

South and West Asia: Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism,

During the sixth century B.C.E. as the Israelites were claiming their god, Yahweh, to be the only God and his laws to be the only laws, new ideas rose in India to challenge both the domination of the Brahman priests and the emphasis on rituals characteristic of Vedic religion. Though some secular rulers resisted priestly power and in this way challenged the Brahman priests, newer texts expressed critical reflection on Vedic ideas and practices from within the tradition itself.

The Upanishads

The internal critical tradition is represented by the Upanishads (“sessions”), which refer to esoteric knowledge gained from sitting at the feet of a master. Chronologically the last of the Vedic texts, the Upanishads were compiled between the seventh and third centuries B.C.E. and represent a speculative and ascetic (contemplation and self-denial for religious purposes) tradition. The Upanishads focus on the meaning of ritual rather than ritual itself, demythologize the Vedic pantheon, and raise questions concerning the meaning of human existence.

Concepts such as *karma*, meaning “law of causality,” and *samsara*, “wheel of life,” were used differently in the Upanishads than in previous Vedic texts. *Karma*, for example, in earlier contexts had meant “ritually prescribed behavior,” as emphasized in the priestly tradition; in the Upanishads its meaning was transformed to “cumulative causality determined by human actions.” The goal of human existence, according to the Upanishads, should be to escape the endless cause-effect sequence of the continuous cycles of

existence and achieve individual identification with a unified cosmic essence. Because of their focus on metaphysical (beyond physical reality) or abstract questions concerning human existence rather than rigid adherence to religious practices, in these texts the importance of ritual and the role of priests was greatly reduced.

Hinduism

The assimilation of new ideas and the reformulation of traditional Vedic ideas and practices between the second century B.C.E. and the second century C.E. led to the emergence of the religious tradition later known as Hinduism. The Book of Manu, composed during this era, represents the reassertion of the priestly tradition. It contains the instructions of the creator of the universe to the first man and king, Manu, and it explains the caste system as a consequence of *karma* (actions) accumulated in earlier incarnations. The book's injunction to humans is to achieve a state of being without longings or desires in order to realize the cosmic essence or the eternal truth.

Ideas about both social and spiritual life were further developed in other religious and philosophical literature, including the Sanskrit epics, the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*, both completed in their final written form in the first centuries C.E. The latter work, the *Ramayana*, tells of the heroic exploits of Prince Rama, while the *Mahabharata* focuses on a great battle fought among descendants of Rama's brother, King Bharata. Although not an integral part of the epic, the most influential Hindu scripture, the sacred poem Bhagavad Gita ("Song of God"), composed in the second century C.E., was inserted into the *Mahabharata* and became part of this great epic.

The Bhagavad Gita

In the Bhagavad Gita, the god Krishna, an incarnation of the Hindu solar deity Vishnu, takes human form as a charioteer who befriends and counsels Arjuna the warrior. Arjuna, a representative of the warrior caste, faces a battle in which he must slay his own relatives. As Arjuna wrestles with the moral dilemma this presents, Krishna recites the Bhagavad Gita.

Krishna counsels Arjuna that he must fulfill his duty as a warrior and that he is not to worry about his role in the deaths of his friends and relatives because their deaths in battle will allow their souls to move on to the next life. Arjuna, he says, is merely an agent of a cosmic process, and his own salvation depends on his carrying out his duty. He must act, without attachment and without personal ambition, to fulfill his role in society, as must every individual according to his caste. The moving and eloquent injunction on how to live one's life expressed here says that, like Arjuna, one must live and act according to what is expected of one's place and role in the world,

without the interference of personal ambition or even human emotional attachments to kin and friends.

Often characterized as a way of life as much as a religion, Hinduism drew from beliefs of the Indus Valley civilization, including worship of the god Shiva, as well as from the culture and religion of the Indo-Europeans, such as worship of the warrior god, Indra, or the fire god, Agni. Southern Indian contributions to the Hindu pantheon probably included the god Krishna. The Vedic scriptures portray the gods of the Hindu pantheon and prescribe the ritual practices to be followed by priests, and the Upanishads provide a metaphysical context for ethical questions having to do with good and evil, morality, and human duty. The Bhagavad Gita, however, can be regarded as the main ethical text of Hinduism, showing how carrying out the faithful execution of one's duty (*dharma*) results in good *karma*.

Jainism and Buddhism

By the sixth century B.C.E., an era of commercial expansion, social conflict, and religious turmoil on the Indian subcontinent, the rich Ganges River plain of northern India was dotted with more than a dozen kingdoms, one of which was the birthplace of Buddha. In this setting, Jainism and Buddhism rose as challenges to the Vedic establishment. Both were rooted in a "wandering ascetic" movement that opposed the power of Vedic priests; both also rejected caste ideology and the sacrificial rituals of the Vedic religion, drawing on the critical intellectual tradition associated with the Upanishads.

Mahavira

Mahavira (ca. 540–468 B.C.E.), whose name means "Great Conqueror," was the founder of Jainism (followers of *jina*, the "conqueror"). He abandoned his comfortable life as the son of a tribal chief to become a wandering ascetic at about the age of thirty. He reacted to priestly ritualism by promoting ascetic practices for his followers and taught the annihilation of *karma* by penance and disciplined conduct.

Jains believe that everything in nature is alive and endowed with a form of spiritual essence; they also believe in the doctrine of nonviolence, which has had a profound influence on Indian culture and society into modern times. Jainism never gained a wide following, either in India or elsewhere, although the founder of the Mauryan Empire, Chandragupta Maurya (r. ca. 324–301 B.C.E.) was said to have abdicated his throne to become a Jain monk in south India.

Buddha

Like Mahavira, the man later known as Buddha was born in the sixth century B.C.E. to the ruler of a kingdom in the Himalayan foothills and grew up amid

the luxurious surroundings of palace life. As he became an adult he began to recognize the existence of suffering, sickness, and death. He sought an understanding of the causes of human suffering by following the teachings of various ascetics and holy men. Dissatisfied with their teachings, Buddha eventually achieved *nirvana* (the extinction of forces that cause rebirth), “enlightenment,” or the realization of the true nature of existence through a combination of meditation and ascetic practices.

The Four Noble Truths of Buddhism

The Four Noble Truths, taught by Buddha in a famous sermon at the Deer Park in Benares, contain the basic precepts of Buddhist belief: that life is suffering; that the cause of suffering is desire; that in order to stop suffering, one must stop desire; and that the way to accomplish this is through the Eightfold Path, which includes ascetic practices and mental disciplines followed by monks, holy men who live apart from society and have committed their lives to religious practice. The debt of Buddhism to earlier Indian cosmology and thought, particularly that of the Upanishads, is evident in fundamental concepts such as *samsara*, the cycle and bondage of rebirth, and *karma*, the cumulative causality of actions that propels humans through life after life.

In contrast to Jainism, which remained confined to India, Buddhism was later transmitted to East and Southeast Asia to become one of the great world religions. By the sixth century B.C.E., when both Buddhism and Jainism took shape in South Asia as reformist challenges to the dominant Vedic tradition, a new system of religious belief that challenged prevailing ideas and was similarly concerned with ethical questions began to form in the setting of the Persian Empire in West Asia: Zoroastrianism.