household ritual, including some forty rites pertinent to all the major turning points in life, including birth, initiation as one of the twice-born (a member of one of the three Aryan castes), entering on one’s education, marriage, death, and rites for the departed soul. The third part of the *Kalpa Sutras*, the *Dharma Sutras* (7<sup>th</sup> to 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries BCE) regulated individual conduct so that one would be worthy to conduct the rituals. In actuality, each text in these three groups must be regarded as a separate composition, their kernel sometimes going back to around 500 BCE. These texts were appended to the *Vedas*, and are called *Vedangas*. In the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> centuries CE, the *Dharma Sutras* were expanded and put into verse, making up the *Dharma Shastras*, of which the earliest is the *Manava Dharma Shastra*, or *Manu Smriti*. (*Smriti* forms the second great class of Hindu religious literature, “that which is remembered,” as opposed to the *sruti*, the Vedic literature, “that which is heard”). This is called in the West the *Laws of Manu*. The dharma literature was extensive and complex, intended for study by the Brahmins, who would be consulted by the laity on any issue that arose. The *Dharma Shastras* actually had standing in the courts of law, and specified penalties and restitutions for violations. Among other classes of dharmas, they describe common dharmas that are binding on everyone independently of caste—self-control, kindness, truthfulness, and the like, including altruistic duties toward animals, which have

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<sup>106</sup>See Hiriyanra (1940) 34-36.

rights, but no duties. Specific dharmas are also described, which apply to particular groups, some depending on caste and the stages of life appropriate to the upper three castes, that is, in the order in which one enters on them, the occupations of a student of the *Vedas*, a householder, a forest hermit, and a wandering mendicant. (The last is condemned in some of the *Dharma Sutras*.) Every householder, for instance, is expected to make five great sacrifices: studying the *Vedas*, sacrificing to the gods, honoring guests, making oblations to ancestors, and offering food to the birds. On the whole, the *Dharma Sutras* clearly intend to introduce the most important innovations of the *Upanishads* and related protest movements into the Brahminic religion.<sup>107</sup> Another class of *smṛiti* is the *Itihāsa*, that is, history, actually legends about Kings and sages of the remote past. The two most noted works in this class are the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*.

### 13. THE BHAGAVAD GITA

Be intent on Action, not on the fruits of action;  
 Avoid attraction to the fruits,  
 And attachment to inaction!

*Bhagavad Gita* 2.47

He who sees me everywhere  
 and sees everything in me  
 will not be lost to me,  
 and I will not be lost to him.

*Bhagavad Gita* 6.30

I grant unwavering faith  
 to any devoted man who wants  
 to worship any form  
 with faith. . . .

But finite is the reward  
 that comes to men of little wit;  
 men who sacrifice to the gods reach the gods;  
 those devoted to me reach me.

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<sup>107</sup>See Hirianna (1940) 36-39; Basham (1989) 68 ff.; 98 ff. The present-day ritual life of India is controlled by the *Tantra*, a group of texts regarded as the revelation of Shiva specific to the present world age. The *shakti*, the female personification of the energy associated with the passive male god (Hindus view the female as the active principle, the male as passive) is the center of much of the cultic practice found in the *Tantra*, providing a female counterpoise to the Vedic, male-dominated tradition. There is no caste prerequisite for the use of Tantric ritual, or esoteric initiation into its meaning. (See Zimmer (1957) 62 (note by Joseph Campbell).)

*Bhagavad Gita* 9.21, 23

The scripture at the foundation of modern Hindu practices, the *Bhagavad Gita*, is embedded in the *Mahabharata*, which recounts a cycle of legends concerning the struggle between the five sons of Pandu and their enemies, the one hundred sons of Dhrtrastra, over the throne of Kuru land. The basic story accumulated accretions of all sorts over a long time until it became an immense and varied collection. The *Bhagavad Gita* is a dialogue between the chief of the sons of Pandu, Arjuna, and a sage friend of his family, Krishna, just prior to the great battle in which the sons of Pandu gained the throne. The *Gita* was compiled in three stages between 300 and 100 BCE. In its final rendition it is a defense of orthodox Hinduism against the unorthodox schools that opposed it, in particular Buddhism, Jainism and Carvaka. The first stage answers the question put to Krishna by Arjuna—why should he fight in this battle, given the bad things likely to come of it? It affirms the necessity of following the dharma appropriate to one's caste and station in life, and suggests that we need not gain bad *karma* even by killing, so long as we perform our duty simply as such, without attachment or self-serving desire. The second stage expanded this brief statement to something out of all proportion to an urgent discussion just before the armies join. As reported, the dialogue would have delayed the battle half a day or more. This second stratum of text is fundamentally Brahmanic and Upanishadic, greatly expanding the brief answer of the first stratum of the text. The third stratum of text, interleaved with the second in a way that makes it sometimes difficult to disentangle from it, was added by a theist, who identifies Krishna as an Avatar or incarnation of the one God, entirely distinct from the world and the self, who made the world. He substitutes for Yoga a gospel of *bhakti*, devotion to the god, engendering grace by which one is forgiven any failures and saved, that is, brought to the everlasting heaven of the highest God. This last redactor of the text insists it is the direct word of God, for Krishna is both God and man, so that its authority is the equal of the *Vedas*. Moreover, the doctrine he teaches is *older* than the *Vedas*, and was taught by earlier Avatars of God who have been forgotten.<sup>108</sup> This theism no doubt appealed to the common man far more than the Yogic approach of the *Upanishads*, providing a far more practicable way to salvation. The third stratum of the text flatly contradicts the first two on essential points, but the orthodox interpreters of the *Gita* insist that the two are reconcilable, often stretching the text out of all sense to make the theistic texts mere exoteric expressions of the deeper truths expressed in the Yogic texts. The numerous cults of lesser gods are given their due as well by the theistic texts, for devotion to a lesser

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<sup>108</sup>*Bhagavad-gita* 4.1–3.

god will win that god's heaven. It is only that his heaven is not as good as that of the highest God, and is not, of course, permanently gained.<sup>109</sup>

The opening of the *Gita* recounts how Arjuna speaks to his charioteer, Krishna, asking him to pull his chariot up between the two armies just as the battle is about to commence, and then, “overcome with compassion,” he speaks of the many evils about to come from the battle, the death of kinsmen, the crime of killing, the destruction of social order, leading finally even to the mixture of castes, and the failure of sacrifices to the ancestors. Symbolically, the chariot in which Arjuna rides is the body with its senses as the horses, and the surrounding environment as the world, in which a person must lay claim to his own and assert himself in its defense—Arjuna is Everyman. Arjuna's compassion often seems well-founded to Western minds, and surely the resolution of Arjuna's doubts by Krishna, leads to slaughter and destruction. But the situation is at least honestly drawn. The Jains and Buddhists, who are addressed here, were both pacifistic, and their pacifism went so far that following it out seemed to threaten the whole social order. The Jains would have starved had they followed their principles and not allowed non-Jains to do their dirty work for them. The Buddhists, though they did not take the doctrine of *ahimsa* (not harming others) in Jainism to the point where one was unable to survive in the world, still rejected the caste system and were critical of the social order they observed around them, in particular, of the ideals of the Kshatriya. The opposition between the *Gita* and practices and edicts of King Asoka, for instance, is clear. No doubt many among the nobles would have held that Asoka's pacifism was a violation of his duties, his dharma as a Kshatriya, and likely to lead to disaster for the kingdom. The reaction to these movements was somewhat like our own reaction to pacifists in time of war. It just wasn't practical, however noble it sounded, and if one looked into it more closely, it could be seen that killing in a just cause was not only permissible, but one's duty. War is terrible, yet the warrior must embark on it, for it is his duty to his fellows to do so. This situation stands in for a thousand more more ordinary situations we face every day—how can we justify eating meat, or embracing economic practices that condemn some to poverty, or taking advantage of the position we are born to, including our natural intelligence and talents, forcing others to lose out in the competition? We shall see that withdrawal from society and the world was the recommendation of the Buddhists and Jains in view of their clear-sighted understanding of just what injustices and crimes were involved even in commonplace actions, while completely ignoring one's duty and seeking

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<sup>109</sup>*Bhagavad Gita* 9.20–25. See Basham (1989) 82 ff. for this analysis of the text. Higher criticism has not been generally accepted in Indian circles, and such an analysis of the text as Basham suggests would be rejected by any Orthodox Hindu, but it seems clearly to be correct.

pleasure was the recommendation of the Carvaka. How then do we affirm the wisdom of doing one's secular duty and leading a secular life?

Krishna's answer is rooted in the ascetic teachings evolved from the *Upanishads*, but it is fundamentally an ethical reply to an ethical question. He begins with reincarnation, arguing that "nothing of the non-existent comes to be, nor does being cease to be."<sup>110</sup> The implied argument is that ultimate underlying realities must be without beginning and everlasting, for only those non-ultimate realities that come to be by the combination of the ultimate realities can admit of creation or destruction. One's self, though, must be an ultimate reality (an assumption denied by the Buddhists), and so we are driven to the doctrine of reincarnation. The upshot of this is that we cannot really slay another person, that is, destroy the person himself—"he who thinks this self a killer, and he who thinks it is killed, both fail to understand . . . it is not killed when the body is killed."<sup>111</sup> We only put an end to one stage of his existence. The true self here is identified as the unmanifest, and said to be unchanging. Thus the arguments against fighting based in its evil consequences are shown to have no basis.

Moreover, Krishna continues, death is inevitable anyway, if the end of this particular lifetime is what is meant by "death," and one should not grieve for what is inevitable.<sup>112</sup> As before, this is perhaps too briefly stated. The point may be that one cannot end the suffering of other creatures by withdrawing from life. Most of the suffering one imposes on others is arguably suffering they would have exacted from someone else anyway, if one had not been there, since most of us bring most of our suffering on ourselves. This would be especially applicable to Arjuna's enemies, for Arjuna allows that they have put themselves in their current position by their accumulated *Karma*.<sup>113</sup> Even suffering that results from one's position in society is due to bad *karma*, and refusing to act within society is not going to remedy that bad *karma*. To aid others at all is something that can only be done by teaching them to do their duty for its own sake, and avoid bad *karma*. What is required is to act well or justly, to provide an example, and perhaps to teach. So making his living by begging, that is, joining the Buddhist or Jain mendicant orders, will not help anything, and is not better, as Arjuna suggests it may be,<sup>114</sup> than killing his old teachers in the battle.

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<sup>110</sup>*Gita* 1.16.

<sup>111</sup>*Bhagavad Gita* 2.19–20.

<sup>112</sup>*Bhagavad Gita* 2.26–27.

<sup>113</sup>*Bhagavad Gita* 1.38.

<sup>114</sup>*Bhagavad Gita* 2.5.

Finally, there is a positive reason to join in the battle, once we have seen that the consequences of our actions for ourselves or others would not justify withdrawing from the battle, for it is our duty (*dharma*), and by doing our duty we gain good *karma* and attain to the heavens. Moreover, there are worldly considerations here, for not doing our duty leads to deserved shame. And if we are worried about gaining bad *karma* due to the consequences of our actions, then we need only act without attachment, “impartial to joy and suffering, gain and loss, victory and defeat,” and we must do our duty.<sup>115</sup> In effect, Krishna argues that our actions have good *karma* or bad depending on their motivation, not on their outcome, and so we must act purely from duty, and then only will our actions will gain good *karma*.

Thus ends the original speech, and answers Arjuna’s question. What follows was added later, and constitutes a considerable expansion on what has been said up to this point, backing it up with a general picture of the world. Krishna begins by criticizing “undiscerning men who delight in the tenets of ritual lore” and “utter florid speech, proclaiming ‘There is nothing else!’ Driven by desire, they strive after heaven.”<sup>116</sup> Clearly such followers of the strictly Brahman tradition are to be regarded as worldly fellows, just as though they sought pleasures in this life alone. The point is not to do one’s best within the world, but to get free of it. This freedom is accomplished by acting without attachment to the fruits of one’s action, which leads to experience of the true self, an experience which then removes even the taste for experienced things.<sup>117</sup> Once this is achieved, one does one’s duty with the awareness that “I do nothing at all”—only the senses, not the self, are occupied with things of the senses, and the soul has been recognized as the self of all beings.<sup>118</sup>

The involvement in *karma* arises in the end from dwelling on the objects of the senses, which is something over and above merely having some desire for or aversion to them. It is a matter of worrying at the desire or aversion, planning for it, talking about it to oneself, imagining its satisfaction, and so on, until one becomes attached to the satisfaction of one’s desire in such a way that for his life to be satisfactory to him at all, he *must* have it. So, the text says, from dwelling on the objects of the senses springs attachment to them, and from this springs desire, that is, the special sort of desire that *must* have its object, or else everything is ruined. From such a desire arises anger (at the prospect of its non-fulfillment, others’ not caring, and so on), and from

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<sup>115</sup>*Gita* 2.38.

<sup>116</sup>*Gita* 2.42-43.

<sup>117</sup>*Gita* 2.59.

<sup>118</sup>*Gita* 5.6-9.

this bewilderment and loss of memory, leading to the destruction of intelligence. One’s intellectual powers become confused and infected by the desire, so that one willfully refuses to believe what is evident (“bewilderment”), begins to misremember past events, and finally becomes unable to consider intelligently and effectively how to proceed. The man is now no longer capable of finding the way to freedom, due to his self-deceptive practices and the loss of contact with reality they have produced, and so he perishes.<sup>119</sup> Given the chain of events responsible for our perishing, what we must do is go back to the root of it, and gain control of the senses, so that we do not dwell on their objects. This all grounds a form of meditation in which the yogin sits, motionless and erect, upon a mat, alone, and concentrates his mind one-pointedly on the self, bringing the mind back to its concentration whenever it wanders away. This does not seem to be a matter of eliminating sensory experience, or even the natural desires that arise as a result of this experience, but simply a refusal to become wrapped up in, to identify with or place one’s self in, these experiences or desires. It results eventually in the vision of one’s self abiding in all beings (probably held simultaneously with experience of this empirical world), and all beings in one’s self.<sup>120</sup> This meditation is not involved with austerities, but to pursue it successfully one must be temperate in eating, sleeping and recreation.<sup>121</sup> The meditation is declared to be very difficult, though not impossible, but if a man cannot succeed in attaining the realization who he really is through such meditation, the honest attempt will nonetheless guarantee him rebirth in a heaven, and after that in surroundings conducive to returning to the effort.<sup>122</sup> The yogin who follows this practice is greater than the Brahmin with his sacrifices, greater than the ascetic, and greater than the man of knowledge.<sup>123</sup> This discussion is closely connected to Buddhist discussions of the chain of causation leading to rebirth, and the form of meditation advised to attain *nirvana*<sup>124</sup> is very close to Buddhist practice, except, of course, that the aim of Buddhist meditation is to come to the final realization that there is no self at all, not to an awareness of the true, transcendental self lying behind the illusory empirical self.

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<sup>119</sup>*Gita* 2.62-64. The parallel to the chain of causes in Buddhism, which mounts instead from ignorance, i.e. the view that there is a self, is no doubt intentional.

<sup>120</sup>*Gita* 6.10-15, 24-32.

<sup>121</sup>*Gita* 6.16-17. Again, the Buddhist “middle way” is echoed.

<sup>122</sup>*Gita* 6.33-45. Also a Buddhist view, so that those who are zealous but fail to achieve the aim are often identified as thrice-returners, people who will achieve nirvana within their next three lives.

<sup>123</sup>*Gita* 6.46.

<sup>124</sup>The word used at *Gita* 6.15 for the extinction of the illusory self.

The *Gita* also teaches the doctrine that one's state of mind at the point of transmigration determines whether one will be reincarnated, or instead attain to the absolute Self, and end this round of births. In the theistic parts of the text the final state required to attain to the highest heaven, and escape all further rebirths in the lower worlds, is one of devotion to God. But in the yogic portions of the work, the required state is the concentration just described, so that one utters the syllable *Aum* with his mind focused on the true self as one dies.<sup>125</sup> The idea is old. In the *Upanishads* the *atman* must, at one's death, depart through the top of the head if it is to attain to the heaven of Brahman.

As for the strategy of acting without attachment that is to accompany this meditation, it is necessary in part because life is impossible without work, and we are so constructed that we cannot actually manage to be inactive.<sup>126</sup> The fellow who renounces work is irresponsible, for he needs the work of others so that he can live. One may wonder why this matters to the yogin, since the *true* self does not need work to live, and the work of others is no product of their true selves. Later in the *Gita*, it is argued that renunciation of works is in fact a way to salvation, but is very hard to achieve unless one attains to detachment through the proper performance of works first.<sup>127</sup> So the yogin is advised that a premature renunciation of work in this life is an expression of exploitive laziness, not of detachment. This, of course, implies a criticism of the Buddhist practice of renunciation early in life, before completing one's societal work.

So we must work, but do our work as a sacrifice, in order to become free from attachment. We should do our work not for our own sake, but for the sake of God or duty, and so become free from attachment to its results. Not to work at all will leave one attached to *not* working. Also, though, it was Brahmin doctrine that the world had been brought into existence by a sacrifice, and was continued in existence by repetition of this sacrifice, and this reinterprets that doctrine in such a way that the repetition of the sacrifice becomes, not some formal ritual performed now and again, but the work of those who make up the world and maintain it in order.<sup>128</sup>

As a matter of fact, the work that one does is done by the three *gunas* that make up material nature

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<sup>125</sup>*Gita* 8.11-13. Again, we may compare Buddhism, and stories of the death of the Buddha in which he goes through the full round of meditative states, repeating the process of his enlightenment, at the point of death.

<sup>126</sup>*Gita* 3.8, 3.5.

<sup>127</sup>*Gita* 5.6.

<sup>128</sup>*Gita* 3.8-16.

(*prakriti*) in Samkhya thought, and it is due to material nature that works are connected with their appropriate *karma*. In effect, different works strengthen one or another of the three strands, and so determine one's next birth. The Self (which stands above the intellect, and that above the mind-organ, which is above the senses)<sup>129</sup> actually does no work, though it is deluded into thinking it does by a sense of self that arises in it. (This means that a yogin who has advanced beyond illusion should not have any aversion to work, since it does not involve him, and, after all, it is his duty to support himself if he chooses to continue this life.) The whole doctrine is Samkhya, and it clearly implies that the Self lies outside the three *gunas* that make up nature, but unlike Samkhya, it holds that there is but One such Self, Brahman, not an infinite number of them. One who does not know this becomes attached to his works.<sup>130</sup> Probably the point is that he becomes attached because he views the works as his own. Arjuna asks about the case in which one is forced to do some sin, and Krishna replies that whenever that happens a person in fact performs the sin out of desire and attachment. If one knows the Self, then nothing in this world matters except duty, and so no one who knows the Self can be forced to sin.<sup>131</sup> In laying this out several more conservative points are made, one to the effect that such esoteric doctrines as these should not be taught to those who are not ready for them and would be unsettled by them,<sup>132</sup> and another to the effect that it is our *own* work, that is, the work of our caste and stage of life, that we must do.<sup>133</sup> Clearly this Yogic wisdom is to be corrected by such advice, so that it does not disturb the social order.

The third, theistic portion of the *Bhagavad Gita* contradicts all this. It insists that there is an immutable, and inactive, eternal creator,<sup>134</sup> who is distinct from the world, so that the nature (*prakrit*), into which all things are dissolved at the end of the world cycle, is God's own, not God,<sup>135</sup> and the highest Person, God, is distinct from the other imperishable lower persons, the selves of beings in the world.<sup>136</sup> This God cannot create the

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<sup>129</sup>*Gita* 3.42.

<sup>130</sup>*Gita* 3.27-29; 5.14; 13; 14.5-25.

<sup>131</sup>*Gita* 3.36-43. The similarity of the *Gita's* view to Stoic ethics should be noted. In both cases we have an elaboration of the ethic of a military, governing caste.

<sup>132</sup>*Gita* 3.29.

<sup>133</sup>*Gita* 3.35.

<sup>134</sup>*Gita* 4.13.

<sup>135</sup>*Gita* 9.5-6.

<sup>136</sup>*Gita* 15.16-18.

world, since he is inactive, and the world always was in any case, nonetheless he is somehow responsible for the world. How can this be? We are told that God supports all things by his vital energy.<sup>137</sup> He is also said to be in the hearts of all beings, and to cause them to do what they do by his power.<sup>138</sup> Again, all things are in God and supported by God's spirit, and all states of being are in and from God, but God is not in any of these things or their states.<sup>139</sup> Not only is it denied that God is in things, but there seems to be some worry that the notion that all things are in God will be misunderstood. It is insisted that they do not dwell in Him in such a way that they behold his divine mystery, and then it is suggested that they are in Him in the way Ether is in Space.<sup>140</sup> God is independent of the things that are in Him, and exists quite nicely without them. They are things over and above (or under and below) God, with their own natures, who, though supported by God, are not aware of him. How can we put all this together? It seems that God is something other than his vital energy, and that he lends his vital energy to the universe, so that it supports, as it were, two lives, that of God, who controls all things and whose life embraces and exceeds the totality of all other things, and the lives of individual things in nature, and of individual imperishable, immaterial souls. God is said to cast his seed into nature, so that it can give rise to things.<sup>141</sup> The seed is what bears the self that organizes things into what they are. The picture envisioned is surely something like the relation of an Aristotelian organic form to the various parts of the organism. The form provides a vital energy which is responsible for the living activities of its body's organs, and one might at least imagine that the form could survive without the organism. The organs exist in the form (that is, they are utterly dependent on it for their being), but they are not identical to the form, and the form does not exist in each of the organs as their true selves (in the way it is the man's true self). In any case, though God provides the vital energy of things in this world, and that energy is the underlying reality on which all else depends, since he is not the same as any of these things, is not their true selves, it is not God that acts in things, but the things in this world that act as they are enabled to by God's energy. The one act that is, perhaps,

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<sup>137</sup>*Gita* 15.13.

<sup>138</sup>*Gita* 18.61.

<sup>139</sup>*Gita* 7.12, 9.5.

<sup>140</sup>*Gita* 9.5-6.

<sup>141</sup>*Gita* 14.3-4.

imputed to God is launching a new cosmos after the old cosmos has ended,<sup>142</sup> and here, of course, God is invoked to solve a real mystery, for with the disappearance of all individual things it is a mystery how any natural causal power could bring about the new universe, since no natural thing is present to exercise any power.

Sometimes God is presented as a being over and above the natural world we know, but sometimes he seems to be equated with it almost in the same breath as he is said to transcend it.<sup>143</sup> This tendency is especially marked in several passages in which God is represented as the Person, and treated more or less as the soul of the universe. The best way to understand this is to consider the relation of a human being to the parts of her body. We have millions of cells which lead their own lives, as it were, and the body can be considered as an aggregate of these cells, all interacting with one another and the outside world. But the human being is something more than just the additive sum of these cells and their relationships, or so, at least, it is often thought. The life of the human being is other than the life of its cells, and other than the lives of all its cells taken together, but the human being *is* that great collection of cells, and its activities seems to be the collective activities of its cells, regarded in a special way, perhaps. Something of the same view seems intended here concerning the Person. There is a way, perhaps, in which my individual life contributes to the life of God, but it does not follow that God is my true self, or that God is nothing over and above the things making up the empirically observable world.

Much of the language of the yogic portion of the text can be accommodated within this theism, but there are nonetheless a number of plain contradictions between the two traditions. For one thing, the self of an individual man, though it is identified as non-material and non-empirical, is not equated to God himself, so that final bliss is an eternal presence in the Heaven of this highest God, not the attainment of the knowledge that one is Brahman. Moreover, the manner of attaining the final bliss is redescribed as a matter of making one's work into a sacrifice to God, so that its karmic consequences are thus avoided. One might discover that one is not the agent, but, like God, does not act when the material elements act, but one also discovers that even nature does not act of its own power, but with the power of God, and that one's inactive self is supported by God. Yogic practice is a matter of offering the senses up as sacrifice, or the various breaths in the meditation

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<sup>142</sup>*Gita* 9.7-8. In a verse that seems to echo Samkhya doctrine, we are told by Krishna in 9.10 that "nature, with me as her inner eye, bears animate and inanimate beings." Here God seems to be identified as the witness, like the *purusha* in Samkhya thought. Elsewhere God is given a more active role as the source of activity or power, which is not inherent in the natural world of itself.

<sup>143</sup>So *Gita* 7.4-14; 11; 15.7 ff. In another mood, the author seems to make God especially the highest and most perfect form of each thing, if that is the way to take *Gita* 10.19 ff.

of breath control in Yoga.<sup>144</sup> In short, every religious practice is authorized, as long as it is performed as a sacrifice to God. Now one might think that it is the will which brings one to salvation in this Theism—the attainment of wisdom of the yogic sort, awareness of one’s true self, is praised as the “sacrifice” that is most effective in bringing one to salvation.<sup>145</sup> This is because this sacrifice leads to, perhaps, an awareness of the power of God underlying events, including one’s own actions. Or this sacrifice enables one, by turning away from grasping after one’s self, to be devoted to God. A comparison to Christian mysticism seems in order, here. It is emphasized that faith is needed, not a doubting character, if one is to attain this wisdom,<sup>146</sup> which might mean that one must have faith in the efficacy of yogic practice in order to work hard enough at it to get the results desired from it. In any case, the effect of this wisdom is to enable devotion of the purest sort to God.

[[Vision of God replaces the merging with Brahman — devotion to God, Bhakhti, as effective way to gain aim of one’s religion (multiple avatars etc.).

#### 14. THE ISHA UPANISHAD

The whole world is to be dwelt in by the Lord,  
 whatever living being there is in the world.  
 So you should eat what has been abandoned,  
 and do not covet anyone’s wealth. . .

When a man sees all beings  
 within his very self,  
 And his self within all beings,  
 It will not seek to hide from him.

When in the self of a discerning man,  
 his very self has become all beings,  
 What bewilderment, what sorrow can there be  
 regarding that self of him who sees this oneness.

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<sup>144</sup>Gita 4.23 ff..

<sup>145</sup>Gita 4.33-38; 18.50 ff. Makes the attainment of oneness with Brahman valuable because, “becoming impartial to all beings, one obtains supreme devotion to Me. By devotion one truly understands what and who I am in essence. Having known me in essence, one merges into me.” How one attains perfection through natural work is discussed in 18.45-49.

<sup>146</sup>Gita 4.39-40.

He has reached the seed—without body or wound,  
without sinews, not riddled by evil.  
Self-existent and all-encompassing,  
the wise sage has dispensed objects through endless years.

*Isha Upanishad 1, 6–8*

The *Isha Upanishad* is a short work that reacts against the views of the *Baghavad Gita*. It begins with an assertion of the necessity of vegetarianism for salvation, so that one kills no conscious being, raises and answers a series of objections, and then addresses a prayer to the Self identified in the course of this discussion as the one self of all beings.<sup>147</sup>

The opening verse asserts that the whole world was intended to be dwelt in by the Lord, who is identified as awareness, and for that reason, it is argued that if one encounters some portion of the world that already has the Lord dwelling in it, that is, a living being with consciousness, one must not take his dwelling from him. So one may not kill or harm anything, for it will amount to harming the Lord. One is permitted to take as food only what is abandoned by the Lord, that is, things already dead, or perhaps plants, which are not conscious. (It seems clear that the Lord here is taken to be the self of these beings, not something standing outside them that created them. The Lord is *in* these beings, it is not only that they are in the Lord.)

Then an alternative approach is suggested, which could be taken right out of the *Gita*. One should “just perform works in this world,” and if one does this unattached, *karma* will not be acquired. The response is that “those who kill the self go to demonic worlds,” and the intention seems to be that those who kill the Self are those who kill any conscious being. The objector replies that the Self stands outside this world, even if it is also within it, and so (presumably this is the point) it cannot be harmed. As Krishna told Arjuna, no one is actually killed.

To this the response is made that if we are to achieve the saving vision, and come to see ourselves as we truly are, we must come to see all beings as ourselves, and our self in all beings. Thus the Self is not so very hard to know or relate to, since the self is encountered everywhere in this world where consciousness is encountered. But that means that if we actually do identify Self as ourselves, we will have the same regard for all beings as ourselves, and so will harm no one. The objection is renewed with the observation that knowing the self is not a matter of ordinary knowledge (and so not recognition of the self in the cow, say), nor is it sheer

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<sup>147</sup>For this *Upanishad*, see the notes to Olivelle’s translation of the *Upanishads*, in which he depends on an analysis of the work in a German article by Paul Thieme.

ignorance, but something that is neither of these. The idea, of course, is that knowledge of the self is a kind of self awareness without an external object. So one retreats into this absolute self awareness and this absolute self, and the world and our actions in it are no longer important. The final answer to this line of argument is that there is no such thing that is neither quite knowledge nor quite ignorance, but rather one must have both together. That is, one must have the positive aspects of both, not the negative aspects of both. So the positive side of knowledge of the world we know outside us through the senses is that there is genuine experience here of the other, and knowledge of self must be combined with this to gain the true knowledge of Self. That is, one must perceive one's self as outside oneself in the objects one knows in the world. To simply get rid of knowledge of the other will simultaneously get rid of the knowledge of the Self. The Self, again, is not something beyond both this world of becoming and the hypothetical world of the eternal and unchanging, but rather simultaneously both. It is the unchanging Self found in the external world of becoming.

This certainly seems to reject the view of the *Gita* that we ought simply do the duties of our caste, whatever violence or injustice might be entailed therein, but it also rejects Buddhist thought. This is not a recommendation that we recognize that we have no selves, but rather urges a correct view of what our self is. Indeed, one suspects that the author thought the Buddhist line, followed out consistently, would give the same result as that of the *Gita*—if there is no self, then we have no reason even to have regard for our own welfare, much less that of others. So the *Isha Upanishda* recommends an engagement in life, with a concern for the welfare of all, since none differ in themselves from the pure awareness which is ourselves.

The *Isha Upanishad* presents a variant of the older Yogic strain in the *Gita*, omitting any mention of the Lord who made and controls the world, and is to be distinguished from the Self. Indeed, when it speaks of the Lord it identifies it with the Self that is in all things. It reflects the turn away from Caste duties to a view of morality rooted in a refusal to harm others, and seems to think it important how one leads one's life in this world. Indeed, given the doctrine we have found here, some sort of empirical life in contact with others is necessary to bliss. One who attains to the end, according to this text, will attain bliss in this world by identifying with (or at least not distinguishing himself from) all the others he encounters in this world.

## **15. THE PURANAS AND VAISHNAVISM**

In the course of the first millenium CE, Hinduism became increasingly dominated by the Theistic element expressed in the *Gita*, and became sectarian, the sects of Vishnu, Shiva, and Shakti (the feminine

emanation of Shiva—Parvati or the dark goddess of death, Kali) being the most popular. These sects tended to center on a new form of worship for India, the ceremonial of a temple, and the Vedic sacrifices were gradually displaced. The most important documents for these developments in Hinduism are the *Puranas*, eighteen collections of legends, myths, and moral precepts, all of which appeared in their present form about 400-600 CE, though much of the material within them is far more ancient. The *Vayu Purana* belongs to the Saivas. The *Vishnu Purana* and the later *Bhagavata Purana*, with the *Harivamsa*, an appendix to the *Mahabharata* traditionally considered a *Purana*, all describe the Vaishnavite sects. The *Vishnu Purana* represents the Vaishnas as naked, ash-covered ascetics, ignoring caste and sex distinctions, and living in cemeteries. Their principle symbol was the *lingam*, an erect penis, representing the power obtained by Shiva through the ascetic practice of retaining and storing one's semen in the sexual act. Stories of Krishna as a cowherd, Krishna Gopala, and his love for and dance with the milkmaids, derive from this work. The stories argue that human love is a possible form of saving devotion to God. The conception of *bhakti* as the way to salvation opened up the highest spiritual aims to everyone, however uneducated. The *Bhagavata Purana* develops this theme especially.

The victory of Vaishnavite Theism was in part due to the fact that it became the state religion of the Gupta dynasty, the *varaha*, or boar incarnation of Vishnu becoming the symbol of royal power. The building of temples is due in large part to state moneys that became available. *Puja*, the temple worship, was conceived as a matter of paying homage and offering entertainment, much in the way that one might serve a noble house guest. The practice is basically the old Middle East practice of caring for the image of the god, offering it food, clothing it, taking it to its bedroom at night, and so on. A simplified version of the thing was done for images of the god in the home. The image is paraded on festival days, drawn on a chariot which can be of huge proportions. At the most important festival of Vishnu, as Jagannatha, Lord of the World, at Puri in Orissa, the chariot's wheels sometimes, by accident or as a sacrifice, crushed people beneath it (one is reminded of the running of the bulls in Pamplona)—hence the “juggernaut.”

The Smarta tradition merged these Puranic traditions with more traditional Upanishadic conceptions, worshipping Vishnu, Shiva, Surya, Ganesha (an elephant-headed god, son of Shiva and Parvati), and Shiva's consort, Durga. The Smarta temple worship involved Vedic ritual, performed as a duty rather than a means to salvation. This became the fundamental upper-class form of religious practice. Philosophy provided its own upper-class religious beliefs. Shankara (9th century CE) propounded a strict idealistic monism, which became popular among upper-class intellectuals, and is the basis of modern Vedanta, and Maharesi Yogi's transcendental meditation. Shankara's system seems to have stirred up a northern, monistic Saivite reaction,

which attributed personality to the One. The popular worship of Shiva as a God of grace found philosophical expression in the thought of Ramanuja (11th and 12th centuries), who argued explicitly against Shankara's interpretation of the old texts.

The worship of Shiva's consort as the Shakti Kali, or Parvati, led to the formation of esoteric tantric groups in the Northeast which conducted rites within their small, closed groups in close touch with the original worshipers of Shiva living in the graveyards. Their meetings included ritual sexual intercourse, in some groups promiscuous, in some only between spouses, in which the woman had the status of the divinity with which the male partner hoped to gain union. Such groups still exist in Bengal, and lie behind the tantric forms of Buddhism.

In the late 15<sup>th</sup> century in Bengal, Caitanya established an intense devotional sect of Vaishnavites, given to ecstatic dancing and hymn-singing, which we know in the West today as the Hare Krishna cult. Sikhism, a blend of Islam, Christianity, and Hindu theology, was established at about the same time by Nanak, and it grew strong in the Northwest.<sup>148</sup>

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<sup>148</sup>This section summarizes Basham (1989) 106-115.