traditions that remain more tribal—Judaism and Hinduism and to a lesser extent Islam—have been so altered by encounters with countless local traditions that they have lost their geographic particularity as their beliefs and practices have become more varied. Primal elements run deep within each cosmopolitan tradition, however, and the continuity of symbols and stories across the centuries persists to some extent even among the most cosmopolitan sectors.

Of course, for many people religion is simply a tool to achieve a sense of security or meaning or even the basics of life such as food, clothing, and shelter. If you spend a few hours surfing the Internet you will find thousands of "varieties of religious experience," as William James (1902/1960) put it more than a century ago. You will find everything from sophisticated theories about the universe and profound ideas about spiritual growth to "secrets" about how to pray for large sums of instant cash. In the meantime, I will commence this tour of some of the major traditions as viewed from a sociologist's eye. I begin with the oldest identifiable traditions, which came from ancient South Asia.

Hinduism, or *Sanatana Dharma*

> *Spiritual knowledge is the only thing that can destroy our miseries forever; any other knowledge removes wants only for a time.*
>
> —Swami Vivekananda

From one part of South Asia to another, the rich mixture of cultures appears in the panoply of religious customs varying from region to region. India itself is much like Europe in that it has an overall culture but many different cultures within it. We can identify an Indian culture, certainly, but also a Tamil and a Maharashtran culture, a Bengali and a Rajasthani culture, a Karnatakan, a Keralan, a Telugu, and a Gujarati culture (just as Europe has French, German, Spanish, British, etc., cultures). Within each location, there are also extreme differences. A wide range of Gods and rituals reflect and inform the diversity of roles and situations in which humans find themselves as they move through their life cycles. To some extent, each temple, household, and individual chooses Gods and rituals because of situational requirements, personal disposition, gender, caste, occupation, and stage in the life cycle. One underlying theme of this elaborate religious system is that each individual must discover his or her own path—with the aid of religious experts—to cope with and transcend life's suffering and eventually to escape it.

Hinduism—or Sanatana Dharma, as some believers prefer to call it—is a religious tradition that encompasses layers of complex deposits from many different cultures over the centuries. Its remarkable diversity and doctrinal tolerance combine with a highly elaborated worldview and ethos that provide hundreds of millions of people with compelling answers to the basic questions of human life. Because of this religious anchor, they can live out their daily lives with a sense of dignity, despite widespread poverty and deprivation, and feel connected to a larger community.

As in many other societies, however, the stratification system is sacralized—that is, made a part of the religious belief system. The exploitation of the masses by a small number of extremely wealthy and powerful families is legitimated by the traditional Hindu worldview. In recent decades, as these problems have been addressed by Hindu reformers, this ancient tradition is incorporating the egalitarian norms of modern culture under its sacred canopy alongside ideas and symbols that have endured for thousands of years.

The wide-ranging collection of beliefs and practices known as Hinduism dates back about 3,500 years, linking contemporary and ancient India. Scholars dispute the origins of Hinduism; some believers claim that it had no beginning. Contemporary Hinduism probably emerged out of the encounter between the indigenous Dravidians and the Indo-Aryans[2] who migrated into India from Central Asia or Iran in about 1500 BCE.[3] Some contemporary scholars believe that practitioners of the **Vedic religion**—that is, the faith based on the ancient Vedas now called Hinduism—encountered Jainism and Buddhism between the fifth and second centuries BCE, laying the foundations of modern Hinduism. Hindu ideas and practices evolved over the centuries across the subcontinent in myriad forms as various cultures of the region became intertwined, prefiguring the process of intercultural contact now occurring in the larger global village.

The strength of Hinduism has been its rich combination of highly rational and nonrational symbolism on the one hand and its adaptability and theological tolerance on the other. Perhaps the most consistent theme in Hinduism is variety, and a central tenet of the perspective from the religion's earliest periods has been the belief that there are many paths to the "Truth," with the result that Hinduism has taken root and grown in a wide diversity of cultures on the Asian subcontinent. One of its most essential ideas is that people can reach their ultimate goal—to break the chain of rebirths in a process of liberation called **moksha**—by discovering their own **dharma** (duties or responsibilities) and performing it well, thus enabling them to advance in a new lifetime or eventually to escape the cycle altogether. The idea that different paths lead to the same summit opens the door to remarkable flexibility in overall orientation and specific practices under a single broad sacred canopy.

At the center of the tradition is an ancient and diverse collection of hymns, ritual chants, and stories about encounters with the sacred in its myriad forms. The religion's earliest beliefs and rituals are expressed in the hymns called the Vedas, which were originally transmitted orally, like most ancient religious literature, and compiled about 1500 BCE, at the time of the Dravidian–Aryan encounters. The Vedas themselves, according to tradition, were not authored—not even by the Gods—but have always existed along with the very sounds of the universe itself, and were "discovered" by the sages who then transmitted them. Gods and humans interact regularly in these texts, creating stories that have been the lifeblood of social life in Indian villages over many centuries.

The *Rig Veda*, which consists of 10 books with liturgical chants and sacrificial formulas, is seen as the source of all Truth and provides the basis for much of the material in other Vedas, each of which has a huge body of interpretive literature. "Ekam sat, vipraha bahudha vadanti" in the *Rig Veda* declares the following: "Truth is One, though the sages call it by various names" (O'Flaherty, 1981). This verse and others lead some to insist somewhat ironically that monotheism began not with the ancient Hebrews but at least 3,500 years ago in the Vedas.

Six or seven centuries before the Common Era, a collection of philosophical speculations was compiled as the **Upanishads**, first as part of a secret cult threatening the religious establishment but later as a central component of Hindu literature. Finally, the massive epics of the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* are the classics of Hindu literature, read and told by village storytellers, priests, and elders for centuries. The former consists of about 100,000 verses (twice the size of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*) and includes the famous ***Bhagavad Gita***, the "Song of the Lord." The *Mahabharata* has been revived in the late 20th century in a somewhat sensationalized form—a television series—that has riveted Indian audiences.

The Gods serve as models both for everyday life and for the structure of authority in Indian life. Just as the Gods' authority flows from their heroic deeds, so individuals with authority must prove their worthiness and receive considerable deference once they establish their legitimacy. The Gods of Hinduism are highly specialized in character and function. They number, according to some estimates, about 33 million, and at least one God addresses each social and psychological need, whether it be safety (**Vishnu**), wealth (Lakshmi), or liberation from the pursuit of safety and wealth. The elephant God Ganesha is the overcomer of obstacles who aids people in need of courage or assistance in times of trouble; consequently, most temples contain his image even when devoted primarily to another God. Most modern Hindus, however, believe that only one God stands behind the multitude

of these manifestations (just as most Christians believe that the Father, and Holy Spirit are different manifestations of the same God).

This complex belief structure serves to unite the ethnic and econ diversity of a large majority of India's 1 billion people. These social gr and subcultures interacting with one another across the vast Asian sub tinent are loosely bound in a shared worldview while maintaining autonomy. Each temple, as well as most households, has its own sty worship, choosing those Gods and rituals that have an affinity with its ests. Nonetheless, the Vedic texts and Hindu epics, the stories of Gods humans interacting, stretch a loosely woven sacred canopy over the het geneous social order of the Indian subcontinent.

A central task of Hindu philosophers and theologians has been ma sense of these diverse cultures within a single geographical territory, and effort to address that social problem lies at the root of major doctrinal de opment within Hinduism. The famous teacher Shankara (ca. 788–829 attempted to systematize Hinduism by claiming that all reality is (monism) and that we live in the illusion (maya) that individuals hav separate existence from the universe. The Supreme Reality, the Brahman, unqualified and absolute, in contrast to the world in which we live, with cycles of suffering, death, and rebirth. In the same way that actors perfo a play, our lives have a provisional or dependent reality, dependent on Brahman, or ultimate reality. Thus the unity and diversity of the world simultaneously affirmed in Shankara's school, and the problem of soci diversity is thereby solved theologically: There appear to be many Gods, bu there is really only one. There appear to be many social orders, but there only one—many individuals, but each soul contains and is contained in the Infinite. Shankara's ideas prevail in Indian philosophy today, reinforced by the elaborate institution of his monastic order, which controls many of India's most important Hindu temples.

A second major school of Hinduism was started by Ramanuja (ca. 11th century CE), who claimed that a single unified reality exists but is qualifiable. Matter, souls, and God all exist in the world, but the first two are simply qualities of God. The popular appeal of this perspective is that it does not involve the rejection of the world implied by the monism of the Shankara. According to Ramanuja, the material universe, including one's family and all the various Gods, are all aspects of the one ultimate God. A third major Hindu school emerged in Madhua's 13th-century dualism—called *Duaita Vedanta*—that views souls as distinct from God and matter. Madhua believed that at least some souls can become enlightened and that one can achieve moksha through devotion to Vishnu. The two major branches of Hinduism—the Shaivites (embracing the teachings of Shankara and Ramanuja) and the

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Vishnaivites (embracing the teachings of Madhua)—continue the dialogue between the monism of Shankara and the dualism of Madhua, respectively. Such philosophical debates are not central to Hinduism, however, which is rooted in ritual rather than doctrine.

In the many manifestations of Hinduism on the Indian subcontinent, the boundaries among the natural, human, and divine worlds are often unclear, reflecting the reality of a life that is much more integrated across species than that most Westerners experience. Even in the modern cities of India, cows, pigs, water buffalo, goats, and sometimes monkeys and other animals live side by side with humans. People who exhibit great spiritual powers and are revered because of their accomplishments become deified in popular culture.

Hindu religion expresses this fluidity of boundaries among the diverse parts of a unified world in a number of ways: Hanuman is sometimes a monkey, sometimes a God; Ganesha is sometimes an elephant, other times divine. Ram, a name widely used to refer to God, is a legendary human hero and is also an incarnation of the God Vishnu. Major figures in human history become godlike, and people treat them as such. In addition to small shrines to Vishnu and Shiva, for example, one also finds shrines to Mahatma ("Great Soul") Gandhi. People take some Gods' names for their own, and even businesses may be named after a God.

The focus of Hinduism for most believers lies not so much in theological arguments but in the actual practice of worship, primarily in acts demonstrating respect for the divine in one's home or temple. Humans and Gods are mutually dependent: The Gods require sacrifices or offerings, especially in the form of food, to stave off chaos and sustain nature; if they thrive, they offer benefits to humans. Moreover, Hindu theology reveals its social origins in the fact that each God represents an important aspect of human life.

Many Hindus believe in a single "Godhead," made up of three elements: (1) **Brahma** and **Saraswati**, the Creator; (2) Vishnu and Lakshmi, the Preserver; and (3) Shiva and **Parvati**, the Destroyer (see Table 2.2). Each of these deities has a stylized form of representation in both female and male forms.

Each of the mysteries of human life is thus personified in a particular God. Issues of creation and death are embodied in Brahma and Shiva, respectively. The tension between the two for preservation and survival is addressed in the person of Vishnu, who intervenes with heroic action at times of crisis to give people hope (see Table 2.3). When Mother Earth sank to the bottom of the ocean, for example, Vishnu took the form of a boar, dived down into the water, and rescued her.

Table 2.2 The Hindu Trinity

Creator	→	Brahma (male) Saraswati (female)
Preserver	→	Vishnu (male) Lakshmi (female)
Destroyer	→	Shiva (male) Parvati (female)

Table 2.3 Avatars or Incarnations of Vishnu

Avatar	Form	Heroic Action or Purpose
Matsya	Fish	Help re-create the world after a flood
Kurma	Tortoise or crocodile	Preserve immortality for the gods
Varaha	Boar	Save sinking Mother Earth
Narasimha	Half man, half lion	Destroy demon Hiranyakashipu
Vamana	Dwarf	Destroy Bali, king of demons
Parasurama	Angry man	Destroy autocratic princes
Rama	Perfect man	Overcome injustice, establish just rule
Krishna	Divine statesman	Teach action without desire
Buddha	Compassionate man	Purify Hinduism of ritualism
Kalkin	Incarnation to come	Save humans at the end of this age

The male aspects of God represent the rhythms of natural life, whereas the female aspects are more closely linked with human nature and therefore more accessible to ordinary people. A Mother **Goddess movement** emerged around Durga-Parvati, a body embodying the immanent active energy (shakti) of the distant and terrifying Shiva, who is transcendent and generally inaccessible to common mortals.

Part of the key to Hinduism's durability is its ability to incorporate other religious symbols. The God Vishnu plays a particularly important role in this process because he becomes identified in various **avatars**, or incarnations (including the ever-popular Krishna); as Hinduism diffused over time, Vishnu was sometimes identified with local pre-Hindu deities. Some Hindus reincorporated Buddhism by viewing the **Buddha** as an avatar of Vishnu; others have gone so far as to include Jesus in the list. When asked about that idea, many Hindus respond, "Yes, of course," whereas others scoff at the idea. This is an interesting example of the flexibility of Hinduism to adapt to new situations, especially when dealing with foreign invasions. During the late 19th century, with the arrival of British colonialists, several important Hindu authorities began to explore the relationship between Christianity and their native faith and found a number of parallels. Some became exponents of Christianity as well as Hinduism: Sri Ramakrishna had a vision in which he was embraced by Christ, and Swami Vivekananda called on his fellow monks to become "Christs" and "to pledge themselves to aid in the redemption of the world" (Prabhavananda, 1963, p. xiv). Swâmi Abhedânanda, in his 1902 essay "How to Be a Yogi," expressed Hinduism's affinity with Christianity in a particularly Hindu way:

> A genuine seeker after Truth does not limit his study to one particular example, but looks for similar events in the lives of all the great ones, and does not draw any conclusion until he has discovered the universal law which governs them all. For instance, Jesus the Christ said, "I and my Father are one." Did He alone say it, or did many others who lived before and after Him and who knew nothing of His sayings, utter similar expressions? Krishna declared, "I am the Lord of the universe." Buddha said, "I am the Absolute Truth." A Mahometan Sufi says, "I am He" while every true Yogi declares, "I am Brahman."

Hinduism enables people to cope with life as it is. Some characteristics of one's life change over time; others, such as socioeconomic status, nationality, ethnicity, and gender, remain relatively stable. Hinduism teaches people that their happiness and fulfillment lies in discerning their own dharma (duty) and carrying it out to the best of their ability. In this analytical framework, given stages in the life cycle, occupational tasks, and other roles show affinities with particular Gods and rituals under a loosely woven sacred canopy that integrates the diversity of individuals, roles, groups, and ethnic communities living on the subcontinent. At its best, Hinduism enables people to identify, yet in some ways transcend, the givens of their life situations; at its worst, it legitimates a system of social stratification in which privileged and poor alike become convinced that the inequalities of society are both fair and immutable.

The ancient tradition of Hinduism provides interesting models for the cultivation of religious tolerance within a broader social tradition. Deities and their representatives alike are highly revered, yet they are not exclusivistic. They must prove their worthiness by providing perceived benefits, whether spiritual or material, psychological or social. The pluralism of Hinduism within this broad unity is accomplished by means of an extraordinarily large perspective from which it is viewed, as shown in Hindu cosmogonies. Just as the details of life on a planet seem unimportant when viewed from a distance in space, so the teeming particularity of subcultures, castes, families, and individuals becomes less urgent from the universalistic perspective of the Hindu cosmogony.

Hindu Theodicies

The explanation for suffering and death in Hinduism is related to the ultimate goal of existence—that is, to become liberated from the world by uniting the individual soul or spirit known as the **atman** with the Brahman, or Universal Soul, that encompasses the entire universe. That goal is not easily reached, however, and is accomplished only by struggling through successive lifetimes during which one must fulfill one's dharma. This worldview results in a highly rational theodicy, which explains suffering by referring to one's **karma**, or actions from this and previous lifetimes. Each individual soul goes through a cycle of rebirths, known as *samsara*, or the wheel of life, the endless round of deaths and rebirths: When a person dies, the soul leaves its body and transmigrates to another. The nature of the next reincarnation is determined by the person's karma—that is, the collective consequences of all individual actions. The Gods do not punish or reward; negative actions bring their own dire consequences, and positive actions bring their own rewards. The law of karma, or action, is a basic notion of cause and effect: "As we sow, so shall we reap" is the saying one Hindu author uses to explain the law (Jagannathan, 1984, p. 54), which has a status in Asian thought similar to the law of gravity in Western science.

The consequences of every thought, word, and deed grow exponentially. As Lama Sopa, a Tibetan authority, explains, when one sows seeds, a tree grows that in turn bears fruit with new seeds that become new trees. The impact of karmic action thus has a ripple effect, or is exponential in its consequences. All elements of the cosmos are interdependent, constituting a self-contained cosmos of ethical retribution, which does not require the intervention of Gods to punish or reward. Encounters with the Gods are primarily for educational purposes so that people can learn how to be rewarded, rather than punished, for their actions. You are responsible for all

of your actions—touching fire will cause a burn whether knowingly or unknowingly. One's individual life at any point is the summation of all previous actions so that together we create the kind of social environment in which we live.

In this system, one is not to fear or mourn death; it is simply another passage. The soul leaves one body and enters another in the same way that a person changes clothes. The broad cosmology of the Hindu tradition allows the individual to look somewhat philosophically upon the transitory pain of present existence. Even if life seems intolerable, a person can work diligently to do the best with his or her current lot and thereby look forward to a better life in the future.

The karma–samsara concept contains a deterministic element that sometimes convinces people to accept their fate and not try to change their immediate life circumstances, which amount to rewards and punishments for actions in a previous life. Some karma (praradbha karma), such as family or environment, is beyond our control. The karma–samsara theory is supposed to facilitate the individual's transcendence of the profane life by endowing it with religious duty. The system leads to remarkable abuse when exploited, however, by providing a powerful rationale for the ruling classes and legitimating a false consciousness among the poor, who are taught that their poverty is punishment for their deeds in a previous lifetime. This is an ideal rationale for what sociologists call "blaming the victim" (Piven & Cloward, 1971; Ryan, 1976).

The idea of karma is not entirely deterministic, however. First, two of the three stages of karma are amenable to change. The accumulated karma of all previous births (samchita karma) and actions in the present life determines a person's future (agami karma). The impact of the habits of previous lifetimes can be altered by cultivating new habits and ridding oneself of evil thoughts and desires. Finally, a better life in the future can be constructed through attention to present life duties. Moreover, we have the freedom to choose whether or not to live according to our dharma—that is, the duty appropriate to the state produced by individual karma—just as we can decide to ignore gravity if we are willing to face the consequences. Finally, even though we should not strive to change our own life situation, we should attempt to improve others', an idea promulgated both by Hindu activist Mahatma Gandhi and the current Tibetan Buddhist leader, the 14th Dalai Lama (T. Gyatso, personal communication, 1990; Kurtz, 2005a).

In the Asian religions, then, suffering is seen as integral to the fabric of existence, as we experience it. It enters into human consciousness when people develop desires for worldly or material objects and become excessively attached. The solution to the problem of suffering is moksha

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(liberation) in Hinduism, or the attainment of enlightenment or *nirvana* (that is, supreme bliss) in Buddhism, which allows one to escape the "wheel of karma–samsara." In Hinduism, the paths of Yoga cultivate detachment of the self from dependence on this world, allowing one to escape it. Similarly, in Buddhism, following the Eightfold Path prescribed by the Buddha allows us to reach Enlightenment, or nirvana.

Death in Hinduism is sometimes a means of liberation, and a believer does not even have to wait for its natural occurrence. A widow may jump onto her husband's burning funeral pyre, or a devout Hindu can become a *sanyasi*, who renounces the world and lives a life of isolation and self-denial. The sanyasi "dies" to his own life; funeral rites are celebrated and the person's inheritance is passed on as if he were dead. The Hindu theodicy is most fully developed in the legends of the God Shiva, who is simultaneously destructive and life giving, representing death but also the re-creation of life, as in the cycles of death and rebirth in nature. This close connection with the natural world reveals the primal origins of Hindu beliefs. Although many Indians live highly urbanized lifestyles, the country is still based on its villages, and popular religion is intimately tied to the struggle to survive in a relatively hostile natural environment in which resources are scarce and months of drought are followed by violent monsoons in which millions are sometimes left homeless or killed.

The Hindu concepts of dharma and transmigration explain the deprivations of individual existence in a highly rational manner, at the same time giving hope for a better lifetime in the future. They provide a source of comfort at times of death as well, because the end of this life is merely a passage into the next one. One's fate in each successive lifetime is self-determined, within the boundaries of the law of karma, so that one can earn a better life in the next incarnation and hope for ultimate release from the struggle. Although this theodicy solves many problems on both the psychological and social level, it has also been exploited to maintain a strict social hierarchy that has come under attack in contemporary Hinduism.

Hindu Rituals

Yoga and Three Paths to Enlightenment

Yoga (literally, to yoke or unite) is the Hindu ritual for uniting the soul with God through meditation and certain ethical practices. Hindu rituals are extremely well developed, spelled out in rich complexity and elaborate detail in ancient ritual manuals. At the most abstract level, Hindu rituals solve the threat of chaos. Discord is held at bay by the

Gods, who in turn require gifts (especially signs of deference and food) to do their work. Thus, it is the obligation of each Hindu to carry out the rituals of the faith as an individual contribution to maintaining the cosmic order.

Because of the syncretic and flexible nature of Hinduism, a number of paths to enlightenment are possible, all leading to the same summit. All of them involve disciplined self-transcendence to overcome excessive attachments to this world. Hinduism identifies three main paths, with a different yogic discipline facilitating progress along each route:

1. The Path of Wisdom or Knowledge, **Jnana Yoga** (for reflective persons)
2. The Path of Action, **Karma Yoga** (for active persons)
3. The Path of Devotion, Bhakti Yoga (the most popular path)

Jnana Yoga, the quickest but therefore steepest and most difficult path, is rarely chosen. It requires not only cognitive but also intuitive knowledge gained from a disciplined reading of the Vedas, the Upanishads, the Bhagavad Gita, and other works along with the guidance of a guru who helps the inquirer to reflect upon the readings and engage in deep meditation on the Absolute.

Karma Yoga, also relatively rare, focuses on selfless acts or service, so that action—even in one's work—becomes a form of worshiping God. The key to liberation through Karma Yoga is doing a task for its own sake rather than for any reward. Consequently, the process contains a paradoxical element: If practiced only for one's own liberation, it will not work, because it will not be selfless action at all.

Finally, Bhakti Yoga, the broadest and most popular path, consists of acts of devotional worship and involves daily poojas—that is, expressions of respect toward a representation of God in one's home, a temple, or one of the small shrines that dot the Indian landscape. The aim of these rituals of personal worship in Bhakti Yoga is to become consumed with love for God and therefore to be intoxicated by a divine vision.

Choosing the path most suitable to personal inclinations and abilities, the believer strives to transcend selfish desires and the routine of profane life through disciplined practice of the appropriate rituals. Such practices may be as elaborate as a sustained pilgrimage to a holy place or as simple as chanting the Lord's name in the privacy of one's home. For every devout Hindu, power accumulates in the performance of rituals so that the use of ritual packages sustains him or her in daily life and at times of crisis.

philosophy of nonviolence. The Jain effort to avoid harming all creatures is echoed in the other great tradition born in South Asia: Buddhism.

Buddhism

India is a land rich in religious pageantry and history, and it is in that fertile soil that the seeds of Buddhism were planted. The enormous gap between wealth and poverty at the time (which persists to the present) helped precipitate the founding of this religious tradition, which asserts that life is full of suffering that can be escaped by showing compassion to all creatures in the world. In Buddhism, a person gains merit by serving others and rejoicing in their good fortune. From this starting premise, we can see that Buddhist thought is extraordinarily rational yet also deliberately nonrational and straightforward, and thus often paradoxical. The Buddha's Middle Path, in fact, attempts to unite a series of opposites that people encounter (as the Buddha himself did) in their life experiences: materialism versus rationalism, asceticism versus indulgence, skepticism versus belief, reality versus illusion, and so on. In short, Buddhists accept the contradictions of the world but also strive to overcome them.

No religious tradition has flourished for so long in such disparate cultures as Buddhism, which has adapted to a broad range of indigenous cultures and changes over time while retaining considerable continuity over the centuries (see Cousins, 1984, p. 278ff). The complexities of these Buddhisms are compounded by their flexibility and diffusion over many cultures during a period of 2,500 years. More than half of the world's population lives in areas in which Buddhism has at some time been the dominant religion. Even in places where Buddhism has been politically suppressed (notably the People's Republic of China), it continues to exert a substantial influence both at the level of popular culture, where religious rituals often persist, and in the general culture, which bears the stamp of centuries of Buddhist influence.

As noted earlier, religious traditions emerge or change during times of social change, and Buddhism is a product of just such an era. The sixth century BCE—the period when both the founder of Jainism and Gautama the Buddha emerged as vital religious forces in India—was a time of considerable social and cultural ferment throughout Asia. Cyrus the Great was extending the Persian Empire into Central Asia, and the Indus Valley was rapidly becoming the richest province of the empire. At about the same time, K'ung-Fu-tzu (Confucius) was responding to a period of war and chaos in China with his teachings about respect and order in heaven and on earth. The Buddha's religious teachings flourished in an environment in

philosophy of nonviolence. The Jain effort to avoid harming all creatures is echoed in the other great tradition born in South Asia: Buddhism.

Buddhism

India is a land rich in religious pageantry and history, and it is in that fertile soil that the seeds of Buddhism were planted. The enormous gap between wealth and poverty at the time (which persists to the present) helped precipitate the founding of this religious tradition, which asserts that life is full of suffering that can be escaped by showing compassion to all creatures in the world. In Buddhism, a person gains merit by serving others and rejoicing in their good fortune. From this starting premise, we can see that Buddhist thought is extraordinarily rational yet also deliberately nonrational and straightforward, and thus often paradoxical. The Buddha's Middle Path, in fact, attempts to unite a series of opposites that people encounter (as the Buddha himself did) in their life experiences: materialism versus rationalism, asceticism versus indulgence, skepticism versus belief, reality versus illusion, and so on. In short, Buddhists accept the contradictions of the world but also strive to overcome them.

No religious tradition has flourished for so long in such disparate cultures as Buddhism, which has adapted to a broad range of indigenous cultures and changes over time while retaining considerable continuity over the centuries (see Cousins, 1984, p. 278ff). The complexities of these Buddhisms are compounded by their flexibility and diffusion over many cultures during a period of 2,500 years. More than half of the world's population lives in areas in which Buddhism has at some time been the dominant religion. Even in places where Buddhism has been politically suppressed (notably the People's Republic of China), it continues to exert a substantial influence both at the level of popular culture, where religious rituals often persist, and in the general culture, which bears the stamp of centuries of Buddhist influence.

As noted earlier, religious traditions emerge or change during times of social change, and Buddhism is a product of just such an era. The sixth century BCE—the period when both the founder of Jainism and Gautama the Buddha emerged as vital religious forces in India—was a time of considerable social and cultural ferment throughout Asia. Cyrus the Great was extending the Persian Empire into Central Asia, and the Indus Valley was rapidly becoming the richest province of the empire. At about the same time, K'ung-Fu-tzu (Confucius) was responding to a period of war and chaos in China with his teachings about respect and order in heaven and on earth. The Buddha's religious teachings flourished in an environment in

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which diverse cultures were encountering one another, and Buddhism itself (like the other major religious traditions) was constructed as a response to multicultural contact.

Gautama Buddha, also known as Sakyamuni and Prince Siddhartha, was born about 563 BCE as the son of King Suddhodana. More interested in fathering a ruler than a monk, the king tried to keep his son bound to this world by surrounding him with luxury and shielding him from ugliness, sickness, decrepitude, and death. According to Buddhist tradition, however, Siddhartha slipped out of the palace and saw a decrepit, broken-toothed, gray-haired, bent old man, thereby learning about old age. On a second ride, he saw a body racked with illness and learned about disease. On a third ride, he encountered a corpse and learned about death. Finally, he saw a monk with a shaven head, robe, and bowl, and learned about the option of withdrawing from the world of wealth and power into which he was born. The young Siddhartha escaped the palace at night and joined the wandering holy men of the forest, studying with various teachers and following a life of strict asceticism. He found that path no more satisfying than the life of indulgence in the palace, however, so he experimented with more moderate means of seeking fulfillment. In the midst of intense meditation under the famous *Bodhi* tree, he obtained enlightenment, or **Bodhi**:

> I thus knew and thus perceived, my mind was emancipated from the asava [canker] of sensual desire, from the asava of desire for existence, and from the *asava* of ignorance. . . . Ignorance was dispelled, knowledge arose. Darkness was dispelled, light arose. (Buddha, 1954, p. 249)

Although he probably did not intend to found a new religion, a large number of followers gathered around Siddhartha, and their ideas became popular throughout Asia. The complex network of Buddhist traditions is difficult to characterize briefly, but scholars identify various branches emerging from the adaptation of Buddhism to local cultures during its diffusion in Asia (see Buddha, 1954, p. 80). Different elements of the Buddha's teachings were emphasized in different regions of the continent, according to their affinities with indigenous cultures, interests of the local ruling classes, and so forth.

The basic teachings of the Buddha are summarized in famous images such as those of the lotus and the river. The lotus is a ubiquitous symbol in Buddhist art and literature. This water lily is a beautiful pale blossom that emerges in its fragile splendor from the mud of shallow ponds, suggesting that purity can spring up from the anguish of the world; it thus becomes symbolic of the Buddha's teachings that humans can rise above the suffering

of the world. Widely used in both Buddhism and Hinduism, the lotus image pervades Eastern thought. The river occupies a similarly archetypical spot in Buddhist imagery. Gautama Buddha himself was much inspired by the symbolism of rivers, which helped him to understand the unity in the diversity of life. A ferryman taught him to listen to the river, in which the water continually flowed and flowed, yet was always there; it was always the same yet at every moment was new. In just this way, the role of the Buddha figure would also vary widely with numerous reincarnations or manifestations that have made this religion, like Hinduism with its many avatars, so adaptable to indigenous cultures.

The Four Noble Truths are a series of four propositions about the nature of life that also encapsulate the Buddha's teachings:

1. Life is *dukkha* (usually translated as suffering, pain, or anguish, although these are merely subjective attributes of the larger phenomenon).
2. This suffering is rooted in *tanha* (craving, desire, attachment).
3. One can overcome tanha and be released into Ultimate Freedom in Perfect Existence (nirvana).
4. Overcoming desire can be accomplished through the Way, or the Eightfold Path to nirvana.

The suffering of which the First Truth speaks is the pain that seeps into all finite existence. Like an axle dislodged from the center of a wheel or a bone slipped out of its socket, life becomes dislocated, especially on six occasions: (1) in the trauma of birth, (2) in the pathology of sickness, (3) in the morbidity of decrepitude, (4) in the phobia of death, (5) in the entrapment in what one abhors, and (6) in the separation from what one loves. The cause of this dislocation is complex and may come from a former, present, or future life (see Gard, 1962, p. 113ff). Once the cause of suffering has been identified, it can also be overcome, by means of the fourth principle. As the Buddha put it, "I lay down simply anguish [*dukkha*] and the stopping of anguish [*nirodha*]."[4] This last principle asks that adherents follow the Eightfold Path, which requires the following:

1. Right knowledge: This is to be sought not by itself but in conjunction with the other seven attributes.
2. Right aspiration: Seek liberation with single-mindedness.
3. Right speech: Master one's use of language, so that it moves toward charity. Because it is an indicator of motives, one should avoid false witness, idle chatter, abuse, slander, and the like.

4. Right behavior: This lies at the center of the moral code of the Five Precepts, which will be examined in a moment.
5. Right livelihood: Avoid occupations incompatible with spiritual advance.
6. Right effort: Will and exertion are important.
7. Right mindfulness: Note the importance of the mind and its influence on us ("All we are is the result of what we have thought," Buddha, 1954, p. 1).
8. Right absorption: Use techniques like those of *Raja Yoga*.

The early Buddhists had a pantheon that began with the five cosmic elements (*skandhas*): (1) form, (2) sensation, (3) name, (4) conformation, and (5) consciousness. Known as the five *Dhyani* Buddhas, these elements were eventually conceived as the five primordial Gods responsible for creation. A sixth Dhyani Buddha, Vajrasattva, is often added to the list, although he is of a rather different order because he serves as a priest to the others. This system, though somewhat polytheistic, still posited ultimate reality as indivisible, a problem complicated by the fact that wherever Buddhism traveled, it incorporated indigenous religious practices—and along with them, indigenous Gods.

Perhaps as a response to the millions of Gods in the Hindu tradition against which Gautama Buddha and his followers were reacting, contemporary Buddhism relies more on the teachings of the Buddha than on the action of any particular Gods. Moreover, the objects of worship in Buddhism tend to be humans who become divinized because of their acts during a lifetime or local Gods who are incorporated into the Buddhist tradition and are then perceived to be Buddhas themselves. The question of whether there are any Gods in Buddhism is a difficult one. Although many Buddhist scholars and sages will insist that there is no deity because the forms are mere illusion, Buddhism as practiced often appears to have Gods. As in Hinduism, the line between humanity and divinity is not a clear one, however, and Buddhists tend to believe that every individual has the Buddha nature within himself or herself.

The story of the Queen Mother of the West is interesting in that regard. According to the legend (*100 Celebrated Chinese Women*, n.d.),

> during the reign of Han Emperor Wu (140–86 BCE), the Queen Mother of the West boarded her chariot of purple clouds and traveled to the imperial palace with an entourage of celestial maidens, her green birds flying in front to clear the path.
>
> Emperor Wu watched in awe and then rushed outside to greet his guests. During the feast held in her honour, she commanded her celestial maidens to sing

and dance. . . . Emperor Wu saw that she had the power to give orders to the celestial maidens and consequently believed that she must also be the dowager mother of all celestial beings.

In **Mahayana Buddhism**, the school dominant in Northern Asia, including China, emphasis is placed on a Buddha's decision to remain a bodhisattva—that is, one who qualifies for entrance into nirvana but chooses to work for the salvation of all beings before doing so. The importance of a bodhisattva in popular religion is quite understandable, as such a figure plays a vital intermediary role between the human and the divine worlds, just as Jesus, Mary, and the saints in Christianity, Muhammad in Islam, and the prophets in Judaism help to bridge the chasm between heaven and earth.

In practice, Buddhist religion places emphasis on the "Three Jewels": the Buddha, the dharma, and the **Sangha**—the teacher, the teaching, and the organization of followers, respectively. In a core ritual of worship, the faithful Buddhist chants that he or she takes refuge in the Buddha, the dharma, and the Sangha, thus attempting to transcend this world of suffering and treat others with compassion to relieve both their suffering and his or her own.

Although not traditionally classified as a messianic religion by social scientists, Buddhism has a strong messianic element in the concept of the bodhisattva—that is, those individuals who obtain enlightenment but return to aid others rather than entering into nirvana or eternal bliss. **Avalokitesvara**, the most widely revered bodhisattva in East Asia, appears in several forms as a Buddha, an **arhat** (enlightened human), and an animal, and in many spheres (heavens and hells) to free all creatures from suffering and lead them to the Pure Land of Amita. Thus, this bodhisattva is known for compassion and mercy and is celebrated in the Lotus Sutra, in which she appears in 33 transformations to meet the needs of each audience to whom she addresses her teachings.

Avalokitesvara, the Goddess of Mercy, is one of the most famous images represented in Chinese popular culture. As such, she serves a function similar to the widely popular Virgin Mary in Christianity, especially appealing to the poor and to women because of her approachability and merciful demeanor. According to legend, Avalokitesvara vowed to serve the Buddha and fled to a nunnery over the objections of her father. His agents pursued her and set fire to a temple where she had sought sanctuary, resulting in her death but also in the reward of immortality. According to the story, her father was blinded as punishment, but Avalokitesvara plucked out her own eyes to restore her father's sight, thus earning her title as Goddess of Mercy.

Avalokitesvara, known as Kuan-yin (Guanyin) or Kuan-shih-in in Chinese (see Overmyer, 2002), is not just an ancient or mythical figure. She plays a very real role in contemporary world politics, believed by some to be incarnated as the Tibetan Dalai Lama, now living in exile in India. The current Dalai Lama, 14th in the line of succession, has become a popular figure worldwide, especially after winning the Nobel Peace Prize in 1989 for championing the nonviolent struggle for Tibetan independence from China. Avalokitesvara's mantra, "*Om Mani Padme Hum*," is one of the most popular prayers in Buddhism.

Buddhist Rituals

Most Buddhist rituals involve efforts to obtain merit of some sort, either for oneself or for someone else, thereby transcending one's current state through the performance of the ritual. The foundation of Buddhist ritual consists of *dana* (giving), *sila* (precepts), and *kamma* (karma). Keeping the precepts includes conscious acts of service and paying respect to others. All of these ritual acts are rooted in the concept of karma, which is conceived in much the same way as it is in Hinduism: Because every act has a consequence, if one engages in meditations, chanting, and service and keeps the precepts, merit will accrue to oneself and to others.

A central Buddhist ritual is the chanting of refuge that a believer takes in the Three Jewels: the Buddha, the dharma, and the Sangha. This chant is a prelude to the performance of Buddhist rituals throughout Asia, which incorporate many ancient rites and a variety of indigenous practices. The metaphor of crossing the river helps to explain the meaning of these sacred symbols: An explorer—the Buddha—makes the trip first, proving that it is possible. He comes back to show us the way. The dharma, or teachings of Buddhism, is the vehicle of transport, the boat or raft we will use in our journey; and the Sangha, the organization of followers, is the boat's crew, in whom we can have confidence because of their training and discipline. Chanting that one is taking refuge in the Three Jewels helps a believer to recenter and focus attention on the path to liberation from this world of suffering:

Veneration to the Blessed One, the Enlightened One, the Perfectly Enlightened One, is as follows:

To the Buddha, the [chosen] resort, I go.

To [the] Dhamma, the [chosen] resort, I go.

To [the] Sangha, the [chosen] resort, I go.

Chanting is very common throughout Buddhism—especially chanting the *paritta*, the protection discourses. Chants are most significant at times of crisis or change: death, illness, possession, danger, embarking upon a new activity, entering a new house, and so on (see Cousins, 1984, p. 310).

Formal worship varies widely in the Buddhist tradition, in part because the religion has been grafted onto local traditions and thus is often practiced according to ancient indigenous customs. Followers often worship relics by bringing offerings (food, water, clothing, incense, candles, etc.), bowing or prostrating, cleaning or adorning the relic, or chanting verses. Worship can also be carried out at home, although a temple or pagoda facilitates the worshipers' gain of merit, sometimes through ingenious methods. The Ten Thousand Buddhas Temple, located in Taichung, Taiwan, contains 10,000 images of the Buddha, all of which can be worshiped in a single visit, and hundreds of which can be venerated with one bow or prostration.

Sikhism

> *Deep within the self is the Light of God. It radiates throughout the expanse of His creation.*
>
> *Through the Guru's teachings, the darkness of spiritual ignorance is dispelled.*
>
> *The heart lotus flower blossoms forth and eternal peace is obtained, as one's light merges into the Supreme Light.*
>
> —Guru Amar Das

Another tradition that challenged the religious orthodoxies in South Asia was the Sikh tradition, founded in the Punjab in South Asia, during the 15th century CE, based on the teachings of Guru Nanak Dev Ji and 10 gurus who followed him. Although it has a relatively small population compared to the world's major faiths, Sikhism continues to grow, has diffused to every continent, and has an estimated 22.5 million adherents in Asia, as well as another 600,000 in North America. Its presence is often visible, especially in urban areas of South Asia and elsewhere, because of the distinctive turban and uncut hair worn by male adherents.

The Sikhs emphasized a monotheistic faith and the principles of justice and equality, cultivating a disciplined lifestyle and meditation. Guru Nanak's writings in the Punjabi language constituted the first sacred text, supplemented by the writings of his successor gurus and even those of Hindu and Muslim saints to form the *Adi Granth* by the 1680s (Mann, 2006, p. 46).

Indeed, the authority of the personal was transferred to the sacred book by Guru Gobind Singh in 1798, making it the Guru Granth Sahib. Community prayer at the center of Sikh worship began at the house of the Guru Nanak, the *gurdwara*, the name later used to designate the Sikh houses of worship.

The culture of personal discipline and the martial tradition of the Sikhs led to their becoming important partners of the British Raj, where they often served in the military and other positions of authority. The relationship with the broader society has not always been peaceful, however, especially with the emergence of a secessionist movement in the 1980s seeking an independent Sikh state. The Indian government attacked the center of the movement in Amritsar, resulting in a decade-long period of violence and mayhem.

One interesting outgrowth of the emphasis on justice and the community's tension with Hindu orthodoxy was the institution of the community kitchen, which was open to anyone regardless of class or caste. Sikhs would cook and eat together, thus breaking with the Hindu caste norms against eating together that pervaded much of Indian society. The shared meals have also become a kind of community service, where the poor are welcome to come and eat free meals alongside members of the congregation.

Religious Life in China and East Asia

As Buddhism diffused east into China, East Asia, and Southeast Asia over the centuries, it found more fertile ground there than in its homeland. It became intertwined with indigenous religions of China and elsewhere, especially with Confucianism and Taoism, where the three traditions mingle with other local indigenous ritual practices to create a rich tapestry of spiritual beliefs, practices, and institutions that have evolved.

It is helpful to look at these three living religions in the context of their long and impressive history dating back to ancient China, before the time of Confucius, Lao-tzu, and the Buddha, to the ancient I Ching, also called "The Book of Changes" and "The Classic of Changes." The major portion of the work is traditionally attributed to Wen Wang, founder of the Chou dynasty in the 12th century BCE, making it one of, if not *the*, oldest known sacred scriptures, although it has several additions from later centuries.

Religious belief and practice in China now consists of an amalgamation of several religious traditions, especially Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism, making it difficult to categorize the traditions to which individuals belong. The *Encyclopædia Britannica Online* (Religion: Year in Review 2010, 2011) identifies this complex of beliefs as "Chinese Folk Religionists" and describes its adherents as follows:

> Consulting an oracle and seeing yourself in terms of the symbols or magic spells it presents is a way of contacting what has been repressed in the creation of the modern world. It puts you back into what the ancients called the sea of soul . . . by giving advice on attitudes and actions that lead to the experience of imaginative meaning. Oracular consultation insists on the importance of imagination. It is the heart of magic through which the living world speaks to you. (p. 8)

The I Ching organizes these forces of nature into images so that an individual reading becomes possible, beginning with a problem and a question regarding how one can act in creative relation with the forces shaping a particular moment in time. Whereas the traditional method was the casting of yarrow sticks or coins, today it can be done by computer: See the website http://flytrapinteractive.com/~complimentary/iching/ and ask your own questions. The I Ching "responds" with patterns in a hexagram that have a long tradition of interpretations and commentaries. The usefulness of such ancient texts is always in the wisdom of the interpretation, of course, and the imaginative problem solving that comes from meditating on the question and receiving assistance from the right person for interpreting. K'ung-Fu-tzu himself said, "If I could study the I Ching fifty more years, I would have all the knowledge I need" (Confucius, 1998, 7:17).

If the method of inquiry he used was mysterious, the outcome of his deliberations was quite simple and clear-cut, laid out in the Lun-yü—the Analects—the most sacred scripture in the Confucian tradition and probably compiled by a second generation of his disciples and based on the master's sayings as preserved in oral and written form. At the core of his thought was the importance of educating oneself spiritually for self-realization—a lifelong effort to develop proper character. The ultimate goal of education is *ren* (or *jen*) or human-heartedness, which is the highest virtue. The path to the attainment of *ren* is the practice of *li*, that is, social norms. *Li* is not something fixed, however, but is subject to change according to individual situations, and to discern it, one must rely upon the principle governing the adoption of *li*, that is, *yi*, proper character or the principle of rationality. Thus, *yi* (rationality) leads to *li* (social norms), which in turn leads to *ren* (human-heartedness).

The education of individuals prepares the way for a peaceful and well-ordered society. A ruler has the responsibility to govern by example, disciplining his or her own life to be a model for all the people. The core of this rational living with human-heartedness is a set of five relationships: (1) father and son, (2) elder brother and the younger, (3) husband and wife, (4) elder and younger, and (5) ruler and subject. In each case, the latter should show respect and give deference to the former. Although the key to a peaceful society is thus submission to hierarchy, the relationships are reciprocal, and much

of the content of the Analects addresses the responsibility of the superordinate to the subordinate. The elder and the ruler should show kindness, nobility, care, humaneness, and benevolence to their social inferiors.

The bottom line of the Confucian ethic in these relationships should sound familiar, as it appears in some form in most religious and ethical systems: What you do not want done to yourself, do not do to others.

Confucian thought became the bedrock of Chinese culture over the centuries, in part because of an elective affinity between his teachings and the interests of the emperors but also because of the highly respected scholarship of his disciples. According to Karl-Heinz Pohl (2003, p. 470), Jesuit missionaries brought valued Confucian teachings to Europe, where they had an impact on the Enlightenment.

Not everyone was comfortable with K'ung-Fu-tzu's hierarchical advice, however. Chinese religious thought has important countertraditions in the ideas of Mo-tzu, who taught universal love rather than filial piety, and in the teachings of Lao-tzu, who insisted it was better to have people develop their own sense of the Way rather than to impose it by force. The founder of Taoism believed that ethical systems like K'ung-Fu-tzu's sometimes contribute to problems rather than solving them and that such moral exhortations prove self-defeating.

Indeed, Stephen Karcher (1999) has noted the following:

> Confucianism and Taoism were the two poles to traditional Chinese culture. . . . Confucianism, an intensely conservative, moralistic, and hierarchical teaching, emerged first. It went on to become the official philosophy of Imperial China. It defined a political and cultural elite who identified the way or *tao* with the internationalization of a particular set of social relations. Taoism, the second child, mocked social values and established power alike. An intensely individualistic teaching, it developed methods of dis-identifying with social institutions and commonly held motivations. (p. 299)

I now turn my attention to the tradition founded on the wisdom of Lao-tzu, the critic of the Confucian establishment who also become a vehicle for a critique of the Western establishment in the countercultures of Western civilization 15 centuries later.

Taoism

Thirty spokes meet at a nave;
Because of the hole we may use the wheel.

Clay is moulded into a vessel;
Because of the hollow we may use the cup.
Walls are built around a hearth
Because of the doors we may use the house.
Thus wealth comes from what is,
But worth from what is not.

—Lao-tzu (1995)

Legend has it that Lao-tzu, fed up with people not listening to him, decided to leave his country. A border guard recognized him and insisted that he share his wisdom before he left, so the sage sat down and wrote the famous *Tao te Ching* (or *Daodejing*) with only about 5,000 Chinese characters. As the border guard watched over him, he inscribed these words of wisdom, contending that the cosmos is organized in a certain Way and that power or virtue (both from the same word *te*) comes naturally by acting in accordance with the universe and its nature. He handed his text to the guard, mounted his bull, and continued on his journey. According to another legend, he became Siddhartha's teacher. The *Tao te Ching*, according to Pohl (2003), "is not only the most widely translated Chinese work, but, after the Holy Bible it is the most widely translated book worldwide" (p. 481).

Just as a combination lock with a series of numbers has to be arranged in a proper sequence and lined up in just the right way, so people will find that when they are aligned with the universe, it will be unlocked for them. If they are not properly aligned, no matter how hard they pull, it will not open. Thus, the most appropriate and even effective way to act and think is with *wu-wei*, sometimes translated as "effortless activity." Seidel and Strickmann (n.d.) suggested that wu-wei "is an action so well in accordance with things that its author leaves no trace of himself in his work." In other words, "perfect activity leaves no track behind it; perfect speech is like a jade worker whose tool leaves no mark" (*Tao te Ching*, as quoted by Seidel & Strickmann, n.d.).

In his introduction to *The Way of Chuang-tzu*, the Christian monk Thomas Merton (1965), the foremost spokesperson for Taoism in the fourth and third centuries BCE, explained the principle this way:

> The true character of wu wei is not mere inactivity but *perfect action*—because it is act without activity. In other words, it is action not carried out independently of Heaven and earth, and in conflict with the dynamism of the

> whole, but in perfect harmony with the whole. It is not mere passivity, but it is action that seems both effortless and spontaneous because performed "rightly," in perfect accordance with our nature and with our place in the scheme of things (p. 28).

In attempting to discern the nature of the Way, Lao-tzu found that opposites are complementary, symbolized in the famous yin-yang symbol now part of global popular culture. Light and dark, male and female, hard and soft, even life and death, are all part of the Way. Life, however, is flexible and death inflexible and rigid, so in life one must bow like the bamboo to survive the storms. This, said Merton (1965, p. 30), is another key to Chuang-tzu's thought. "All beings are in a state of flux," so one should be careful of clinging to a partial view, treating it as if it were "the ultimate answer to all questions." One must remember that "what is impossible today may suddenly become possible tomorrow. . . . What seems right from one point of view may, when seen from a different aspect, manifest itself as completely wrong."

Taoism seems both complex and simple at the same time, and according to the text itself, it is easy to take it in and think one understands it even when one does not. That is why the *Tao te Ching* begins "The Tao that can be known is not Tao." We should, in other words, strive to understand and follow the Way (the Tao), but it is beyond anyone's ability to do so. That does not mean, however, that one simply sits and accepts everything the way it is, but rather that one develops a different perspective on the world and its implications for one's life. One should not conquer others with brute force but find the power within oneself and the universe that brings opposites into harmony and empowers everything to live in peace. Lao-tzu (1995) even presaged Gandhi when he wrote the following in Chapter 30:

> Powerful men are well advised not to use violence,
>
> For violence has a habit of returning;
>
> Thorns and weeds grow wherever an army goes,
>
> And lean years follow a great war. . . .
>
> For even the strongest force will weaken with time,
>
> And then its violence will return, and kill it.

The famous teacher and founder of Taoism in China was convinced that the universe itself was ultimately peaceful and that people who followed "the

Way" (the Tao) of the universe would be more effective. Although rocks seem more powerful than water, over the years a stream will carve a canyon through a mountain. People who are patient and nonviolent may appear weak but in the long run will be more powerful than those who are impatient and violent. Like Mahavir in South Asia, Lao-tzu laid the foundation for a strong tradition of nonviolence throughout ancient East Asia.

If the true Tao cannot be known, then someone who pretends to explain it in writing probably knows almost nothing about it, having missed the point altogether. So, I will move on to the final Asian tradition I wish to visit briefly in this tour, one that is at the heart of Japanese national culture.

Shintoism

Although not a global religion by any means, the Japanese impact on the modern world—like that of the Jews—has been disproportionate to their numbers, so we should know something about their religion. Moreover, it is an interesting case study in the persistence of a somewhat localized indigenous tradition well into the modern and postmodern eras.

The word *Shinto* means "the way of the Gods" or "the way of the Kami"—that is, the sacred, or "what is worshiped," literally *shin* (divine being) plus *do* (way). As such, it is more a broad set of ways of honoring the spirits of the natural world than a self-conscious, distinct religious tradition. Like many ancient cultures, the Japanese lived close to nature, organizing daily life around natural events, cycles of the seasons, and so forth. The beautiful natural setting of the islands was inspiring and powerful; it appeared to be filled with forces in addition to humans and had an overall existence.

As the idea of the Kami developed, cosmogonies emerged about the Amatsu, the heavenly Kami, Izanagi, and Izanami, who organized the material world by stirring the ocean with a jeweled spear from the Floating Bridge of Heaven. As that material coagulated, it formed eight islands (Japan, or, according to some, the whole world). Eventually, as Shinto mythology intertwined with the imperial household, some believed that the first emperor of Japan, Jimmu, was a descendant of Amaterasu, the Sun Goddess, and one of the most important of the Kami.

This indigenous tradition is bound with the broader life and culture of the people from prehistoric times. It was formally developed as early as the seventh century BCE and took on its own distinct identity only after the arrival of competing traditions such as Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism. Confucianism probably reached Japan in the fifth century CE and became widespread over the next 200 years, along with Taoism. Gradually, a pan-Japanese practice emerged as political power centralized with the