



Chapter I

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

The Context out of which Buddhism Emerged

The Brahmanical World

The founder of Buddhism, Siddhartha Gautama, was by birth what we would now call a “Hindu,” and although Siddhartha was highly critical of the religion into which he was born, and although the movement that he founded broke with this dominant religious tradition in significant ways, Buddhism did not emerge from a religious vacuum. Indeed, it is important to recognize that Buddhism was at the start very much a reform movement from within Hinduism. It is thus essential to understand something of the social and religious world of sixth-century-B.C.E. India in order to understand the Buddha’s own religious worldview and why Buddhism

took the particular shape that it did. In order to understand the Buddha’s teachings, we must, in a sense, acquaint ourselves with the basic religious and philosophical vocabulary of the time.

The dominant religious system in the northern Indian world into which the Buddha was born is often called Brahmanism—the word “Hinduism” is a foreign label describing the diverse religious culture of India, first used by Arab traders in the eighteenth century—a religion based on a body of texts called the *Vedas* that had developed orally beginning around 1500 B.C.E.; this religious tradition is thus sometimes also called the Vedic tradition. The Vedic religious world was one inhabited by numerous gods, or *devas*—a word related to

the English word “divinity”—many of whom were personified forces of nature. Humans, although very much at the mercy and whim of these powerful beings, could nonetheless interact with and influence the *devas* by praising them and offering them sacrifices. In return, humans received boons from the gods—abundant crops, healthy sons, protection, and long lives.

A new genre of religious discourse began to emerge out of the Vedic religious world sometime between the seventh and the fifth centuries B.C.E., a body of doctrines known as the *Upanishads*. Although they would eventually become part of Hinduism, these texts—orally transmitted, like the *Vedas*—questioned the efficacy of the formal sacrifice and introduced new, essential religious ideas, many of which would eventually be adopted by the Buddha: the cyclical idea of rebirth (*samsara*), the ethical law of cause and effect (*karma*), the concept of liberation (*moksha*) from the world of *samsara* through the path of asceticism, and the importance of calming the mind through meditation (*yoga*).

As the ideas of the *Upanishads* began to spread in India, some individuals, mostly men of the educated class, took them to heart, and set out to experience the liberation that these ideas described. To do so, they renounced their ties to the material world—in order to be able to focus on their spiritual pursuits—and undertook spreading these new ideas even further, and debating philosophical and meditational points. These various religious seekers were called *shramanas*—literally, “wanderers”—and the earliest Buddhists saw

themselves as a subset of this general group of itinerant religious seekers. Also among these groups was Mahavira, the founder of another new religious tradition, Jainism.

At about the same time, important social changes were also in process along the Gangetic plains in northern India. Kingdoms began to emerge out of the traditional kinship structures that had governed social and political life for centuries, and with these kingdoms emerged cities and highly structured systems of government. Furthermore, trade routes began to develop between these cities, and with trade came both economic growth and the emergence of a merchant class. This latter group is particularly important in the emergence of Buddhism, for although they had economic status, the merchants and traders did not have religious status; the Buddha would offer them a new religious path that would allow them to develop that status in part through their material support of him and his followers.

The Vedic Worldview and the Centrality of Sacrifice

The Sanskrit word *Veda* literally means “knowledge,” specifically, the specialized, divinely inspired knowledge contained within the verses of these massive texts. It is a knowledge that unlocks the power of the ritual, a knowledge that is, furthermore, the special province of the Vedic priests, known as brahmins.

There are several important aspects of the *Vedas* that should be noted at the outset

here. First, these were said to be revealed texts, called *shruti*—which means “heard”—by the Hindu tradition. They were said to have not been composed, but rather orally revealed to humans by the gods. The *Vedas* were thus authorless, not written but “heard” and remembered and passed down by the brahmins to other brahmins. As such, they were considered absolute authority, infallible truth. Furthermore, they were, and continue to be, considered by the Hindu tradition to be eternal, having always existed and forever existing, and thus were held not only to be perfect, but also to be, essentially, religious and social imperatives, rules to be followed absolutely. The *Vedas*, then, and the brahmins who protected and perpetuated them—and who were the only people who could speak and hear the Vedic verses and perform the Vedic rituals—were the hallmark of Indian religious orthodoxy, and it was precisely this exclusive and restricted sense of religious practice that would be challenged by the Buddha.

Perhaps because the *Vedas* were exclusively oral texts, sound (or *vac*) was considered to be the primary creative force in the world, a god (or sometimes goddess) in its own right—it is sound that unleashes the power of the sacrifice and also that which reproduces the structure of the world. Hence the *Vedas* contain verbal formulas called *mantras*, which, when recited, were thought to bring about creation. These formulas were in a language called “Sanskrit” (literally, “well formed”), which was the special language of the sacrifice and which embodied the properly constructed cosmos. These verbal formulas were memorized and passed down

from one person to another, and only special persons—brahmin priests—could learn, speak, and hear them.

The texts that make up the *Vedas* are a mixture of hymns of praise, myths, and ritual formulas. The ritual texts, particularly the group of liturgical texts called *Brahmanas*, present highly elaborate, often intricately detailed directions for how to properly perform sacrifices to the various gods, how many bricks to use in the altars, what offerings to make and when and by whom, and so on. Other Vedic texts, however, are directed to the many gods who control the cosmos. This, then, is a world in which the different gods are active forces in human life and, furthermore, in which the actions of these gods can be influenced by proper—or improper, as the case may be—ritual performance. The basic goal of the Vedic rituals was to maintain order—cosmic order among the realm of the *devas*, and, in a parallel sense, human order. The concept of order is indeed at the very core of the entire Hindu tradition.

The religious path expressed by the *Vedas* is one of “action,” the literal meaning of the word *karma*, and it is most fundamentally a path concerned with ritual. As such, this is a religious worldview concerned not primarily with salvation, with what comes after this life, but with this world—happiness, health, and wealth. Religion, in fact, was understood in early India to be a kind of work, which when properly performed produced worldly benefits. Thus, there is in the *Vedas* an emphasis on sacrificial action, or work, and on the correct performance of that action.

The hymns of the *Vedas* were chiefly composed for chanting at sacrifices, where animals, grains, milk, and clarified butter (*ghee*) were offered to the gods. On the most basic level, sacrifice was conceived of as a meal offered to the *devas* by the humans. The medium of these offerings was fire, or *agni*—both in an earthly sense (the word “agni” is related to the English word “ignite”) and in a divine sense (Agni was considered the god of fire). Fire was essential to the Vedic religious world because it had tremendous power: It (a) transforms the physical, material goods offered into “food” for the gods; (b) purifies the offerings made to the gods; (c) represents both creative and destructive energy; and (d) is the very basis of human domestic life (without heat and cooking, there can be no life). Thus Agni was one of the most prominent gods in all of the *Vedas*, the messenger between the human and the divine realm, the transporter of the dead, and, in some verses, the embodiment of all gods. As one Vedic verse puts it, “That which is Brahman (the whole universe, the prime mover), the priests speak of in various forms; they call it Agni” (*Rig Veda* 1.164). Furthermore, Agni was sometimes conceived of as heat, or *tapas*, which was also the purifying ascetic energy necessary for the proper performance of the ritual; the priests would prepare themselves for the ritual by generating *tapas*—created through various purification rituals and intense meditation—that burned off their spiritual impurities. As will be examined later, the Buddha took this basic idea, the purifying quality of heat, and directed it inward, rejecting the external understanding

of sacrifice and making the purification process an entirely internal one.

The sacrificial world of the *Vedas* was extremely complex, involving elaborate preparations to ensure the purity of the ritual priests, the sacred space, and the sacrificial offerings. The construction of the sacrificial fire altar, likewise, involved days of careful and exacting preparations. In fact, large portions of the *Vedas* consist of highly technical instructions as to how to perform these complex rituals. Finally, the sacrifices themselves would often go on for many days, involving dozens of priests and multiple offerings to multiple gods.

In the early Vedic period, probably beginning sometime around 1500 B.C.E., the gods were considered to be the creators and preservers of the cosmos, and these *devas* were the dominant focus of the religion. Gradually, as the Vedic worldview developed over several hundred years, the religious emphasis shifted, and the centrality of the sacrifice and the sacrificial priests was emphasized more and more. Thus, in later texts such as the *Atharva Veda*, the sacrifice itself was understood to be the re-creation, on a human level, of the cosmos. Indeed, in Vedic mythology, sacrifice is what creates the world. Thus, the priests who held the special and secret knowledge of the sacrifice were seen as having the fundamental knowledge of the universe, and thus the ability to control it. They were the focus of the religious world and the sole religious actors on the religious stage. It was they and they alone who knew the sacred texts and performed the sacred rituals. Significantly, it was precisely

this restricted, essentially elitist religious world—in which religious power and status was confined to a small group who inherited their positions—that the Buddha rejected and reformulated.

In addition to the ritual specialists who made up the brahmin caste, there was a subgroup of brahmins called *rishis*, or seers. On the most basic level, these were religious specialists who, through what we might call “mystical vision,” were able to see into the true nature of things, into the divine realm, and thus communicate with the gods. They gained this visionary insight in part through ingesting a substance called *soma*, which gave them a purified vision. What was *soma*? The answer to this question is not known, although scholars do know that it was some sort of a hallucinogenic plant—it has been conjectured that it was perhaps the fly agaric mushroom. At any rate, *soma* was ritually prepared—there are long portions of the *Vedas* devoted to the preparation and praise of *soma*—and then ingested by the special priests as part of the larger sacrificial rituals. *Soma* is also portrayed and praised in the *Vedas* as a god, much like the Greek god Hermes—an intermediary between the world of the humans and the world of the gods.

The Vedic Gods

In many respects, the early Vedic gods are personifications of natural forces—wind, fire, rain, or sun. The gods are responsible for creation, which they effect through something

called *maya*, described as the art of the gods, a projection of the gods’ imaginations. The idea is that the gods give form to the powers that are already present in the cosmos, eternally, as part of the natural order of things; they do not, in this sense, create the powers, but rather make them manifest in the world. Hence, the gods are often described as craftsmen, “measurers,” using their “rulers” to form the world. Thus, a prominent early Vedic god is called Vishvakarman (“maker of everything”), and he is described as the divine architect or carpenter who fashions the world out of nothing.

Prajapati (“father of life”) is another Vedic creator god, described as at once the universe, time, sacrifice, and sacrificer. This is at times quite confusing: Prajapati emits all living beings via the sacrifice, and then he has to be put back together by the sacrifice because he himself has been sacrificed in creating the world; indeed, when the Vedic priests build the fire altar, with its 720 bricks, they are building Prajapati, who is the year (360 for the days, 360 for the nights). In this ritual, the priests are said to “reassemble” him, and the word to describe this process, not incidentally, is “sanskrit”—properly constructed, well fit. Here we can see the early articulation of a significant idea, a metaphoric rebuilding or reforming of the individual’s self that gets developed in later Indian religion. The sacrifice thus not only makes the cosmos come into being, but it also, on a human level, makes the person “complete.”

Another prominent Vedic god is Indra, to whom about one quarter of the verses of the

Rig Veda are devoted. He is described as the tireless consumer of *soma*, and as the archetype of generative forces. Furthermore, it is he who creates hurricanes, who pours down rain, and who commands all forms of wetness. He is thus associated with life and, at times, destruction. Most significantly, though, he is the benevolent leader of the Aryans—the nomadic tribes who settled in northern India and who are thought to have been the human authors of the *Vedas*—their great warrior and protector. Some of his epithets in the Vedic texts are the “destroyer of enemies and cities,” “bestower of prosperity” on humanity, and the “lord of heaven.” In significant ways, the image of Indra as model king will be adopted and reformulated by the Buddhists, who will conceive of the model king not as a god but, ultimately, as the Buddha himself.

A discussion of the Vedic gods could go on for many pages, but what is important to note, in the context of the rise of Buddhism, is that the world was conceived of in these hymns and myths as being formed and ruled by powerful gods, who often, through their whimsy or divine play, reeked havoc on the human realm. Humans could certainly—via hymns of praise and sacrifice—influence the gods, but ultimately they were, in this worldview, at the mercy of these often-capricious deities. The Buddha would reject this cosmological worldview outright, particularly this reliance on the whim of the gods, and instead would forcefully posit that humans and humans alone are responsible for their birth, their death, and, ultimately, their salvation.

The Dynamics of Caste

In this examination of the religious and social context out of which the Buddha and Buddhism emerged, it is important to finally consider one of the most significant aspects of Brahmanical and Vedic religious and social life against which the Buddha reacted—what is most typically called “the caste system.” The Vedic religious world was hierarchical: the *devas* were at the top of this hierarchy (within the realm of the *devas* there were hierarchical divisions as well), and below them was the human realm, formally defined by the division of society into four classes, or *varnas*, membership in which was determined solely by birth. Although the caste system took many hundreds of years to develop, and was, at least initially, not so much a system—and certainly not the oppressive system that it has often been seen to be—as a means of understanding and prescribing social and religious roles, caste eventually developed into one of the defining aspects of the Hindu religious tradition.

At the top of this hierarchical social structure were the sacrificial priests, the brahmins. It was their role and duty to perform the religious rituals and to preserve and recite the *Vedas*—to memorize the thousands of verses in the texts, to chant them at the sacrificial rituals, and to pass these texts on to successive generations of brahmins orally. In so doing, the brahmins maintained the order, or *dharma*, of the divine world, assuring that the gods were appeased through sacrifice and ritual praise. Directly below the brahmins in

the hierarchy were the kshatriyas, the warriors and sociopolitical rulers. Just as it was the duty of the brahmins to maintain the order of the divine world, so was it the *dharma* of the kshatriyas to preserve order in the human realm. Below the kshatriyas were the vaishyas, the cultivators and keepers of domestic animals. It was their *dharma*, accordingly, to provide food and material goods. Below them were the shudras, the laborers and servants, whose *dharma* it was to ensure the cleanliness of the other three classes of humans.

Accordingly, this was a system not only of mutual dependence, but also of restriction. There was no upward mobility in this system. One Vedic text (the *Purusha Shukta* of the *Rig Veda*) that describes the creation of the universe envisions this social system as a human being who is sacrificed to create the world: the brahmins are the mouth of the human (because of their oral preservation and performance of the sacred verses of the *Vedas*); the kshatriyas are the arms (because they are the “strong arms” of the social world); the vaishyas are the thighs (the support of the body); and, significantly, the shudras are the feet (the lowest, but also in many ways the most fundamental). Thus, social and cosmic order, *dharma*, can only be maintained if each part of the body is present and “healthy.” Certainly, the feet are lower than the head, but without the feet the body cannot stand.

Although it seems that the Vedic understanding of caste bears little resemblance to the restrictive and oppressive system that later came to dominate Indian social and religious life—it was originally envisioned as a symbi-

otic division of labor and life—the Buddha himself was highly critical of this division of society. He saw the *jati*, or birth, model of dividing society, which was the basis of the caste system, as fundamentally oppressive, and rejected it outright. Rather, the Buddha posited that one’s own effort in each life determined one’s previous and future rebirths, and he also insisted that even the lowest members of the social structure could attain salvation by cultivating selfless compassion and by striving for self-awareness. Salvation, therefore, was not from a Buddhist perspective the special privilege of the brahmins, but was open to everyone.

Time, Death, and Speculation in the Later *Vedas*

When the Buddha set out to find the path to enlightenment, he did so in order to conquer suffering and, ultimately, death, because he saw that it was continued rebirth—and thus also redeath—through time that was the very basis of suffering. But what was the prevailing understanding of these complex ideas at the time of the Buddha’s birth?

Time was considered in the early Vedic period to be eternal; the gods and the cosmos had always existed in one form or another, and would always continue to exist. The issue of what happens to humans at death was not a prominent topic. Rather, as we have seen, it was life that was emphasized, and the sacrifice was intended to provide for matters in this world by appeasing the gods. By the late Vedic

period, however, a certain note of anxiety can be detected in the Vedic discourse. The tone of the Vedic texts seems to shift, moving from the confident and remarkably unspeculative discussion of sacrifice to a troubling note of existential doubt. Questions begin to be raised about the nature of creation, about the relationship between the gods and the individual, and the very nature of death. In the tenth book of the *Rig Veda*, for instance, we find the question raised as to what there was in the beginning, before the world was created. Was there something, or was there nothing? What came before there was something? Does anyone know? Who created the creator? These are weighty questions, to be sure, questions that, in one form or another, are fundamental to virtually all religious traditions. Significantly, though, these questions remain unanswered in the *Vedas*, as if their human authors recognized the ultimate mysteries of the cosmos, and as if these authors wished, in the end, to invite further philosophical and existential speculation.

More specifically, the sages in the *Vedas* began to wonder whether or not there was some sort of afterlife. A kind of hell-like realm of prolonged suffering after death for those who lived poorly, who did not properly perform their religious and social duties, is sometimes discussed in the earlier texts, a realm that is overseen by the god Yama (“death”), although the nature of these hells, and how one ends up there, is generally laid out in rather vague terms. Essentially, death in the earlier *Vedas* seems to have been viewed as an inevitable end. The later texts, however, introduce

the concept of a “realm of the Fathers”—somewhat mysterious figures who are, like the gods, to be praised and worshipped—where one goes after earthly death. In other words, the seeds of the concept of rebirth were sown in the later Vedic period, and by the time the *Upanishads* were introduced (about which more will be said in the following section) the fate of the individual after earthly death became a primary concern of Indian religious thought.

This marks a profound moment in the development of Indian religion, recorded in the later Vedic texts—particularly evident in the *Brahmanas*, a genre of commentarial literature that provides a kind of running interpretation of the *Vedas*. It is this development that would eventually lead to the emergence of Buddhism: a shift in focus is evident, away from the quid pro quo world of the sacrifice, in which offerings are made to the gods in order to get earthly results, and toward a new search for the nature of the self, the nature of life—indeed, a search for the very nature of existence.

The Challenge of the *Upanishads*

This shift in focus is recorded in the *Upanishads*, a group of orally transmitted texts that began to be composed in the last part of the Vedic period, from about the eighth through the sixth centuries B.C.E. The tone of these texts is very different from that of the majority of the *Vedas*. It is existentially speculative and profoundly philosophical. It

is in the *Upanishads* that what became the central tenets of Indian religious thought—ideas that formed the basis of Buddhist thought as well—are most clearly articulated: the concept of *samsara*, or the continuous cycle of birth, life, death, and rebirth; the idea of *atman*, a permanent self that transmigrates through *samsara* (the Buddha, however, will reject this idea of a permanent self); the doctrine of *karma*, moral and ethical causality; and the possibility of *moksha* (in Buddhist terms, *nirvana*) or release from this world of rebirth.

In the *Upanishads* we no longer see a model, as articulated in the *Vedas*, of a cosmos populated by a multiplicity of gods who must be influenced via the sacrifice, but rather the *Upanishads* focus on the abstract divine principle underlying all of existence, which is called *Brahman* (not to be confused with the caste *brahmin*). And what is this power? “It is the unseen seer, the unheard hearer, the unthought thinker, the ununderstood understander. Other than It, there is no seer. Other than It, there is no hearer. Other than It, there is no thinker. Other than It, there is no understander. It is your *atman*, the inner controller, the immortal” (*Brihad Aranyaka Upanishad* 3.7.23).

The *Upanishads* are fundamentally ascetic in their orientation, advocating a religious life outside of society, a renunciation of worldly attachments. The sages who wrote them, who recorded the dialogues about the nature of the self, existence, *Brahman*, death, and release, rejected the Vedic involvement in things of this world. These texts locate the basic existential problem as the generation of *karma*, a word

that literally means “action,” but comes in the *Upanishads*—and in Buddhism as well—to refer to any intentional action that creates consequences or is performed with the anticipation of results, including, therefore, sacrificial action (which is, after all, fundamentally intended to create, to bear fruit). In order to break free from the binds of *samsara*—and it is essential to recognize that the Upanishadic sages saw rebirth as a negative phenomenon—one must find a way to stop generating *karma*, the actions that lead to rebirth, in the first place.

On its face, this may seem to be a relatively simple matter: if it is actions that create *karma*, then the solution to the existential state of human beings, to being stuck in the world of rebirth, must be the elimination of all actions. However, the Upanishadic sages recognized that it is extremely difficult to stop all actions. First, one must separate from the world of action—from sacrifice, from domestic life, from the ties of family. The *Upanishads* are thus sometimes called Forest Books, in that they advocate a simple life, removed from the hustle and bustle of the world, a life away, in the forest. Second, the *Upanishads* advocate a life of focused meditation (*yoga*) and philosophical introspection. *Yoga*, a word that literally derives from a Sanskrit verb meaning “to yoke”—as in to yoke an ox to a plow—is understood as means to the end here. It is a mental and physical technique of concentrating on a single reality, that of *Brahman*, which is sometimes described in the *Upanishads* as The One, and of cultivating the realization that one’s own self, one’s *atman*, is no different

than the divine whole of Brahman. According to the *Upanishads*, Brahman is not only the energizing force of the cosmos, but it is also the very self of the human being.

Thus, the *Upanishads* advocate a path of self-knowledge, a knowledge that results in the removal of a fundamental ignorance that creates the illusion that there is a difference between the individual *atman* and the absolute Brahman. This ignorance—which is sometimes called *maya*, or illusion—leads to grasping, to the generation of *karma*, and it is this *karma* that causes rebirth. Thus, release from the bonds of *samsara*, called *moksha*, is achieved through the elimination of ignorance about the nature of the self. One particularly illustrative dialogue, recorded in the *Katha Upanishad*, takes place between the god of death, Yama, and a brahman named Naciketas. Naciketas had won a boon from the gods, the ability to ask Yama any question he likes, so he asks the god about what happens after death: “When a man is dead, there is this doubt: Some say, ‘He exists,’ and some say, ‘He does not exist.’ I want you to instruct me in this matter.” Yama, though, begs him to ask something else, saying, “Even the gods had doubt as this.” But finally, after Naciketas repeatedly asks the same question, Yama instructs him, telling him that the only way to escape death, the only way to end the cycle of rebirth and attain salvation, is to “study what pertains to the self,” and in the process “leave both joy and sorrow behind” (*Katha Upanishad* 1.20).

To summarize, then, the transition from the Vedic to the Upanishadic worldview is marked

by a transformation of the concept of sacrifice, in which the external, formal sacrifice of the Vedic world is internalized. The outward action of the sacrifice, *karma*, is rethought and given an ethical and moral emphasis. Proper sacrifice is not in the *Upanishads* understood to be the offering up of material, into the fire of Agni, to be transported to the gods; rather, true sacrifice is the generation of an internal heat, or *tapas*, that burns off one’s desire and allows for the elimination of ignorance and, ultimately, *karma*. Furthermore, the prime religious actors of the *Upanishads* are no longer the ritual priests with their specialized knowledge of the construction of the sacrificial altar and the ritual formulas to be chanted during the sacrifice. Now the religious actors are ascetics, renouncers who cultivate the knowledge of the self and, ultimately, of Brahman.

Conclusion

The period during which the *Upanishads* were being formulated and eventually recorded, roughly from about 800 to 600 B.C.E., was a period of tremendous religious fermentation. Indeed, the sixth century B.C.E. in India was one in which change was happening at an extraordinarily fast rate, historically. In response to the ideas that eventually were recorded in the *Upanishads*, a diffuse group of religious seekers calling themselves *shramanas* began to reject the structured Vedic social and ritual world, and instead seek insight outside of society. The *shramanas*, then, like their

Upanishadic counterparts—who, remember, were themselves brahmins—sought out the quiet of the forest and the jungle, where they could debate philosophical and religious matters among themselves, and where they could gain knowledge of their own nature, and, ultimately, of Brahman. Once they gained this understanding, they would be released from the world of *samsara* and believed they would attain eternal oneness with Brahman or some other form of salvation.

The techniques and ideas of the *shramana* movements varied considerably. Some advocated a harsh, extreme form of asceticism, denying themselves any pleasure at all, sometimes to the point of rejecting all nourishment; others advocated an extreme course of meditation, in which the renouncer would, essentially, meditate at all times; and still others took the opposite extreme, and advocated a form of renunciation that looked very much like hedonism. They engaged in whatever they pleased, free of any rules or constraints. Most of these movements we know very little about, since they are only mentioned in Buddhist and Hindu sources, and only mentioned as misguided. Two, however, stand out—the Ajivakas and the Jains.

For the most part, we know of the Ajivakas only through Buddhist and Jain sources, in which they are portrayed as the archenemies of true religious seekers, misguided and extreme. It is clear that they must have been very serious ascetics, practicing a much harsher ascetic course than either the Hindu renouncers or the Buddhists. To enter the Ajivaka order, for instance, one had to have all one's hair pulled

out, and then grasp a molten piece of metal. Their basic doctrinal stance was that there is no human causality, really no *karma*, in the sense that it is generally known. Instead, they proposed that there was an impersonal force called *niyati*, or fate; everything in an individual's life was predestined (not by any god, just by the impersonal force of the cosmos). Humans must go through 8,400,000 *kalpas*—a *kalpa* consists of 4,320,000,000 years—being born and reborn over and over again, at the end of which we become ascetics in the final birth: According to one Buddhist text, the Ajivakas held that “*Samsara* is measured as with a bushel, with its joy and sorrow and its appointed end. It can be neither lessened nor increased, nor is there any excess or deficiency of it. Just as a ball of thread will, when thrown, unwind to its full length, so fool and wise alike take their course, and make an end of sorrow” (*Digha Nikaya* 1.47). This was, to be sure, not a terribly attractive worldview. We are, according to the Ajivakas, simply marching through one miserable life after another until we finally cease to exist.” Not much is precisely known about the Ajivakas, and scholars do not know why the Ajivaka movement did not catch on and survive, but one thing is clear: there was no place for the laity, making it very hard for them to gain either followers or patrons (needed to provide shelter and food, especially), and without either of these, it seems that this was a self-defeating religious tradition.

In contrast to the Ajivakas, the Jains did survive and, to a degree, continue to this day to flourish in India. Jainism was founded by

Vardhamana Mahavira (“the great hero”), sometimes called a Jina (“victor”), or Tirthankara (a “ford maker,” who makes a crossing point out of this world), who lived at almost exactly the same time as the Buddha. Not surprisingly, Buddhists and Jains share many religious ideas, although the two traditions also differ on many key points. Some of the basic Jain tenets include the idea that all things, including inanimate objects, contain a living force, or *jiva*, and each carries a certain karmic load. Higher forms, which have less karmic burden, also have volition, and animals and humans can affect their own *karma*. Austerity burns off *karma*. When the individual finally burns off all *karma*, he or she ascends to the realm of pure light for eternity (and the *jiva*, once there, remains individual,

unlike in the Upanishadic view). Violence to other beings creates the most negative *karma*. Hence there is a real emphasis on *ahimsa*, or nonharm. Thus, Jains in India tend to be merchants, because it is one of the few trades that does not directly involve injuring other beings.

What is most important for the present context is to recognize that the Buddha and Buddhism arose out of this atmosphere of great religious flux, a sustained period of questioning the old religious and ritual values and practices. The Buddha certainly adopted the basic Indian religious vocabulary of his day, but he also crafted it into his own particular message, changing some basic ideas and rejecting others.

STUDY QUESTIONS

- 1 What was the Vedic understanding of sacrifice?
- 2 Describe the basic characteristics of the Vedic gods.
- 3 Why did the Upanishads critique the Vedic world?