

the *miasma* that had infected the entire family. Instead of wavering, like her sister Ismene, Antigone proudly took possession of her suffering and—literally—“walked in solitary pride” into her tomb.

The dream of enlightenment, Sophocles seemed to be telling his polis, was an illusion. Despite their extraordinary cultural and intellectual achievements, human beings still faced overwhelming pain. Their skills, their principles, their piety, and their reasoning powers could not save them from *dukkha*, which they experienced not as the result of their own karma, but from a divine source outside themselves. Mortal men and women were not in charge of their destiny. They must do everything in their power to avoid tragedy—as Antigone did. But when they had come to the end of endeavour, they could only accept their fate unflinchingly and with courage. This, Sophocles suggested, was what constituted human greatness. But in India, the dream of enlightenment was not dead. Indeed, it was becoming a tangible reality to more people than ever before.

A spiritual vacuum had also opened up in India, and new sages worked energetically, even desperately, to find a fresh solution. By the late fifth century, the doctrine of karma, which had been controversial at the time of Yajnavalkya, was now universally accepted.¹⁰¹ Men and women believed that they were all caught up in the endless cycle of death and rebirth; their desires impelled them to act, and the quality of their actions would determine their state in the next life. Bad karma would mean that they could be reborn as slaves, animals, or plants. Good karma would ensure their rebirth as kings or gods. But this was not a happy ending: even gods would exhaust this beneficial karma, would die and be reborn in a less exalted state on earth. As this new concept took hold, the mood of India changed and many became depressed. They felt doomed to one transient life after another. Not even good karma could save them. When they looked around their community, they could see only pain and suffering. Even wealth and material pleasure was overshadowed by the grim reality of impending old age and mortality. In fact, they believed, worldly goods “sap . . . the energy of all the senses,” and hastened their decline.¹⁰² As this gloom intensified, people struggled to find a way out.

More and more people became disenchanted with the old Vedic rituals, which could not provide a solution to this problem. The best they could offer was rebirth in the world of the gods, but in the light of the new philosophy, this could only be a temporary release from the relentless

recurrence of suffering and death. Further, people were beginning to notice that the rites did not even produce the material benefits they promised. Some rejected the ritual science of the *Brahmanas*. The Upanishads promised final liberation, but this spirituality was not for everybody. It was based on a close familiarity with the minutiae of Vedic thought that most people simply did not have, and many were doubtful about the identity of the brahman and atman, on which the whole system depended. Yoga offered *moksha*, but how did the yogin interpret the tranced states that he experienced? Could they be reconciled with Vedic orthodoxy? The Upanishads that were composed at about this time asserted that they could. The Katha Upanishad claimed that the atman (the true self) controlled the body in the same way as a rider managed his chariot. The yogin learned to keep his mind and senses under control like the good horses of a chariot driver. In this way, a person who “has understanding is mindful and always pure,” and would achieve release from the endless cycle of rebirth.¹⁰³ But others were convinced that yoga was not enough. Something more was needed.

Yoga was a full-time job. It demanded hours of effort each day, and was clearly incompatible with the duties of a householder. By the sixth century, most people thought that the householder had no chance of achieving *moksha*, because he was a slave to karma, compelled by the duties of his class to perform one action after another, each fuelled by the desire that was the root of the problem. A householder could not beget children without desire. He could not wage war, grow his crops, or engage in business without wanting to succeed. Each action led to a new round of duties that bound him to the inexorable cycle of samsara. The only way to find release was to “go forth” into the forest and become a hermit or a mendicant, who had none of these tasks. People in India did not regard the renouncers as feeble dropouts, but revered them as intrepid pioneers, who, at considerable cost to themselves, were trying to find a spiritual solution for humanity. Because of the prevailing despair in the region, many were longing for a Jina, a spiritual conqueror, or a Buddha, an Enlightened One, who had “woken up” to a different dimension of existence.

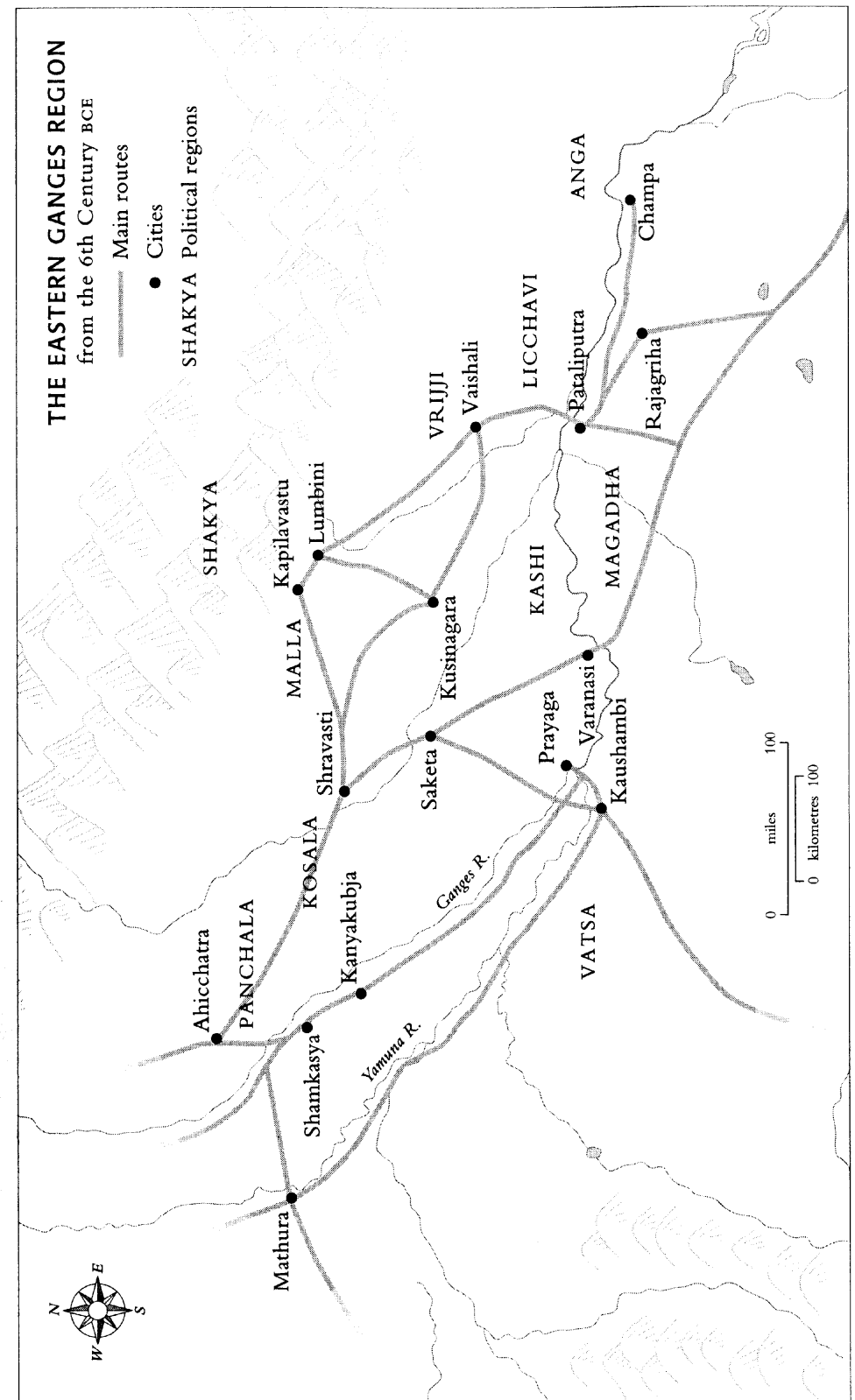
The spiritual malaise was exacerbated by a social crisis. Like the Greeks, the peoples of north India were undergoing major political and economic change. The Vedic system had been the spirituality of a highly mobile society, engaged in constant migration. But by the sixth and fifth centuries, people were settling down in ever larger permanent communities and were seriously engaged in agriculture. The introduction of iron technology, including the heavy plough, made it possible to reclaim more

fields, to irrigate them, and to clear the dense forests. The villages were now surrounded by carefully supervised plots of land with a network of ditches. New crops were produced: fruit, rice, cereal, sesame, millet, wheat, grains, and barley. Farmers were becoming richer.¹⁰⁴ There was also political development. By the end of the sixth century, the small chiefdoms had been absorbed into larger units. The largest of these new kingdoms were Magadha in the southeast and Kosala in the southwest. They were ruled by kings who had, very gradually, imposed their rule by force and had slowly changed the old patterns of allegiance from clan loyalty to an incipient patriotism that focused on territory rather than kinship. As a result, the *kshatriya* warrior class, which was responsible for defence and administration, had become even more prominent. The new kings were no longer as deferential to the Brahmins as their forebears had been, though they might still pay lip service to the older ideals.

Monarchy was not the only form of government. To the east of the new kingdoms, a number of differently run states had also emerged, ruled by an assembly (*sangha*) of the elders of the old clans (*ganas*). This government by discussion had an obvious resemblance to the Greek polis, though in truth we know little about these Indian *sanghas*. It was not clear how many people were admitted to the tribal assembly, which classes were involved, or whether council members were elected. There were probably as many systems as there were states, but however they were organized, these “republics”—Malla, Koliya, Videha, Naya, Vajji, Shakya, Kalama, and Licchavi—were becoming more powerful, even though they felt threatened by the kingdoms of Kosala and Magadha, which wanted to expand their territory. The possibility of confrontation loomed, and people were aware that wars between these larger states would be far more destructive than the old raids, especially since weaponry had become more deadly since the manufacture of iron.

The new states stimulated trade in the Ganges basin. They built roads and secured trade routes. Coins replaced cattle as the symbol of wealth, and a merchant class developed, which traded in metals, textiles, salt, horses, and pottery throughout the region. Some enterprising people began to build mercantile empires. We read of a potter who owned five hundred workshops and a fleet of boats that carried his ceramics all over the Ganges Valley.¹⁰⁵ Trade generated more wealth, which the kings and the *sangha-ganas* could spend on luxury goods, on their armies, and on the new cities that were becoming centers of trade and industry.

The Vedic texts had boasted of great cities, such as Hastinapura, but in reality these were little more than villages. Archaeology shows that



urbanization got under way only in the sixth century, and that the new towns—Varanasi, Rajagriha, Shravasti, Kaushambi, and Kapilavastu—developed in the eastern end of the Ganges Valley. The old Vedic heartlands to the west remained predominantly rural. Power was shifting to the east, which the Brahmins had always seen as marginal and impure. This development was another blow for Vedic orthodoxy, which was not so well suited to an urban environment and had never put down strong roots in the eastern territories. If the kings were beginning to shrug off the control of the priests, the republics tended to ignore the Brahmins altogether, and skimped on the traditional sacrifices. Instead of holding a potlatch to burn off their surplus, they preferred to channel it into the administration, or use it to fund urban construction, trade, and industry. A primitive capitalism had developed, which had quite different priorities. The lavish sacrifices had been designed to impress the gods and to enhance the patron's prestige. By the fifth century, these eastern peoples had realized that their improved trade and agriculture brought them far more wealth and status than the Vedic rites.

Instead of conforming to tradition, the new cities encouraged personal initiative and innovation. Individuals—successful shopkeepers, enterprising manufacturers, and canny financiers—were becoming prominent, and these people no longer fitted easily into the old class system. Individualism was beginning to replace tribal, communal identity. Further, the people who were becoming so successful usually came from the lower classes of the Vedic system. Merchants, farmers, and bankers were usually *vaishyas*, who had generally been of less distinguished lineage. Now some *vaishyas* were accumulating land, and taking a lead in the agricultural revolution; others were going in for trade and industry, and becoming richer than the *kshatriyas*. Artisans usually came from the indigenous *shudra* class, who were not allowed to take part in the Vedic rituals and did not belong to the Aryan community. In the old days, their function had been to provide labour. But in the new towns, some *shudras*, such as the potter with the huge ceramic empire, were acquiring wealth and status that would once have been inconceivable.

These developments were positive but also unsettling. Urbanization involved massive social change that left many people feeling obscurely disoriented and lost. Some families had become rich and powerful, others had started to decline. Towns and trade encouraged greater personal mobility, and while it was stimulating to make new contacts with people in other regions, this also undermined the smaller, more parochial communities. There were new class divisions. Brahmins and *kshatriyas* tended to band

together against *vaishyas* and *shudras*. The old rural elites felt alienated from the emerging urban classes, which had strong *vaishya* and *shudra* elements. The rich *vaishyas*, who had become merchants and bankers, were increasingly estranged from the agricultural *vaishyas* in the countryside. The rules that had governed relations between the four classes now seemed incongruous, and people had to learn fresh ways of living together. The loss of tribal identity left some feeling bereft and cast into a void.

These social tensions were particularly acute in the east, where urbanization was more advanced, and it was in this region that the next phase of the Indian Axial Age began. Here the Aryan settlers were in a minority, and indigenous traditions were still very much alive. People felt free to explore novel solutions. The rapid material developments in the towns made city dwellers more conscious of the pace of change than in the countryside, where people did the same thing at the same time, year after year. Life probably seemed even more ephemeral and transient, and this confirmed the now-ingrained belief that life was *dukkha*, as did the prevalence of disease and anomie in the crowded, disturbing cities. Traditional values had crumbled, and the new ways seemed frightening and alien. The cities were exciting; their streets were crowded with brilliantly painted carriages; huge elephants carried merchandise to and from distant lands; and merchants from all parts of India mingled in the marketplace. The urban class was powerful, thrusting, and ambitious. But the gambling, theatre, dancing, prostitution, and rowdy tavern life of the towns seemed shocking to people who leaned towards the older values.

Life was becoming even more aggressive than before. In the republics, there was infighting and civil strife. The monarchies were efficient and centralized only because they could coerce their subjects. Armies professed allegiance to the king alone, instead of to the tribe as a whole, so he could impose order with his personal fighting machine, and use it to conquer neighbouring territory. This new royal power gave greater stability to the region, but many were disturbed that the kings could force their will upon the people in this way. The economy was fuelled by greed, and bankers and merchants, locked in ceaseless competition, preyed on one another. How did this ruthless society measure up to the ideal of *ahimsa*, which had become so crucial in north India? Life seemed even more violent and terrifying than when cattle rustling had been the backbone of the economy. Vedic religion appeared increasingly out of touch with contemporary reality. Merchants were constantly on the road, and could not keep the sacred fires burning or observe the traditional household rites. Animal sacrifice may have made sense when stock breeding had been the

main occupation, but now that agriculture and trade had taken its place, cattle were becoming scarce and sacrifice seemed wasteful and cruel—too reminiscent of the violence of public life. People needed a different religious solution.

Naturally they looked to the renouncers, who, like the merchants, were the men of the hour. They too had stepped outside the confines of the Vedic system and struck out on their own. These days the renouncers were everywhere. Some communities of hermits remained in the forests, observing Vedic rituals, but others were very much in evidence in eastern society. By the sixth century, countless schools had sprung up. Groups of disciples clustered around a teacher who had advocated a special way of life, promising that his *dharma* (“teaching”) would lead to liberation from death and rebirth. His pupils probably called him the Buddha or the Jina, because they believed that he had discovered the secret of enlightenment. We know very little about these schools. India was still an oral society and most of these gurus left no written scriptures; often we rely on the polemic of their rivals, who probably distorted their teaching. These teachers had imbibed the competitive spirit of the age and vied fiercely with one another for disciples, taking to the roads to preach their *dharma*. Crowds of renouncers in their yellow robes marched along the trade routes beside the merchants’ caravans, and their arrival was anticipated as eagerly as the traders’ wares. When a new teacher came to town, people turned up en masse to listen to him. There were passionate discussions involving all classes of society in the marketplace, the city hall, and the luxuriant tropical parks in the suburbs. Householders, who had no intention of leaving home but felt in need of new spiritual answers, often attached themselves to a school as lay supporters. The renouncers, the “silent sages,” walked quietly through the towns, begging for their food by holding out their bowls, and householders and their wives were happy to fill them with leftovers. This was a good deed, and might ensure that in their next life they too could become monks, with a chance of achieving *moksha*.

The latest teachings had a number of common elements: life was *dukkha*; to become free, you must rid yourself of the desire that led to activity, by means of asceticism and meditation. There were no elaborate texts and commentaries. These dharmas were strictly practical. The guru taught a method that was accessible to anybody who wanted to learn it; you did not have to be a scholar or a ritual expert. The programme was usually based on a teacher’s own experience. If it worked and brought his disciple intimations of liberation and enlightenment, the *dharma* was valid. If it did nothing for him, he felt no compunction about abandoning

his teacher to find another one. In fact it was customary for monks to hail each other on the road: “Who is your teacher? And what *dharma* are you following these days?”

Some of these schools taught extreme methods, which revealed the growing desperation.¹⁰⁶ The Hansas were entirely homeless, could stay only one night in a village, and lived on cow dung. The Adumbaras lived on fruit, wild plants, and roots. The Paramahansas slept under trees, in graveyards, and in deserted houses. Some followed the teachings of Samkhya and practised yoga, intent on acquiring liberating knowledge. Others were more sceptical. A teacher called Sanjaya rejected the possibility of any final answer. All one could do was cultivate friendship and peace of mind; because truth was relative, discussion inevitably led to acrimony and should be avoided. Ajita, another teacher, was a materialist, who denied the doctrine of rebirth: since all humans were wholly physical creatures, they would simply return to the elements after their death. The way you behaved was therefore of no importance, because everybody had the same fate, but it was probably better to foster goodwill and happiness by doing as you pleased and performing only karma that fostered these ends.¹⁰⁷

These teachings all showed a determination to find a way out of the samsaric impasse of rebirth and redeath: some believed that they could achieve this by performing formidable austerities, others by avoiding hostility and unpleasantness. The goal was not to find a metaphysical truth but to obtain peace of mind. Unlike Sophocles, these sages did not think that they had to accept their pain with dignity. They were convinced that it *was* possible to find a way out. One of the most important of these teachers was Makkhali Gosala (d. c. 385). A taciturn man and a severe ascetic, he preached religious fatalism: “Human effort is ineffective.” People were not responsible for their behaviour. “All animals, creatures, beings and souls lack power and energy. They are bent this way and that by fate, by the necessary condition of their class, and by their individual nature.”¹⁰⁸ He founded a school called Ajivaka (“Way of Life”). Gosala believed that all human beings without exception were destined to live through a fixed number of lives before they attained *moksha*, so their actions could not affect their fate one way or the other. And yet, paradoxically, the Ajivakas adopted a harsh regime. They wore no clothes, begged for their food, and observed such strict dietary rules that some of them starved to death. They also inflicted intense pain on their bodies. When he was initiated into the sect, for example, the new member was buried up to his neck and had his hairs pulled out one by one. They did not perform these penances because they believed that they would help them, but simply because they had

reached that stage in their personal cycle when it was their lot to practise austerity.

It is a sign of the intense anxiety of this period that this bleak dharma was very popular. Gosala's rivals attacked him more vehemently than any other guru, because they feared his success. Inscriptions show that kings sent him gifts and donated property to Ajivaka ascetics, and the sect survived in India until the tenth century CE. We may not have the full picture. Gosala probably taught an especially effective form of meditation that was kept secret from outsiders. The extremity of his *tapas* may have been designed to shock initiates into a state beyond pain or pleasure, and his determinism could simply have been a method of achieving serenity and calm: if everything was predestined, there was no point in worrying about the future.

Gosala was said to have been a disciple of Vardhamana Jnatrputra (c. 497–425), who became one of the most important teachers of this period. His disciples called him Mahavira, "Great Hero." The second son of a *kshatriya* chieftain of Magadha, he had a spectacular physique, strength, and beauty but decided, at the age of thirty, to abandon the world and become a renouncer. He was determined to achieve enlightenment by himself, without the help of a guru, so he refused to join one of the established schools. We are told that the gods performed his rite of initiation into homelessness, and for twelve and a half years he lived as a mendicant, roaming through the Ganges Valley, practising the usual austerities: he wore no clothes, exposing his body to the torrid heat of summer and the cold of winter; he fasted, and deprived himself of sleep and shelter. It was during this initial period that he accepted Gosala as a disciple, and travelled with him for six years until Gosala announced that he had achieved *moksha* and could call himself a Jina, a spiritual conqueror. This account, however, is a later interpolation into an older text.¹⁰⁹ It is hostile to Gosala, suggesting that he was merely jealous of Mahavira's spiritual superiority and broke away prematurely. Eventually the two men were reconciled: Gosala died acknowledging that Mahavira was a true teacher, and Mahavira predicted that one day Gosala would achieve enlightenment. It is likely that there was some historical connection between the two schools, and that Mahavira was influenced by the Ajivakas at an early stage, but went on to develop an independent teaching.

Mahavira's harsh lifestyle had a special purpose. Like all ascetics, he wanted to release his true self from the constraints of the body, and thus achieve inner control and peace of mind. But he did not achieve *moksha* until he had developed an entirely new way of looking at the world that

was informed through and through by *ahimsa*: "harmlessness."¹¹⁰ Each human being had a soul (*jiva*), a living entity within, which was luminous, blissful, and intelligent. But animals, plants, water, fire, air, and even rocks and stones each had *jivas* too; they had been brought to their present existence by the karma of their former lives. All beings shared the same nature, therefore, and must be treated with the same courtesy and respect that we would wish to receive ourselves.¹¹¹ Even plants had some form of awareness; in future lives, they could become sacred trees, and then progress to human form and finally achieve enlightenment. If they gave up all violence, animals could be reborn in heaven. The same rule applied to human beings, who could achieve *moksha* only if they did not harm their fellow creatures. Until an ascetic had acquired this empathic view of the world, he could not attain *moksha*.

For Mahavira, liberation *was* nonviolence. When he achieved this insight at the age of forty-two, he immediately experienced enlightenment. At that time, according to the earliest texts, he was living in a field beside a river.¹¹² He had fasted for two and a half days, drunk no water, exposed himself to the full glare of the sun, and achieved *kevala*, a unique knowledge that gave him an entirely different perspective. He could now perceive all levels of reality simultaneously, in every dimension of time and space, as though he were a god. Indeed, for Mahavira, a *deva* was simply a creature who had attained *kevala* by perceiving and respecting the divine soul that existed in every single creature.

Naturally this state of mind could not be described, because it entirely transcended ordinary consciousness. It was a state of absolute friendliness with all beings, however lowly. In this enlightened state of being, "words return in vain, no statements of mundane logic can be made, and the mind cannot fathom it." You could speak of it only by saying, "*Neti . . . neti*" ("Not this . . . not this"). When an enlightened person had attained this perspective, he or she would find that there was "nothing with which it can be compared. Its being is without form. . . . It is not sound, nor form, nor soul, nor heaven, nor touch or anything like that."¹¹³ But, Mahavira was convinced, anybody who followed his regimen would automatically attain this ineffable state, and become a Jina. Hence his followers were known as the Jains, and his dharma was "the Way of the Conquerors."

Mahavira was a *kshatriya*. He believed that he was simply the latest in a long line of Jinas who had crossed the river of *dukkha* to gain liberation. After his death, the Jains would develop an elaborate prehistory, claiming that, in previous eras, there had been twenty-four of these "ford-makers," who had discovered the bridge to *moksha*. Each one had been a *kshatriya*,

had been physically strong and beautiful, and as brave as a lion. Mahavira, the “Great Hero,” was thus offering an alternative ethos to the warrior class; the new heroism utterly rejected fighting, but required courage of its own. Later the Jain order would be sponsored by kings and warriors who were not able to abandon their military duties, but who hoped to do so in a future life. Despite its dedication to nonviolence, the dharma frequently used martial imagery. The Jain ascetic was a warrior who was battling his own belligerent instincts and warding off the bad effects of the aggression that characterized all unenlightened people. The ascetic would win as much glory for himself, his family, and his order by his life of *ahimsa* as a soldier on the battlefield. The Jain community was called a *gana*: “a troop.” To become a Jina required the valour, determination, and ruthlessness towards oneself that was the mark of a true hero.

Few people ever pursued the ideal of *ahimsa* with such relentless consistency as Mahavira. Later Jains would develop an elaborate eschatology and cosmology; they would evolve a metaphysics that saw karma as a form of fine matter, like dust, produced by the different qualities of various actions, which settled on the soul, weighing it down and preventing it from soaring to the top of the universe. As far as we can tell, Mahavira and his early followers were not concerned with these matters. Nonviolence was their *only* religious duty. All other ethical practice was useless without *ahimsa*, and this could not be achieved until the Jain had acquired an empathy with every single creature: “All breathing, existing, living, sentient creatures should not be slain, nor treated with violence, nor abused, nor tormented, nor driven away. This is the pure, unchangeable, eternal law, which the enlightened ones who know have proclaimed.”¹¹⁴

This understanding was not, of course, a notional assent. The Jains had to become aware at a profound level that even apparently inert entities, such as stones, had a *jiva* and were capable of pain, and that no living creature wished to suffer—any more than they themselves did.

Jains achieved this insight by a programme of asceticism that made them conscious of this extraordinary truth. By learning to behave differently, they found that their outlook changed, and they began to see the world anew. They had to move with consummate caution lest they inadvertently squash an insect or trample on a blade of grass. They were required to lay down objects with care, and were forbidden to move around in the darkness, when it would be easy to damage another precious creature. They could not even pluck fruit from a tree, but had to wait until it had fallen to the ground of its own accord. Jains needed to eat, of course, and in the early days they were allowed to accept meat in their

begging bowls, provided that they had not had the animals killed themselves. The ideal, however, was to abstain from any activity at all, because the tiniest movement or physical impulse was likely to cause injury.

But the *ahimsa* of the Jains was not entirely negative, preoccupied with *not* doing harm. Jains had to cultivate an attitude of positive benevolence towards all beings. All living creatures should help one another. They must approach every single human being, animal, plant, insect, or pebble with friendship, goodwill, patience, and gentleness. Like the yogins, Jains followed five “prohibitions” (*yama*) and vowed to forgo violence, lying, sex, stealing, and the ownership of property, but Mahavira’s interpretation of these *yama* was informed by his vision of the life force in all things. Naturally the early Jains concentrated on the first vow, of *ahimsa* (“harmlessness”), which they practised in the smallest details of their lives, but the other vows were also informed by the spirit of nonviolence. Not only must Jains refrain from lying, but their speech must be deliberate and controlled, in order to eliminate any hint of unkindness or impatience. Words could lead to blows, so they should talk as little as possible. It was even better *not* to speak the truth if it would hurt another creature. The Jain vows were designed to create an attitude of watchfulness and care. It was not enough for Jains to forgo stealing; they could not possess anything at all, because each being had its own sacred *jiva*, which was sovereign and free.¹¹⁵

At all times, Jains must make themselves aware of the life force in everything around them. If people did not see this, they could not relate properly to their fellow creatures, but this involved Jains in a truly heroic restraint that seemed to curtail their lives at every turn. They could not light fires, dig, or plough. They could drink only filtered water, must inspect their surroundings every time they took a single step, and avoid any thoughtless movement. If the vows were lived in this way, the Jains would find that they had achieved an extraordinary self-control and a compassion that would bring them to enlightenment. Empathy was crucial. First, Mahavira taught, the Jain must acquire “knowledge of the world,” so that he understood that everything had a sacred life force. Once he had acquired this knowledge of the world, he must then cultivate “compassion for it.”¹¹⁶

Mahavira had arrived at his own version of the Golden Rule. Jains had to treat all others as they would wish to be treated themselves. The *dukkha* that pervaded the entire world was caused by the actions of ignorant people, who did not realize what they were doing when they injured others. To deny the *jiva* of your fellow creatures was tantamount to denying your

own inner self.¹¹⁷ Jains wanted friendship with all things and all people—with no exceptions whatsoever. Once they had achieved this attitude, they would immediately attain enlightenment. *Moksha* was not a reward bestowed on the deserving by an overseeing god. Jains were not interested in this kind of theology. But they found that this practice, rigorously followed, brought them transcendent peace.

After his enlightenment, Mahavira preached his first sermon at the shrine of a tree spirit on the outskirts of the city of Champa.¹¹⁸ The first detailed account of this event is found in a relatively late text, of the first century, but it became central to the Jain tradition. The king and queen of Champa attended, together with a huge crowd of gods, ascetics, lay folk, and animals, who all listened intently to Mahavira's gospel of nonviolence. It was a symbolic moment. In Vedic sacrifice, the gods had gathered to watch human beings slaughtering animals, but at Champa, gods, humans, and beasts assembled to listen to the preaching of *ahimsa* and formed a single, loving community. This vision of unity and universal empathy was supposed to inform every action of life.

Jains were not interested in yoga but practised their own type of meditation. Standing motionless, their arms hanging by their sides but not touching the body, monks rigorously suppressed every hostile thought or impulse, while, at the same time, they made a conscious effort to fill their minds with love and kindness towards all creatures.¹¹⁹ An experienced Jain would achieve a quasi-meditative state called *samayika* ("equanimity"), in which he *knew*, in every fibre of his person, that all creatures on the face of the earth were equal; at this time he felt exactly the same goodwill to all things, had no favourites, no pet hates, and did not distinguish a single being, however lowly, unpleasant, or insignificant, from himself. Twice a day, Jains stood before their guru and repented of any distress that they might inadvertently have inflicted "by treading on seeds, green plants, dew, beetles, mould, moist earth, and on cobwebs." They concluded with these words: "I ask pardon from all living creatures. May all creatures pardon me. May I have friendship for all creatures and enmity toward none."¹²⁰ The new ideal was no longer merely to refrain from violence, but to cultivate a tenderness and sympathy that had no bounds.

7

CONCERN FOR EVERYBODY

(c. 450 to 398 BCE)

In Israel, the Axial Age was drawing to a close. By the second half of the fifth century, Jerusalem was a small, damaged city in an undistinguished corner of the Persian empire. The Great Transformation usually occurred in regions that were in the vanguard of change and development. Israel and Judah had suffered greatly from the imperial powers, but these empires had brought intimations of broader horizons and a wider world. Israel's Axial Age had reached its crescendo in Babylon, the regional capital. In Jerusalem, the returning exiles were no longer in the forefront of world events, but lived in obscurity; the struggle for survival had taken precedence over the search for fresh religious vision. A few chapters in the book of Isaiah may express the preoccupations of the community after the completion of the second temple.¹ The old dream of Second Isaiah had not died. People still hoped that Yahweh would create "a new heaven and a new earth" in Jerusalem, where there would be no weeping and the pain of the past would be forgotten.² Others looked forward to the time when the city of God should open its gates to everybody—to outcasts, foreigners, and eunuchs—for Yahweh had proclaimed, "My house will be a house of prayer for all the peoples." One day he would bring these outsiders into the city, and allow them to sacrifice to him on Mount Zion.³ But in fact a more rigidly exclusive attitude heralded the end of the Axial Age.

In about 445, a new governor was appointed as the Persian representative in Jerusalem. Nehemiah, a member of the Jewish community in Susa, the Persian capital, had held the post of cupbearer to King Artaxerxes I. He had been shocked to hear that the walls of Jerusalem were still in ruins and begged the king to allow him to go to Judah and rebuild the city of his ancestors. He arrived incognito, and went out secretly one night for a

ride around the old, desolate fortifications, "with their gaps and burnt-out gates." At one point, he could not even find a path for his horse. When Nehemiah made himself known to the elders the next day, the citizens, mounting a massive cooperative effort, managed to build new walls for the city in a mere fifty-two days. But relations between the Golah, the community of returned exiles, and their neighbours had deteriorated so badly that it was a dangerous task. Throughout his mission, Nehemiah had to contend with the determined opposition of some of the local dynasts: Sanballat, governor of Samerina, in the territories of the old northern kingdom; Tobiah, one of his officials; and Gershon, governor of Edom. The new walls were built in fear and tension: "Each did his work with one hand while gripping his weapon with the other. And as each builder worked, he wore his sword on his side."⁴

It is very difficult to date this period. Our chief sources are the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, which consist of a number of unrelated documents that an editor later attempted to string together. He assumed that Ezra and Nehemiah were contemporaries, and made Ezra arrive in Jerusalem first. But in fact there are good reasons for dating Ezra's mission much later, during the reign of Artaxerxes II.⁵ Nehemiah did a great deal to revive the fortunes of the city. He managed to increase the population to about ten thousand citizens, and tried to prevent the suppression of the poor by the nobility. But it is significant that his first act in Jerusalem was to build a wall. In his second term of office, which began in about 432, Nehemiah made new legislation to prevent members of the Golah from marrying into the families of the local population, even those Israelites who had not been taken into exile. He expelled the chief priest, Eliashib, because he was married to Sanballat's daughter. In exile, some of the priests had warned against assimilation with foreigners. Now the Golah was forbidden to marry people who had once been members of the Israelite family, but were now regarded as strangers and enemies.

During the exile, the laity had been encouraged to adopt the purity laws of the priests, and this meant that ordinary Jews had to be instructed in the intricacies of the ritual law by experts. One of these was Ezra, who had "devoted himself to the study of the law of Yahweh, to practising it, and to teaching Israel its laws and customs."⁶ He may also have been the minister for Jewish affairs at the Persian court. At this time, the Persians were reviewing the laws of the subject peoples, to make sure that they were compatible with the security of the empire. As a legal expert in Babylonia, Ezra could have worked out a satisfactory *modus vivendi* between the Torah and the Persian legal system. His mission was to pro-

mulgate the Torah in Jerusalem and make it the official law of the land.⁷ The biblical writer saw Ezra's mission as a turning point in the history of his people: he described his journey to Judah as a new exodus and presented Ezra as a new Moses. When he arrived in Jerusalem, Ezra was appalled at what he found. Priests were still colluding with the *am ha-aretz*, and the people continued to take foreign wives. For a whole day, the inhabitants of Jerusalem had to watch in dismay as the king's emissary tore his hair and sat down in the street in the posture of deep mourning. Then he summoned all the members of the Golah to a meeting: anybody who refused to attend would be cast out of the community and have his property confiscated.

On New Year's Day, Ezra brought the Torah to the square in front of the Water Gate; standing on a wooden dais and surrounded by the leading citizens, he read the Torah to the crowd, expounding on it as he went along.⁸ We have no idea which text he actually read to them, but it was certainly a shock to the people. Religious truth always sounded different when written down and read aloud, and the people burst into tears, shocked by the demands of Yahweh's religion. Ezra had to remind them that this was a festival, an occasion for rejoicing, and recited the text that commanded the Israelites to live in special booths during the month of Sukkoth, in memory of their ancestors' forty years in the wilderness. The people rushed into the hills to pick branches of olive, myrtle, pine, and palm, and soon leafy shelters appeared all over the city. There was a carnival atmosphere: each evening, the people assembled to listen to Ezra's reading of the law.

The next assembly was a more sombre occasion.⁹ It was held in the square in front of the temple, and the people stood shivering as the torrential winter rains deluged the city. Ezra commanded them to send away their foreign wives, and women and children were, therefore, expelled from the Golah to join the *am ha-aretz*. Membership in Israel was now confined to the descendants of those who had been exiled to Babylon and to those who were prepared to submit to the Torah, the official law code of Jerusalem. The lament of the outcasts may have been preserved in the book of Isaiah:

*For Abraham does not own us
And Israel does not acknowledge us;
Yet you, Yahweh, yourself are our father. . . .
We have long been like people who do not rule,
People who do not bear your name.¹⁰*

Suffering and domination had led to a defensive exclusion that was alien to the unfolding spirit of the Axial Age in the other regions.

But that cold, rainy scene was not the end of the story. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah comprised only a small part of the Hebrew Bible. Their perspective was shared by many of the people but it was not the only viewpoint. During the fifth and fourth centuries, the Bible was compiled by editors and the more inclusive traditions of Israel and Judah were also represented. The traditions of P, who had insisted that no human beings were unclean, dominated the first three books of the Pentateuch and qualified the more exclusive vision of the Deuteronomists. Other books reminded Jews that King David himself was descended from Ruth, a woman of Moab. And the book of Jonah showed a Hebrew prophet being compelled by Yahweh to save the city of Nineveh, capital of the Assyrian empire, which had destroyed the kingdom of Israel in 722. When Jonah had remonstrated with God, Yahweh had answered in words that could have been endorsed by many other sages of the Axial Age—especially, perhaps, the Jains: “Am I not to feel sorry for Nineveh, the great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left, to say nothing of all the animals?”¹¹

The first phase of the Axial Age of Israel was over, but, as we shall see in the final chapter, it would enjoy a second flowering: Rabbinic Judaism, Christianity, and Islam would all build on Israel’s Axial insights, and create a faith based upon the Golden Rule and the spirituality of “yielding,” empathy, and concern for everybody.

As they entered the second half of the fifth century, despite the apparent success of their city, some of the older Athenians felt uncertain about the future. Pericles had led the polis to the zenith of its power. The new buildings on the Acropolis were a triumph; sculptors were creating astonishing work, and the great tragedians continued to present their masterpieces at the City Dionysia. In 446, Athens and Sparta had negotiated a truce for thirty years, dividing the Hellenic world between them: Athens would control the Aegean, while Sparta, a land power, held the Peloponnesus. Athens could look forward to a period of peace and prosperity, and yet Pericles built long defensive walls, enclosing the city and the port of Piraeus. Many Athenians still felt vulnerable, grimly aware that the subject poleis resented their imperial rule. In 446 they had sustained heavy losses

in Boetia; cities had tried to defect from the Delian League, and there was war on Samos, in which the Persians threatened to intervene. Athens was not a major world power but only a small, overextended city-state. How could forty thousand fighting men rule the whole of Greece? But the younger generation did not appreciate this. Born after the battle of Marathon, they had known only easy success. They were becoming impatient with Pericles, who was now sixty years old, and were ready to listen to the new ideas that had the city buzzing during the 430s.

There was a major intellectual shift during these years. People had started to feel frustrated and even baffled by the philosophers, whose work was becoming increasingly abstruse. Zeno (b. 490), the disciple of Parmenides, had tried to demonstrate the validity of his master’s controversial ideas by formulating a series of mischievous paradoxes. Parmenides had claimed that despite the evidence of our senses, everything was immobile. Zeno illustrated this by stating that an arrow in flight was actually motionless. At each second it occupied a space that was exactly equal to itself and was therefore always at rest, wherever it was. “What is moving is moving neither in the place in which it is, nor in the place in which it is not.”¹² Again Zeno argued that it was impossible for Achilles, who ran faster than anyone else, even to begin the race of the Panathenaea: before he could complete the course, he had to travel halfway; before he reached that point, he had to get a quarter of the way there. But this line of reasoning could continue ad infinitum: before Achilles covered *any* distance he had to cover half of it.¹³ It was, therefore, impossible to talk sensibly about motion, so it was better, as Parmenides advised, to say nothing about it at all.

Zeno wanted to demonstrate the logical absurdity of common sense and had discovered that motion was really a succession of immobilities in a way that would fascinate later philosophers. Chinese logicians, as we shall see, would evolve similar conundrums. But many of Zeno’s contemporaries felt that reason was undermining itself. If it was impossible to formulate any truth, what was the point of these discussions? The Sicilian philosopher Empedocles (495–435) tried to reinstate the normal world, while holding on to some of Parmenides’ insights. He argued that the four elements were indeed unchanging, but that they moved about and combined to form the phenomena we see. Anaxagoras of Smyrna (508–428) believed that every substance contained parts of every other substance, even though their presence could not be discerned by the naked eye. It followed that because it contained the seeds of all that exists, anything could develop into absolutely anything else. Like the Milesians, he tried to find the source from which everything developed. He called it *nous*

