

have said. "Convention and habit are the basis of everything that men do, for each thing is no more this than that."⁶¹ This was inconsistent, of course. If it was true that we knew nothing, how could Pyrrho know that even this was true—or evolve a philosophy at all? But Pyrrho apparently saw Scepticism as a therapy, not as an epistemological theory. People became too agitated by their strong opinions; they were too anxious to discover the truth. So a Sceptic would kindly undermine their certainty, flushing all this intellectual turmoil out of their systems. Sextus Empiricus, the first Sceptical writer, who lived in the third century CE, explained that Pyrrho and his disciples began by trying to find truth in order to gain peace of mind. But when they were unable to achieve this to their satisfaction, they gave up and immediately felt much better. "When they suspended judgement, tranquillity followed as it were fortuitously, as a shadow follows a body."⁶² So they became known as *skeptikoi* ("inquirers") because they were still looking, had not closed their minds, but had learned that an uncluttered attitude, open to all possibilities, was the secret of happiness.

The Axial Age was well and truly over for these Hellenistic philosophers, and yet in their work we find ghostly relics of the great pioneering spiritualities that sages and prophets had been exploring for more than five hundred years. The heroic striving of Confucius, the Buddha, Ezekiel, and Socrates had been replaced by a more modest, attainable, and, as it were, "budget" version. In Zeno's ideal of a life attuned to nature, there was a hint of Daoism, but instead of yearning to change the world by aligning himself with the natural process, the Stoic simply resigned himself to the status quo. There is a fatalism in all these third-century Greek philosophies that was anathema to the Axial Age. The Buddha had warned his disciples not to become attached to metaphysical opinions; the mystics of the Upanishads had reduced their interlocutors to silence by pointing out the fallacy of rational thought, but they had not simply "suspended judgement" like the Sceptics. They had used the experience of dismantling ordinary habits of thought to give people intimations of a mystery that lay beyond words and conceptual ideas. The renouncers of India had left the world behind, but not to live in the suburban Epicurean Garden, and the Buddha had insisted that his monks must return to the agora and practise compassion for all living beings.

Herein lay the difference. These Hellenistic philosophers made no heroic ethical demands. They all claimed to lay aside the abstruse metaphysics of Plato and Aristotle and go back to Socrates, who had tried to teach men how to live. They wanted the peace of mind that Socrates had

possessed when he had faced his unjust death with equanimity. They were also popularizers like Socrates, who had talked to everybody, learned and uneducated alike. But Socrates had never claimed that a human being's sole aim should be to eliminate disturbance. Zeno, Epicurus, and Pyrrho all wanted a quiet life and were determined to avoid the extremity and striving of the great Axial philosophers. They simply wanted *ataraxia*, to be trouble-free. The Axial sages all pointed out that existence was inherently unsatisfactory and painful, and wanted to transcend this suffering. But they were not content merely to avoid distress and stop caring about anything or anybody; they had insisted that salvation lay in facing up to suffering, not retreating into denial. In Epicurus's sequestered Garden, there is more than a hint of the Buddha's pleasure park. The similarity becomes more pointed when we reflect that most Epicureans had private means to finance their retreat, which would not have been available to the *hoi polloi*.

Instead of seeking *ataraxia*, the Axial thinkers had forced their contemporaries to accept the reality of pain. Jeremiah had denounced those who retreated into denial as "false prophets." The tragedians of Athens had put suffering onstage and commanded the audience to weep. You could achieve liberation only by going *through* sorrow, not by going to elaborate lengths to make sure that it never impinged on your protected existence. The experience of *dukkha* was a prerequisite for enlightenment, because it enabled the aspirant to empathize with the grief of others. But the Hellenistic philosophies were entirely focused on the self. True, the Stoics were urged to take part in public life and work generously for the good of others. But they were not allowed to empathize with the people they served, because that would disturb their equilibrium. This cold self-sufficiency was alien to the Axial Age. Friendship and kindness were crucial to Epicurus's commune, but they were not extended outside the Garden. And however kindly intentioned, there was more than a hint of aggression in the Sceptics' therapy, as they went around picking arguments with other people in order to undermine their convictions. The approach was markedly different from that of the Buddha and Socrates, who always started from where their interlocutors actually were, not where they thought they ought to be.

Many Axial thinkers were mistrustful of pure *logos* and reason, but the Hellenistic philosophies were based on science rather than intuition. Epicurus, for example, developed the atomism of Democritus to show that it was a waste of the precious lives we had to fear death, which would

inevitably occur when the atoms fell apart. It was pointless to ask the gods for help, because they too were composed of and ruled by the atoms. The Stoics taught that it was possible to align yourself with the divine process of nature only if you understood scientifically that it was programmed by the Logos and could not be altered. The third century was the great age of Greek science. The new Hellenistic kingdoms of Ptolemy and Seleucus were far richer than the old poleis, and kings vied with one another to attract scholars to their capitals, bribing them with grants and salaries. Euclid and Archimedes both lived and worked in Alexandria. The Milesian and Eleatic philosophers had concentrated on those aspects of natural science that related to human beings, rather like popular scientists today, whereas the new scientists of the third century were at the cutting edge of mathematics, physics, astronomy, and engineering. Science had now lost its early religious orientation and become a wholly secular pursuit.

The Hellenistic philosophies did not affect the old pagan religion: sacrifices, festivals, and rituals continued without interruption. The mysteries became even more popular, and were often combined with congenial eastern cults. In 399, Socrates had been executed for turning people away from the traditional gods. After the fourth century, no philosopher was persecuted for his religious views, even though Epicurus, Zeno, and Pyrrho attempted to discredit the old beliefs. There was a new tolerance that was never officially endorsed by the establishment, but that gained ground among the elite.⁶³ Most people continued to practise the ancient rites, which remained largely untouched by the Axial Age and would remain in place until Christianity was forcibly imposed as the state religion in the fifth century CE.

The Hellenistic philosophers may not have been as revolutionary as their predecessors, but they had lasting influence, and in many ways they epitomized the emerging Western spirit. In the West, people gravitated towards science and *logos*, and were less spiritually ambitious than the sages of India and China. Instead of making the heroic effort to discover a realm of transcendent peace within, the Hellenistic philosophers were prepared to settle for a quiet life. Instead of training the intuitive powers of the mind, they turned to scientific *logos*. Instead of achieving mystical enlightenment, the West was excited by a more mundane illumination. The Western genius for science eventually transformed the world, and in the sixteenth century its scientific revolution introduced a new Axial Age. This would greatly benefit humanity, but it was inspired by a different species of genius. Instead of the Buddha, Socrates, and Confucius, the heroes of the second Axial Age would be Newton, Freud, and Einstein.

A new empire had also been established in India, but it was very different from Alexander's. Magadha had dominated the Ganges Valley since the fourth century, and had greatly expanded its territory under the powerful Nanda dynasty. But in 321, Chandragupta Maurya, a *vaishya* who may have come from one of the tribal republics, seized the throne, having already established a power base in the Punjab, where the Greeks' departure had left a power vacuum. We know very little about either his reign or his military campaign, but the Mauryan empire eventually extended from Bengal to Afghanistan, and Chandragupta then began to penetrate central and southern India. Coming from the more peripheral tribal states, the Mauryan emperors had no strong links with Vedic religion, and were more interested in the nonorthodox sects. Chandragupta himself favoured the Jains, who accompanied his army and established themselves in the south. His son Bindusara Maurya promoted the Ajivakas, while the third emperor, Ashoka, who succeeded to the throne in 268, patronized the Buddhists, and his brother Vitashoka actually became a Buddhist monk. Pali sources claim that before his conversion, Ashoka had been a cruel, self-indulgent ruler, who managed to win the throne only by killing his other brothers. On his accession, he assumed the title *Devanampiya*, "the Beloved of the Gods," and continued to conquer new territory until he suffered a severe shock.

In 260 the Mauryan army conquered Kalinga in the region of modern Orissa. Ashoka recorded his victory in an edict, which he had inscribed on a massive rock face. He said nothing about his military strategy, and instead of celebrating his victory, he dwelt on the tragic number of casualties. One hundred thousand Kalingan soldiers had been killed during the battle; "many times that number" perished afterwards from wounds and hunger, and 150,000 Kalingans had been deported. Ashoka was devastated by the spectacle of such suffering. The "Beloved of the Gods," he said, felt remorse,

for when an independent country is conquered, the slaughter, death and deportation is extremely grievous to *Devanampiya* and weighs heavily on his mind. . . . Even those who were fortunate enough to have escaped, and whose love is undiminished, suffer from the misfortunes of their friends, acquaintances, colleagues and relatives. . . . Today if a hundredth or a thousandth part of

those people who were killed or died or were deported when Kalinga was annexed were to suffer similarly, it would weigh heavily on the mind of *Devanampiya*.⁶⁴

The purpose of the edict was to warn other kings against undertaking further wars of conquest. If they did lead a campaign, it must be fought humanely, and victory should be implemented “with patience and light punishment.” The only true conquest was *dhamma*, by which Ashoka meant a moral effort that would benefit people in this life and the next.⁶⁵

This was a significant moment. The *Arthashastra*, a manual of statecraft composed by the Brahmin Kautilya, the mentor of Chandragupta Maurya, made it clear that the conquest of neighbouring territories was one of the king’s sacred duties. Ashoka, however, proposed to replace military might with *ahimsa*. There is some doubt about the details of this incident. Ashoka probably exaggerated the casualty figures: the Mauryan army was only sixty thousand strong, so it is hard to see how it could have killed a hundred thousand Kalingans. It was well disciplined and did not usually harass noncombatants. If Ashoka was so distressed by the plight of the deportees, why did he not simply repatriate them? He may have wanted to deter rebellion by emphasizing the magnitude and ruthlessness of his victory, and he certainly did not abjure all warfare from that day forward. In other edicts, Ashoka admitted that war was sometimes necessary, and never disbanded his army.⁶⁶

But perhaps this is to expect too much. It is clear that Ashoka was truly shaken by the violence and suffering in Kalinga, and that he tried to introduce a policy based on *dhamma*. He now ruled an Indian kingdom of unprecedented size. Throughout the length and breadth of his territory he inscribed edicts outlining his innovative policy on cliff faces and pillars. They were prominently sited and probably read aloud to the populace on state occasions. Written in Pali, inscribed with animal figures and such motifs as the Buddhists’ wheel, each one begins, “Thus speaks the Beloved of the Gods,” and preaches a humane ethic of nonviolence and moral reform. The extent of these edicts is amazing; it is comparable to finding identical runes in the Grampians, Italy, Germany, and Gibraltar.⁶⁷

The fact that Ashoka felt that such a policy was feasible suggests that the Axial virtues of compassion and *ahimsa* had taken firm root, even if they could never be fully implemented by a politician. Ashoka may sincerely have believed that violence simply bred more violence, and that slaughter and conquest could only backfire. His *dhamma* was not specifically Buddhist but could appeal to any of the main schools. Ashoka prob-

ably hoped to promote a policy based on consensus, which could bind the subjects of his far-flung empire together. The *dhamma* did not mention the uniquely Buddhist doctrine of *anatta* (“no self”) or the practice of yoga, but concentrated on the virtues of kindness and benevolence.⁶⁸ “There is no gift comparable to the gift of *dhamma* . . . the sharing of *dhamma*,” Ashoka wrote in the Eleventh Major Rock Edict. This consisted of

good behaviour towards slaves and servants, obedience to mother and father, generosity towards friends, acquaintances and relatives, and towards renouncers and brahmins, and abstention from killing living beings. Father, son, brother, master, friend, acquaintance, relative and neighbour should say “this is good, this we shall do.” By doing so, there is gain in this world and in the next there is infinite merit through the gift of *dhamma*.⁶⁹

Far from imposing Buddhism on his subjects, the edicts insisted that there must be no religious chauvinism. Brahmins were to be honoured as well as those renouncers who rejected the Vedic system. The king “honours all sects and both ascetics and laymen with gifts and recognition,” reads the Twelfth Major Rock Edict. “The advancement of the essential doctrines of all the rest” was of the greatest importance. Nobody must disparage anybody else’s teaching. In this way, all the different schools could flourish. “Concord is to be commended, so that men may hear one another’s principles.”⁷⁰

Ashoka was a realist. He did not outlaw violence; there were occasions when it might be unavoidable—if, for example, the forest dwellers stirred up trouble. Capital punishment remained an option. But Ashoka did cut down on the consumption of meat in his household and listed birds, animals, and fish that could not be hunted. It was a brave experiment, but it failed. During the last ten years of his reign, Ashoka made no new inscriptions, and his vast empire may already have been falling apart. After his death in 231, the *dhamma* lapsed. Social tensions and sectarian conflicts set in, and the empire began to disintegrate. It has been suggested that Ashoka’s preoccupation with nonviolence emasculated the army and made the state vulnerable to invasion, but Ashoka was never doctrinaire about *ahimsa*. It is more likely that the empire simply outgrew its resources. Ashoka was never forgotten. In Buddhist tradition, he is a *chakkavatti*, a universal king whose reign turned the wheel of law. Later leaders, such as Guru Nanek, founder of Sikhism, and Mahatma Gandhi, would revive the ideal of concord and unity across sectarian and social divides.

After Ashoka's death, India entered a dark age. Even though a number of documents survived, we have little reliable information about the kingdoms and dynasties that rose and fell during these centuries of political instability, which lasted until the accession of the Gupta dynasty in 320 CE. But we do know that India experienced major spiritual change. During this time, Indian religion became theistic, and the people discovered God. The stark, aniconic religion of the Vedas and the renouncers, which had so drastically reduced the role of the gods, had given way to the Hindu extravaganza of brilliantly painted temples, colourful processions, popular pilgrimages, and devotion to the images of a multitude of exotic deities.

The first sign of this development can be seen in the Shvetashvatara Upanishad, the teachings of "the Sage with the white mule," which was probably composed in the late fourth century. Traditional Vedic religion had never been very visual. Even in their heyday, nobody had been particularly interested in what Indra or Vishnu had looked like. People had experienced the divine in chants and mantras, not in statues and icons. The Shvetashvatara Upanishad is strongly influenced by the teachings of Samkhya yoga, an originally atheistic school, but here brahman, the absolute reality, was identified with the personalized god Rudra/Shiva, and it was he who would liberate the yogin from the painful cycle of samsara. When he achieved this *moksha*, the enlightened yogin would see the deity within himself.

This was probably not a complete innovation. Vedic religion had been practised and promoted by the upper classes, but it is possible that ordinary worshippers had always made images of the gods in perishable materials that did not survive.⁷¹ By the end of the Axial Age, this popular faith, which may have existed continuously ever since the days of the Indus Valley civilization, had begun to fuse with the sophisticated practices of the sages. In the Rig Veda, Rudra was a very marginal god. Now, merged with the indigenous god Shiva, he had come to the foreground as the personalized embodiment of brahman and the Lord of the universe, who made himself known to his devotees in the practice of yoga. The yogin could break the bonds of samsara only by becoming one with the Lord, the ruler of nature and the self (atman): "When he comes to know God, he is freed from all fetters. . . . By meditating on him, by striving toward him, and further in the end by becoming the same reality as him, all illusion disappears."⁷² All impediments fell away, and at the moment of death the self was indissolubly united to Lord Rudra.

The Lord was not simply a transcendent being but lived within the self, in rather the same way as the form (*murti*) of fire was potentially pres-

ent in wood: we could not see it until the friction of the fire drill caused the flame to blaze forth. The Lord resided within us like oil in sesame seeds or butter in curds. Meditation brought the yogin into direct contact with "the true nature of the *brahman*," which was no longer an impersonal reality, but the "unborn, unchanging" Rudra, the mountain dweller.⁷³ He was even "higher than *brahman*, the immense one hidden in all beings, in each according to its kind, and who alone encompasses the whole universe."⁷⁴ Yet Rudra was also "the size of a thumb," hiding within the self.⁷⁵ Meditation had enabled the yogin to see the god's physical form (*murti*) in the deeper regions of his personality.

To create a coherent theistic vision, the Shvetashvatara Upanishad drew upon a number of diverse spiritualities: on the Upanishadic notion of the identity of brahman and atman, on the concepts of rebirth and *moksha*, on Samkhya, yoga, and the chanting of the sacred syllable Om. It joined all these a-theistic disciplines with the image of the creator god. In later, classical Hinduism, this synthesis would create a new theology, which could be applied to any deity, not merely to Rudra/Shiva. The specific identity of the Lord in question was less important than the fact that he had become accessible in meditation. The yogin knew that this god existed, not because of a set of metaphysical proofs, but because he had seen him.

In the very last verse of the Shvetashvatara, we find an important new word. The Upanishad explained that the liberation it described would shine forth "only in a man who has the deepest love [*bhakti*] for God and who shows the same love towards his teacher."⁷⁶ A religious revolution was afoot. People who felt excluded from the abstruse mysticism of the Upanishads and the world-renouncing ascetics were beginning to create a spirituality that suited their way of life. They wanted to participate in the insights of the Axial Age, but needed a less abstract and more emotive religion. So they developed the notion of *bhakti* ("devotion") to a deity who loved and cared for his worshippers.⁷⁷ The central act of *bhakti* was self-surrender: devotees stopped resisting the Lord and, conscious of their helplessness, were confident that their god would help them.

The word *bhakti* is complex. Some scholars believe that it comes from *bharj*, "separation": people became aware of a gulf between them and the divine, and yet, at the same time, the god of their choice slowly detached himself from the cosmos he created and confronted them, person to person. Other scholars believe that the word relates to *bhaj*—to share, participate in—as the yogin in the Shvetashvatara becomes one with Lord Rudra. At this stage *bhakti* was still in its infancy. A crucial text was the *Bhagavad-Gita*, which—some scholars believe—was written during the

late third century. It developed the theology of the Shvetashvatara Upanishad, taking it in a new direction that had a profound effect on the Hindu spirituality that emerged during the dark age.

The *Bhagavad-Gita* (“The Song of the Lord”) may originally have been a separate text, but at some point it was inserted into the sixth book of the *Mahabharata*. It takes the form of a dialogue between Arjuna, the greatest warrior of the Pandava brothers, and his friend Krishna. The terrible war that Yudishthira, Arjuna’s eldest brother, had hoped to avoid was about to begin. Standing in his war chariot, with Krishna as his driver, Arjuna gazed in horror at the battlefield. Until this point in the story, Arjuna had been less disturbed than Yudishthira about the prospect of war, but now he was struck by the enormity of what was about to happen. The family was tragically divided against itself; the Pandavas were about to attack their kinsfolk. According to ancient teaching, a warrior who killed his relatives consigned the entire family to hell. He would rather give up the kingdom than slaughter his brave cousins and his beloved teachers Bhishma and Drona. There would be anarchy; the social order would be destroyed. If he was responsible for the death of his cousins, he would never know happiness again, and evil would haunt the Pandavas for the rest of their lives. “What use to us is kingship, delights, or life itself?” he asked Krishna.⁷⁸ It would be far more glorious to be killed in battle, unarmed, and offering no resistance.

*Saying this in the time of war
Arjuna slumped into his chariot
And laid down his bow and arrows
His mind tormented with grief.⁷⁹*

The *Bhagavad-Gita* was one of the last great texts of the Axial Age, and it marks a moment of religious transition. As so often in our story, a new religious insight was inspired by revulsion from violence. Krishna tried to put some heart into Arjuna by citing all the traditional arguments for war. The warriors who fell in the coming battle would not really die, he said, because the atman was eternal; and since a warrior who died in battle would go straight to heaven, Arjuna would be doing his cousins a favour. If he refused to fight, Arjuna could be accused of cowardice and, more seriously, would violate the dharma of the *kshatriya* class. As a warrior, it was his sacred duty to fight. It was required of him by the gods, by the divine order of the universe, and by society. Like his brother Yudishthira, Arjuna was facing the tragic dilemma of the *kshatriya* dharma. The

emperor Ashoka had been committed to nonviolence but he could not decommission his army. Brahmin priests could abjure warfare; renouncers could turn their backs on the whole sorry mess and take refuge in the forest. But somebody had to defend the community, and to preserve law and order. That, most unfortunately, would mean fighting, if only in self-defence. How could a warrior do his sacred duty to society without incurring the bad effects of the violent karma that he was forced to commit?

Arjuna was not impressed by Krishna’s first set of arguments. “I will not fight!” he insisted.⁸⁰ Warfare on this scale must be wrong. It could not be right to shed blood for worldly gain. Perhaps he should become a renouncer? But he respected Krishna, and turned back to him in desperation, begging for his help. In agreeing to be Arjuna’s guru, Krishna had the difficult job of countering the arguments of the Jains, the Buddhists, and those ascetics who believed that all worldly action was incompatible with liberation. But this meant that the vast majority had no hope of salvation. Arjuna had put his finger on a major flaw of the Indian Axial Age. Krishna wanted him to consider the problem from a different perspective, but instead of proposing a wholly new teaching that cancelled out the other schools, he attempted a new synthesis of the old spiritual disciplines with the new concept of *bhakti*.

Krishna proposed that Arjuna practise an alternative kind of yoga: karma-yoga. He made a shocking suggestion: even a warrior who was fighting a deadly battle could achieve *moksha*. To achieve this, he had to dissociate himself from the effect of his action—in this case the battle, and the death of his kinsfolk. Like any yogin, the man of action (karma) must give up desire. He could not permit himself to lust after the fame, wealth, or power that would result from the military campaign. It was not the actions themselves that bound human beings to the endless round of rebirth, but attachment to the fruits of these deeds. The warrior must perform his duty without hope of personal gain, showing the same detachment as a yogin:

*Be intent on action
Not on the fruits of action;
Avoid attraction to the fruits
And attachment to inaction!*

*Perform actions, firm in discipline,
Relinquishing attachment;
Be impartial to failure and success—
This equanimity is called discipline.⁸¹*

But greed and ambition were deeply rooted in human consciousness, so the warrior could achieve this state of dispassion only by the exercise of yoga, which would dismantle his ego. The warrior must take the “me” and “mine” out of his deeds, so that he acted quite impersonally. Once he had achieved this, he would in fact be “inactive,” because “he” would not be taking part in the war: “always content, independent, he does nothing at all even when he engages in action.”⁸² A *kshatriya* had responsibilities; he could not simply retire to the forest. But by practising karma-yoga he would in fact be detached from the world, even while he was living and active in it. Krishna instructed Arjuna in the usual yogic disciplines, but the meditation he proposed was tailor-made for the *kshatriya*, who could not spend hours every day in contemplation. There was a more exacting form of meditation for a professional ascetic, but karma-yoga could be performed by a man or woman who had worldly duties. The traditional yoga had never centred on a god, but karma-yoga did. The Shvetashvatara Upanishad had instructed the yogin to focus on Rudra/Shiva, but Krishna told Arjuna that he must meditate on Vishnu.

Krishna had a surprise for Arjuna. He explained that he, Krishna, was not only the son of Vishnu, but he actually *was* the god in human form. Even though he was “unborn, undying, the Lord of creatures,” Vishnu had descended into a human body many times.⁸³ Vishnu was the creator of the world and kept it in being, but whenever there was a serious crisis—“whenever sacred duty decays and chaos prevails”—he created an earthly form for himself and came into the world:

*To protect men of virtue
And destroy men who do evil
To set the standard of sacred duty,
I appear in age after age.*⁸⁴

Now that he had imparted this astonishing news, Krishna could speak more openly to Arjuna about the devotion of *bhakti*. Arjuna could learn how to detach himself from his egocentric desires by imitating Krishna himself. As Lord and Ruler of the world, Krishna/Vishnu was continually active, but his deeds (*karman*) did not damage him:

*These actions do not bind me,
Since I remain detached
In all my actions, Arjuna,
As if I stood apart from them.*⁸⁵

But if he wanted to imitate Krishna, Arjuna had to understand the nature of divinity; he had to *see* Krishna/Vishnu as he truly was.

Right there on the battlefield, Krishna revealed his divine nature to Arjuna, who was aghast and filled with terror when he saw his friend’s eternal form as the god Vishnu, creator and destroyer, to whom all beings must return. He saw Krishna transfigured by the divine radiance, which contained the entire cosmos. “I see the gods in your body!” he cried.

*I see your boundless form
Everywhere,
The countless arms,
Bellies, mouths, and eyes;
Lord of all,
I see no end,
Or middle or beginning
To your totality.*⁸⁶

Everything—human or divine—was somehow present in the body of Krishna, who filled space and included within himself all possible forms of deity: “howling storm gods, sun gods, bright gods, and gods of ritual.” But Krishna/Vishnu was also “man’s tireless spirit,” the essence of humanity.⁸⁷ All things rushed towards him, as rivers roiled towards the sea and moths were drawn inexorably into a blazing flame. And there too Arjuna saw the Pandava and Kaurava warriors, all hurtling into the god’s blazing mouths.

Arjuna had thought that he had known Krishna through and through, but now, “Who are you?” he cried in bewilderment. “I am Time grown old,” Krishna replied—time, which set the world in motion and also annihilated it. Krishna/Vishnu was eternal; he transcended the historical process. As destroyer, Krishna/Vishnu had *already* annihilated the armies that were apparently drawing up their battle lines, even though, from Arjuna’s human perspective, the fighting had not even begun. The outcome was fixed and immutable. In order to keep the cosmos in being, one age must succeed another. The war between the Pandavas and the Kauravas would bring the heroic era to an end, and inaugurate a new historical epoch. “Even without you,” Krishna told Arjuna, “all these warriors arrayed in hostile ranks will cease to exist.”

*They are already
Killed by me.*

*Be just my instrument,
The archer at my side.*⁸⁸

Arjuna, therefore, must go into the battle, and play the role allotted to him in restoring dharma to the world.

It was a perplexing vision. Krishna's teaching seemed to absolve human beings of any responsibility for the carnage they committed. Too many politicians and warriors have insisted that they were simply the instruments of destiny, and used this to justify horrendous acts. But few have emptied themselves of the desire for personal gain that, Krishna insisted, was essential. Only the disciplined action of the warrior-yogin could bring order to a destructive world. Krishna seemed pitiless, and yet, he told Arjuna, he was a saviour god, who could rescue those who loved him from the ill effects of their karma. Only people of *bhakti* could see Krishna's true nature, and this devotion required complete self-surrender:

*Acting only for me, intent on me,
Free from attachment,
Hostile to no creature, Arjuna,
A man of devotion can come to me.*⁸⁹

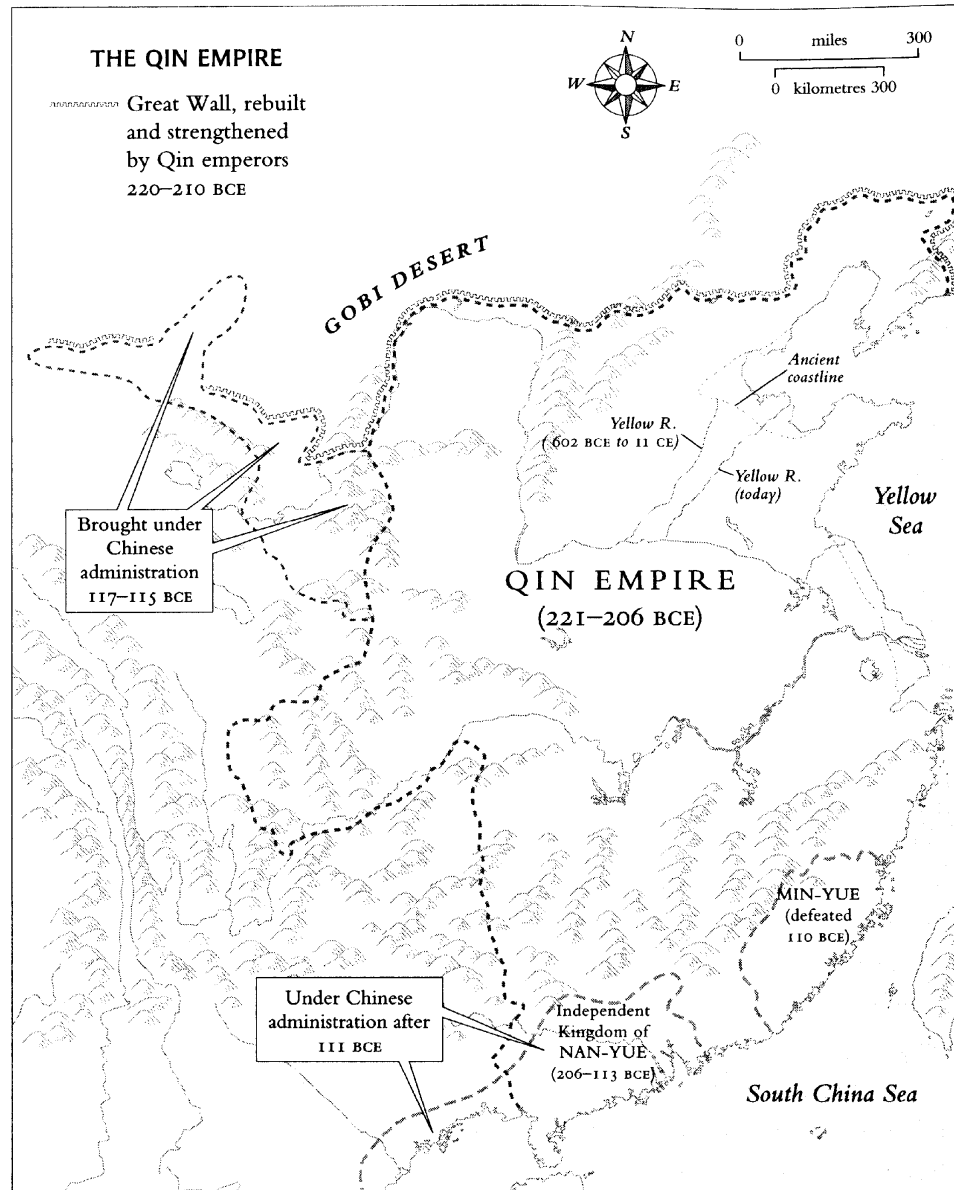
Detachment and indifference were the first steps towards the union with God, which could save human beings from all the suffering of life.⁹⁰

The *Bhagavad-Gita* has probably been more influential than any other Indian scripture. Its great merit was its accessibility. Where other spiritualities confined salvation to a few gifted, heroic ascetics, this was a religion for everybody. Very few people had the time or talent to dedicate their lives to yoga. Not many could renounce their family and take themselves off to the forest. But "if they rely on me, Arjuna," Krishna promised, "women, vaishyas, shudras, even men born in the womb of evil, reach the highest way."⁹¹ Anybody could love and imitate the Lord, and learn to transcend selfishness in the ordinary duties of daily life. Even a warrior, whose dharma obliged him to kill, could practise karma-yoga. After the great epiphany, Krishna explained that the whole material world was a battlefield in which mortal beings struggle for enlightenment with the weapons of detachment, humility, nonviolence, honesty, and self-restraint.⁹² The *Bhagavad-Gita* did not negate the spirituality of the Axial Age but instead had made it possible for everybody to practise it.

THE WAY FORWARD

The spiritual revolution of the Axial Age had occurred against a backcloth of turmoil, migration, and conquest. It had often occurred between two imperial-style ventures. In China, the Axial Age finally got under way after the collapse of the Zhou dynasty and came to an end when Qin unified the warring states. The Indian Axial Age occurred after the disintegration of the Harappan civilization and ended with the Mauryan empire; the Greek transformation occurred between the Mycenaean kingdom and the Macedonian empire. The Axial sages had lived in societies that had been cut loose from their moorings. Karl Jaspers suggested, "The Axial Age can be called an interregnum between two ages of great empire, a pause for liberty, a deep breath bringing the most lucid consciousness."⁹¹ Even the Jews, who had suffered so horribly from the imperial adventures in the Middle East, had been propelled into their Axial Age by the terrifying freedom that had followed the destruction of their homeland and the trauma of deportation that severed their link with the past and forced them to start again. But by the end of the second century, the world had stabilized. In the empires that were established after the Axial Age, the challenge was to find a spirituality that affirmed the new political unification.

The Chinese had yearned for peace and integration for a very long time. When Qin conquered the seven remaining states and established a centralized empire in 221, many must have been relieved, but they had a shocking introduction to imperial rule. The triumph of Qin had been a great victory for the Legalists. Even the legendary sage kings, who had been feudal suzerains, had not achieved an empire of this kind. Qin knew that it had no precedent in China, and the king styled himself "the first emperor." The court historian exulted: "Now within the four seas everywhere, there are commanderies and counties, decrees issue from a single



centre, something that has never been from the remotest past.”² Because this was a new era, the emperor did not claim that he had received the mandate of Heaven. Instead he broke with tradition and appealed to a school of philosophers who had taken no part in the Chinese Axial Age. The court diviners, annalists, and astronomers had probably always been more important than Mohists or Confucians to the rulers of the big competitive states, and they now provided a rationale for Qin rule.

Later this cosmology—a form of magical proto-science—would be known as the School of Yin and Yang, and between the third and the first centuries, it took strong hold on the Chinese imagination.³ As we have

seen, the concept of *yin* and *yang* probably originated with the peasant communities of China, and the correlative cosmology adopted by the Qin could date back to the Neolithic period. Its resurgence at this point represented an intellectual regression, almost an escape from the challenging demands of the Axial Age. Its aim was to find correspondences between human and natural phenomena. The court philosophers claimed that current events were predictable and controlled by larger, cosmic laws, and this gave people the comforting feeling that they were “in the know” at this time of major transition. The theory had been formulated by the fourth-century philosopher Zou Yan, who argued that the five basic elements—earth, wood, metal, fire, and water—followed each other in strict sequence: wood produced fire; fire produced ash or soil; soil produced metal; metal produced water. Each element was associated with one of the seasons, and each gained ascendancy over its predecessor, in the same way that autumn followed summer. Fire, for example, consumed wood, and soil tamped out fire. The Axial philosophers had little time for this type of speculation. Mohists had curtly pointed out: “The five elements do not always win ascendancy over one another.”⁴ Zou Yan, however, believed that he could also apply this scheme to the historical succession of the great dynasties. The Yellow Emperor was linked with the ochre-coloured earth of China, the Xia with wood, the Shang with their bronze metal, and the Zhou with fire. The new Qin dynasty must, therefore, be dominated by water, which was associated with the season of winter.

The first emperor seized upon this idea as an endorsement of his rule. He dressed in black, the colour of winter, which seemed appropriate to the dark, cold policies of Legalism, with its “resolute harshness, deciding all things by law, incising and deleting without benevolence, generosity, mildness or righteousness.”⁵ At the same time, he supported the latest experiments to find the elixir of life. Some of Zou Yan’s disciples in the Qin court were trying to concoct herbal and mineral recipes for immortality—a debased form of magic that would later be associated with philosophical Daoism.⁶ Some of these early scientists experimented with medicines; others cultivated longevity by breathing and gymnastic exercises; geographical expeditions were even dispatched to find the Isles of the Blest off the northeast coast of China, where, it was thought, privileged human beings could live for ever. All this represented a desire to achieve control, to predict the future and keep death at bay by physical rather than spiritual means, but it was also a retreat from the vision of the Axial sages, who had believed that the quest for this type of permanence and security was immature and unrealistic.

The first emperor had to decide how to organize the vast territories he had conquered. Should he give his sons feudal domains, like the Zhou? His prime minister, Li Si, Xunzi's old pupil, advised him to grant his sons stipends instead of land, and to maintain absolute control of his empire. When in 213 a court historian criticized this breach with tradition, Li Si presented the emperor with a fateful memorandum. In the old days, he argued, people had consulted independent scholars and followed different schools of thought, but this could not be allowed to continue:

Your Majesty has united the world. Yet some with their private teachings mutually abet each other, and discredit our laws and customs. If such conditions are not prohibited, the imperial power will decline above and partisanships will rise from below.⁷

Li Si therefore counselled that "all historical records, save those of Qin, all the writings of the hundred schools, and all other literature, save that kept in the custody of the official scholars, and some works on agriculture, medicine, pharmacy, divination, and arboriculture should be delivered to the government and burned."⁸ Not only was there a massive book burning, but 460 teachers were executed. The Axial philosophers of China had arrived at a spiritual apprehension of the unity of all things. For Li Si, unification meant the violent destruction of the opposition. There was one world, one government, one history, and one ideology.

Fortunately, the emperor allowed the seventy official philosophers of the regime to keep copies of the Chinese classics, or everything might have been lost. But these savage policies were counterproductive. After the death of the first emperor in 209, the people of the empire rose up in rebellion. After three years of chaos, Liu Bang, a commoner who had started life as a local administrator, led his forces to victory and founded the Han dynasty. He wanted to preserve the centralized political system of the Qin, and even though he could see that Li Si's policy had been misguided, he knew that the empire needed the realism of the Legalists as well as a more edifying ideology. He found a compromise in the philosophy known as Huang Lo, a synthesis of Legalism and Daoism.⁹ The two schools had always felt an affinity, and they probably chose Huang Di, the legendary Yellow Emperor, as their patron because he had never been important to the Confucians or the Mohists. People were weary of arbitrary imperial rule, and, it was said, Huang Di had ruled by "doing nothing." The emperor must delegate power to his ministers and refrain from

personally intervening in public policy; there would be a rational penal law, but no draconian punishments.

The last Chinese sages of the Axial Age had been wary of dogmatic adherence to a single orthodox position, and were moving towards syncretism. But many people felt confused and found it hard to choose between the different schools. The author of the essay "Under the Empire," which was probably written in the early years of the Han, felt that the spiritual world of China was disintegrating. The teaching of the sage kings had been crystal clear. But now:

Everywhere under Heaven is in great disarray, the worthy ones and the sages have no light to shed, the Tao and Virtue [*de*] are no longer united, and the whole world tends to see only one aspect and think that they have grasped the whole of it.¹⁰

The Chinese had absorbed an important lesson of the Axial Age. They knew that no school could possibly have the monopoly on truth, because the *dao* was transcendent and indescribable. At this time, Daoism was in the ascendancy. For the author of "Under the Empire," nearly all the sages had important insights, but Zhuangzi was the most reliable. He had "taught what he believed, yet was never partisan, nor did he view things from just one perspective." Because he was so open-minded and unfettered by human orthodoxy, he was "in accord with the Dao and went to the highest heights."¹¹

But gradually the merits of Confucianism became apparent.¹² The Han emperors had always appreciated the importance of ceremony and ritual. The first Han emperor had commissioned the local ritualists to draw up a court liturgy and when it was performed for the first time, he had cried: "Now I realize the nobility of being a son of Heaven!"¹³ Once people had recovered from the trauma of the Qin inquisition, Daoism began to seem impractical. It had always had more than a hint of anarchy and lawlessness, and it was felt that the people needed some kind of moral guidance. Whatever the merits of *wu wei*, the emperors could not rule entirely by "emptiness." The popularity of Huang Lo peaked during the reign of the Han emperor Wen (179–157), and after that the regime was ready for change.

In 136, the court scholar Dong Zhongshu presented a memorial to Emperor Wu (140–87), arguing that there were too many competing schools and recommending that the six classics, taught by the Confucians,

