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Religions of the Axial Age:
An Approach to the World’s Religions

Scope:

The years 800–200 B.C.E. comprise one of the most creative and influential eras in world history. The German philosopher Karl Jaspers termed this epoch die Achsenzeit, or the Axial Age, to indicate its pivotal importance in the evolution of human thought. Around the globe, sages and moralists, philosophers and priests grappled with novel ideas about the nature of humanity, the world, and ultimate reality and approached these issues with fresh ways of thinking. Of such importance was this era that modern people continue to live out their moral and religious lives through the fundamental categories and patterns of thought established during this time.

The ferment of religious and philosophical activity centered in four distinct regions of civilization: East Asia, South Asia, West Asia, and the northeastern Mediterranean. Each of these areas witnessed the emergence of several imaginative individuals whose exemplary lives and teachings prompted their followers to create the traditions that led to the birth of the world religions. By setting these traditions and thinkers in juxtaposition, we are able to see more clearly the nature of the questions with which they struggled and to appreciate the similarities and differences of their solutions. We can also understand how their ideas have determined theological and religious thought and practices down to our day.

The course begins with a discussion of the idea of the Axial Age and its characteristics and contours. The introductory lecture accents the importance of this period and explains the value of studying religions comparatively across a specific period of time, rather than merely as traditions isolated from one another and unrelated to larger developments in the evolution of the human spirit. Although the Axial Age had an impact on four major regions, this course will attend principally to the three Asian sites, primarily because of their importance in shaping the world religions and because The Teaching Company already offers a number of excellent courses devoted to the world of the ancient Greeks. In this series, we will focus on the developments of Zoroastrianism in Iran and its influence on Judaism, Christianity, and Islam; Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism in India; and Confucianism and Daoism in China. The course will unfold regionally, beginning in Central Asia, then tracing developments in West Asia, South Asia, and finally, East Asia.

Although it is not an Axial center, we begin in Central Asia to study the early Indo-European peoples, who later migrated to West and South Asia and decisively shaped the religious outlook and practices of those regions. We will examine the shared culture of a group of these Central Asians known today as the Indo-Iranians and explore their similarities and differences after they divide in the second millennium B.C.E. When we get to West Asia, particularly ancient Iran, we examine the context out of which came perhaps the most mysterious of all major Axial sages: Zoroaster, also known as Zarathustra. Zoroaster, who may have been the world’s first prophet, was responsible for reforming the ancient Iranian religious tradition and for numerous theological innovations, such as the apocalyptic Day of Judgment, the devil, and perhaps even the idea of a messiah or savior. We will look at these new conceptions both in their native Iranian context and as possible influences on Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

In South Asia, we start with the indigenous Indus culture and witness the impact of the migration of the branch of the Indo-Iranians (retrospectively called the Indo-Aryans) that eventually made its way to northwestern India. We explore the elements of both Indus and Indo-Aryan religions to prepare for the examination of the Axial transformation of Indian religion. Pre-Axial religion in India focused on this-worldly concerns, such as the acquisition of material needs and comforts, long life, and successful reproduction, and was decidedly oriented toward ritual. With the advent of the Axial Age, Indian sages began to question the values associated with the material world and ritual practices. Indian religion became increasingly preoccupied with understanding the destiny of the individual and the nature of the deepest reality underlying all appearances. After a great deal of speculation, the ideas of reincarnation and karma were widely accepted, creating a new problem for Indian religion: attaining release from the endless rounds of death and rebirth known as samsara. Individuals by the hundreds began to renounce worldly life and experiment with solutions to this predicament. Among the scores of new spiritualities developed during this time, we examine three of the most important and most enduring: the mysticism of the Upanishads, which provided the foundational structure for the massive conglomerate of religious beliefs and practices later known as Hinduism; the teachings of the Buddha, based on an approach he called the Middle Way; and the beliefs and practices of the Mahavira, whose movement became known as Jainism. Setting these traditions
side by side will afford us the chance to see how they responded to many of the same problems but offered distinctive and innovative solutions.

Our final destination is East Asia. We begin with a study of the pre-Axial culture of what will later become China. Understanding this early period, which is barely within reach of current historiography, is important to appreciate the Axial transformations brought about by Confucius and thinkers associated with the tradition of Daoism. We look at the earliest attestations of religious practices that have been important throughout Chinese history, including divination and ancestor reverence. Later, when we turn to Confucius and his followers and then to the Daoists, we observe how these practices are retained and reinterpreted to fit the new concern with moral behavior brought by the Axial Age. Claiming only to transmit ancient traditions, Confucius taught a comprehensive ethic of personal development that remained influential throughout Chinese history and provided the basis for the Chinese educational system. Daoism, often associated with the mythic figure of Laozi, was concerned with many of the same issues as Confucius but suggested other solutions. Throughout Chinese history, Confucianism and Daoism functioned as complements to each other in such a way that individuals could claim allegiance to both Daoist and Confucian traditions.

The series concludes with a set of reflections on the Axial transformations, emphasizing both the common themes across the centers of development and their distinctive qualities. We will consider the overall significance of this age for human history and its major contributions to human spirituality.
Lecture One
What Was the Axial Age?

Scope: The Axial Age refers to the period of time from approximately 800–200 B.C.E., in which unprecedented developments occurred in four separate centers of civilization: West Asia, South Asia, East Asia, and the northeastern Mediterranean. Just the mention of some of the individuals who lived during this period in these localities alerts us to the importance of the age: Zoroaster, Jeremiah, Isaiah, the Buddha, Vardhamana Mahavira, Confucius, Pythagoras, Heraclitus, Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. In different ways, these individuals responded to an array of new issues stirred up by increased urbanization, political instability, the emergence of self-consciousness, and the impulse to understand the world and the human place in it as comprehensively as possible. These social and intellectual dynamics led to intense reflection on the nature and destiny of the individual, the fundamental questions of morality, and the character of ultimate reality. As a consequence of their creative engagement with these issues, the sages of the Axial Age produced the intellectual and moral matrix out of which the world’s religions were born; subsequent religious developments are, in large measure, the developments of the ideas and insights from the Axial period.

Outline

I. The Axial Age, the period between 800 and 200 B.C.E., saw a remarkable burst of creativity almost simultaneously in four separate areas of the Eurasian continent.
   A. In East Asia, in the area we now call China, Confucius and his followers provided the religious, philosophical, and political foundations for more than 2,000 years of Chinese culture. At the same time, Daoist philosophers produced a compelling alternative to Confucianism.
   B. In South Asia, a countercultural movement of ascetics and mystics composed a collection of teachings called the Upanishads that gave nascent Hinduism its characteristic features. Near the same time and place, both the Buddha and Mahavira attained new insights that inaugurated Buddhism and Jainism.
   C. In West Asia, in Palestine, the prophets of Judah helped shape the emerging religion of Judaism. Also in West Asia, in Iran, Zarathustra had recently established Zoroastrianism, which served as the state religion of three powerful empires and contributed decisive new ideas to Judaism and Christianity.
   D. Finally, in the northern Mediterranean, in the land of ancient Greece, Thales, Pythagoras, Heraclitus, Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle essentially invented the Western philosophical tradition.
   E. Just as fascinating as the density of genius in this era is the similarity of ideas and modes of thinking that these individuals developed. They all struggled with many of the same fundamental issues, such as the nature and destiny of the self, the basis and practices of morality, and the highest goods of human life.

II. The 20th-century German philosopher Karl Jaspers (1883–1969) identified this extraordinary period as die Achsenzeit, or the Axial Age, signifying that this era was pivotal in human history.
   A. During the Axial Age, as Jaspers observed, “The spiritual foundations of humanity were laid simultaneously and independently... And these are the foundations upon which humanity still subsists today.”
   B. What was happening at this particular time and in these particular places that might account for the prodigious output of critical ideas and the appearance of some of the greatest individuals known to the world?

III. We can point to several social and political developments that contributed to the opening of the Axial Age.
   A. The Axial era occurred at a time and in places of increasing urbanization and mobility. This trend had significant effects on social structures and the human psyche. Urban life often disrupts one’s sense of identity and places traditional values and beliefs in doubt.
   B. Second, the Axial centers were generally characterized by political and legal upheaval.
      1. The Chinese Axial Age, for example, overlapped a brutal epoch in Chinese history known as the Period of Warring States. India, Judah, and Iran underwent similar periods of turmoil and transformation.
2. Rapid political and social change, of course, generates uncertainty and insecurity, but interestingly, such times are often the most creative and innovative for religious and philosophical thought.

C. Sages in all the Axial centers became increasingly anxious about death and preoccupied with what, if anything, lay beyond death.
   1. Pre-Axial humans, of course, were not unconcerned with death, but their sense of identity was more firmly rooted in their participation in the family, clan, or tribe. Accordingly, death could be accepted, knowing that the family would survive one’s personal demise.
   2. By the Axial Age, attitudes toward death began to reflect a greater concern about the experience of dying and the afterlife. Increasingly, death was regarded with dread, and speculation about what might lie beyond was filled with both hope and terror.
   3. Reflected in this shift in attitudes about death is the rise of a sense of individuality and a greater consciousness of the human being as a moral agent, accountable for his or her own actions.
   4. As humans began to think of themselves as separate, autonomous individuals, death became a more dreadful reality. Selfhood promotes a feeling of isolation or, at least, differentiation from the rest of the human community and the rest of reality, making it more difficult to accept dying as part of the natural process of living.

D. The growing sense of selfhood and anxiety about life’s transience also stimulated conjectures about the nature of the person and spurred the search to discover something within the human individual that might endure the dissolution of the body, something eternal or immortal.
   1. As part of this quest, Axial sages developed a new way of thinking about the world and the place of humanity in it. S. N. Eisenstadt, one of the first scholars to study the sociological dimensions of the Axial Age, calls this way of looking at life transcendental consciousness, that is, the ability to stand back and see the world more comprehensively and critically.
   2. Transcendental consciousness produced novel conceptions of the world’s ultimate reality. In some cases, the Axial sages were not content to accept the old anthropomorphic gods and goddesses as the highest realities or powers governing the universe. They imagined sublime conceptions of ultimate reality, such as the Hindu Brahman and the Chinese Dao.
   3. Thinking about the highest realities also led these individuals to a greater interest in epistemology, that is, how we know what we know and what the limitations of our knowledge are. Attention to epistemology, accordingly, promoted a greater sense of self-consciousness and awareness of humanity’s place in the universe.

E. Finally, the Axial Age marks a dramatic change in the very function of religion in human life. During this era, the purpose of religion shifted from what theologian John Hick calls cosmic maintenance to personal transformation.
   1. By cosmic maintenance, we mean that religion functions chiefly as a ritual means for human beings to collaborate with the divine powers to assist in keeping the world in good working order.
   2. During the Axial Age, however, religion takes on an unprecedented new role in human life: providing the means for the individual to undergo change in order to achieve immortality or happiness.
   3. Selfhood and the heightened awareness of suffering and death prompted some religions to imagine wonderful afterlife experiences as ways to overcome the painful realities of this life. Reaching these goals might mean accepting a new vision of the way the world works or accepting the demands of a particular god with the power to bestow immortality or paradise.

F. Jaspers was certainly correct in his contention that this era laid contemporary humanity’s spiritual foundations. In these lectures, we will probe this idea in greater detail by examining developments in the Axial centers in West, South, and East Asia. For those interested in Axial Age developments in Greece and Judah, I recommend The Teaching Company courses in Greek philosophy and Judaism.

IV. The approach of this course is unlike that of many courses in comparative or world religions.
   A. Some courses in religion focus on a particular tradition, such as Islam or Christianity, approaching the material in a chronological fashion. This method allows one to study a single religious tradition in depth and shows how religions evolve over time.
   B. In the second general method of religious studies, students examine religions one by one, noting similarities and differences. This method allows comparisons of various traditions, but the treatment is often shallow, and historical development is glossed over. Further, the short time allotted to each tradition
often means that the religion’s development in the larger context of its culture is neglected, as are the ways in which one religious tradition shapes others.

C. By examining these religions over the 600-year span of the Axial Age and against the background of their pre-Axial settings, we will have the opportunity to study religions both in their historical development and comparatively.

1. The comparative dimension allows us to view how different religions respond to similar historical and sociological circumstances. It also allows us to see the mutual interaction of religions in proximity to one another.

2. Limiting the time frame and the number of religions we cover enables us to gain a measure of depth in our investigation and connect the religions more fully with their social and political contexts.

3. The greatest value of this course, however, derives from the era on which it is focused. The Axial Age is simply one of the most intriguing periods in religious history. We are about to observe the world’s great religions coming to life.

Essential Reading:

Supplementary Reading:
Eisenstadt, The Origins and Diversity of Axial Age Civilizations, Introduction.
Hick, An Interpretation of Religion, chapter 2.

Questions to Consider:
1. Are there other historical periods that compare with the creativity and influence of the Axial Age?
2. The Axial Age seems to emerge in connection with human self-consciousness. What may account for the rise of self-consciousness?
Lecture Two
The Noble Ones

Scope: Linguistic and textual analysis has conclusively shown that the people who occupied northwestern India and eastern Iran prior to the Axial Age were closely related, spoke similar languages, and held common religious beliefs. Most scholars think that these Indo-Iranians descended from the same stock of pastoral nomads who originated in the Central Asian steppes. A small minority, however, believe that these people were indigenous to India. This lecture explores the culture and religion of Indo-Iranians prior to their split into two separate groups. The Rig Veda and the Avesta, which later became the foundational scriptures of Hinduism and Zoroastrianism, respectively, give us a glimpse of the Indo-Iranians’ gods, their social and moral structures, their cosmology, and their ritual practices. Essentially, their religion served to provide the means for the Indo-Iranians to attain the goods necessary for a prosperous and stable life on Earth. The gods were entreated to help maintain productivity and harmony in the here-and-now rather than to secure otherworldly salvation.

Outline

I. To understand the changes in the Axial centers of East, West, and South Asia, we begin in Central Asia a millennium before the Axial Age, examining the cultural and religious practices of people living in the south Russian steppes, what is today roughly Ukraine to West Kazakhstan. Most scholars believe that these pre-Axial peoples gradually migrated to northern Europe, the northern Mediterranean region, Iran, India, and as far west as Ireland.
   A. The Indo-Iranians remained together until about 4,000 years ago, when they split, some venturing into present-day Iraq and others to present-day Afghanistan and the Indus Valley, gradually spreading across northern India.
   B. For this lecture, we are most interested in the period when the two groups were united in Central Asia before heading south into what is now Iran and India. We call these people the Indo-Iranians.
   C. As the descendants of the Indo-Europeans scattered throughout Eurasia, their single language evolved into dozens of languages in the Indo-European family. Analysis of Icelandic, German, Gaelic, Latin, Greek, Russian, Persian, Sanskrit, Sinhalese, and English shows evidence that they all derived from a single language.
   D. As the group divided, their languages evolved separately but were still similar enough to enable communication. The Indian tribes spoke a form of Sanskrit, and the Iranian tribes spoke Avestan, which now exists only in a collection of sacred writings called the Avesta.
   E. The Indo-Iranians referred to themselves as the “Noble Ones,” each arriving at their respective destinations, which they called the “Land of the Noble.”

II. What we know of Indo-Iranian culture comes from two sources preserved in oral tradition: the Rig Veda, the oldest extant Indo-European text, and the Avesta, a slightly later text from Iran.
   A. The Indo-Iranians were nomadic and semi-nomadic animal herders who also hunted wild animals.
   B. Tribes had little to no formal governance. The society was divided into priests and “producers,” that is, essentially everyone who was not a priest.
   C. The Indo-Iranians were likely peaceful people, with a static society that, for centuries, experienced few significant cultural changes.
   D. Having not yet tamed horses, the earliest people didn’t travel far and knew nothing of warfare that horses made possible.

III. The religious life of early Indo-Iranians suggests a commonsensical worldview with a belief in numerous gods. Trees were also venerated, especially those growing along riverbanks, probably because the bark or fruit was thought to have healing properties.
A. The various gods related to different aspects of everyday life, but especially important were those who controlled the natural world: Sky and Earth (Asman and Zam), Sun and Moon (Hvar and Mah), and winds (Vata and Vayu).

B. The Indo-Iranians worshiped an overarching “king of the gods,” who eventually became irrelevant and was forgotten. The Iranians called him Dyaoš, and the Indians called him Dyaus-Pitr, later known as the Greek and Roman gods Zeus and Jupiter.

C. Gods associated with ritual practices were also important and included the gods of fire, water, animal spirits, and a vision-inducing substance called haoma in the Avestan dialect and soma in Sanskrit.

D. The ahuras (Avestan) or asuras (Sanskrit) were gods simply called “lords.” Three were of greatest significance.
   1. The first two were associated with oaths, which humans had little means to enforce; therefore, gods were invoked to punish those who failed their oaths.
   2. The third and greatest of the ahuras was Mazda, the Lord of Wisdom, who was, later in the Iranian tradition, represented by the Sun.

E. There were numerous lesser divinities called the “shiny ones,”—devas (Sanskrit) or daevas (Avestan)—who represented courage, friendship, justice, obedience, and glory, also called charisma.

IV. In addition to a complex world of spirits and gods, the Indo-Iranians believed in an abstract principle of cosmic order, which kept the Sun on its path and the seasons in proper sequence. Obedience to moral law promoted harmony and well-being, and rituals played an important role in maintaining this order.

A. Rta (Sanskrit) or asha (Avestan) represented an absolute principle for appropriate human and divine behavior; deities were also subject to rta/asha.

B. The principle of order was opposed by the power of disharmony and chaos, called druj (Avestan) or dru (Sanskrit).

C. Rituals were needed to maintain rta/asha against the diametrically opposed druj/druh. In this, we see an example of the pre-Axial practice of cosmic maintenance based on the responsibility people felt to influence the processes on which their lives depended.

D. To fully understand how these ritual practices promoted social and cosmological harmony, we need to look at the Indo-Iranians’ creation stories. The Avestan version says that the Earth was created in seven stages.
   1. First, the sky was conceived as a gigantic inverted bowl made of beautiful stone. Second, water was created, covering the bottom of the sky shell. Third, solid earth was created, floating on the water.
   2. In the fourth, fifth, and sixth stages, life was added in the form of one plant, one animal—a bull—and one man, named Yima (Avestan) or Yama (Sanskrit). In the seventh stage, fire was added.
   3. In the final act of creation, the gods performed the first ritual sacrifice. By crushing and dismembering the plant, the bull, and the man, they created new life. The world was now populated and began the course of asha through death and reproduction.

E. From simple to complex rituals, the Indo-Iranians reenacted the gods’ primordial sacrifices to maintain cosmic and moral order and to ensure that new life replaced the old.
   1. Among the simplest rituals were offerings to the gods of water and fire. Milk and two plant leaves, to represent the animal and vegetable realms, were offered to water. Incense, wood, and animal fat were offered to fire.
   2. A sacred space was created for more complex rituals, in which priests uttered prayers to keep out evil spirits while fires burned in sacred vessels.
   3. Fire rituals were the most sacred, often involving the blood of goats, sheep, or cattle. Animal sacrifices were performed with special prayers so that the animal’s spirit could continue as part of a divine being called the Soul of the Bull, the life energy of animals.
   4. Consecrated and cooked meat was offered to other gods and then eaten. The Indo-Iranians ate only consecrated meat from domesticated animals. They also said prayers before killing wild animals to ensure their spirits’ safe return to the Soul of the Bull.
5. Some rituals involved a sacred beverage, soma (Sanskrit) or haoma (Avestan). Soma was believed to be a god that lived in a plant whose properties induced ecstasy, a sense of immortality, freedom from suffering and fear, and communion with the spirit world. The experience of divine communion was important in confirming the existence of the gods while expanding the mind to consider the deepest possibilities of human life.

V. We now arrive at the eve of the Axial Age, although further developments in Indo-Iranian religions will occur first. The central purpose of religion at this time was co-creation with the gods in the processes and functions of life. Forces were often personified as gods or goddesses or as abstract, impersonal principles. Human beings, clearly feeling a kinship with the natural and divine worlds, had to keep their world in good working order.

**Essential Reading:**

**Supplementary Reading:**
O’Flaherty, *The Rig-Veda*, “Soma.”

**Questions to Consider:**
1. The Indo-Iranians believed that the gods themselves were subject to rta/asha, the principle of order and morality. Many theologians have objected to such a view because it implies a reality above god. The issue of the divine’s relationship to morality led Socrates to ask in the *Euthyphro*: “Are morally good acts willed by God because they are morally good, or are they morally good because they are willed by God?” What do you think? Does the matter turn on how the divine is conceived?

2. Do you think the value of spiritual experiences is invalidated if they are induced by physical substances, such as soma/haoma?
Lecture Three
The World of Zoroaster

Scope: The Avesta suggests that the culture of the Indo-Iranians had degenerated into widespread lawlessness some time before the Axial period. In response to the anarchy of these times, Zoroaster, one of the most mysterious individuals among the founders of Axial religions, arose to reform and purify the ancient religion that he served as priest. We know very little about the man himself, and there is considerable debate about when he even lived. Some scholars place him a few centuries before the start of the Axial Age, but there may be good reasons for including him in the lineup of Axial sages, not the least of which is his deep concern with morality and the ultimate destiny of the individual. Zoroaster’s ethical sensitivities led him to reinterpret the deities of the Iranian pantheon, effectively making them partisans of either good or evil. His reforms eventually led to a new religious tradition bearing his name.

Outline

I. The Indo-Iranians viewed cultural or religious innovation with suspicion and regarded change as sacrilegious. However, as they drifted south from Central Asia, they came in contact with the Mesopotamians, and their way of life changed dramatically.
   A. From the Mesopotamians, the Indo-Iranians learned how to domesticate horses, build war chariots, and fashion weapons, completely disrupting their once stable culture.
   B. They turned to stealing livestock, and raiding and pillaging brought with it a fundamental new purpose: to gain wealth and glory.
   C. But this lifestyle disrupted moral concerns and respect for the rule of law. Perpetrators showed little regard for the weak and defenseless.
   D. With this new way of life arose a third class of individuals alongside the priests and producers: the warlords and professional warriors.

II. Society now had both peaceful people and warriors, and new nomenclature entered the vocabulary to distinguish between the two.
   A. In ancient Iran, the ashavans followed the way of order and stability. Followers of asha were thought to be blessed, suggesting divine approval.
   B. The wicked ones were the drujvants, devotees of the principle of disorder. Many worshiped Indra, the brave new deity of the heroic age.
   C. New gods more acceptable to the emerging warrior caste began to appear and even dominate some forms of religion.
      1. Indra was valiant in combat, reckless, and amoral but loyal to those who revered him and made offerings to him. In return, he was a giver of many gifts to his followers.
      2. Indra loved soma, the intoxicating drink that fueled his passion and reckless spirit.
         a. In earlier times, Indo-Iranians used soma to commune with the gods, to feel immortal, and to imagine a new life free of distress.
         b. In the heroic age of raiding, soma acquired another dimension, freeing its potential to produce a frenzy conducive to war and lawlessness.
   D. In contrast to Indra, other gods, such as Varuna, began to fall by the wayside in ritual and celebration. The adventurous life of the daring Indra was more appealing, and in time, Varuna and Indra would come to be seen as diametrically opposite gods.

III. By the middle of the second millennium B.C.E., the Indo-Iranian peoples were gradually diverging to their respective lands. Our story now follows the peoples of Iran, among whom emerged Zoroaster (a Greek transliteration of Zarathustra), who is one of the least-known founding figures in the history of the world’s religions, a transitional figure, representing an interesting mixture of pre-Axial and Axial religious elements.
A. Little is known about Zoroaster, including when and where he lived. Roughly, we date him to around 1200 B.C.E. in the eastern area of present-day Iran. He came from a modest family living in the semi-nomadic conditions of the Indo-Iranian period when cattle rustlers and outlaws were in their prime.

B. A text called the Gathas (“verses”), part of the oldest Avesta, is the foundational scripture of Zoroaster’s religion and may have been composed by Zoroaster himself. More spontaneous prayers addressed to a god, as opposed to sermons or didactic proclamations, the Gathas are written in an archaic dialect close to the Sanskrit of the Rig Veda.

C. The Gathas tell us that Zoroaster was a priest, an authorized ritual specialist.

D. Troubled by the violence and lawlessness of the land, Zoroaster sought deeper truths. At age 30, he had an impressive visionary experience in which he was led into the presence of the Ahura Mazda and six other radiant beings, known collectively as the heptad (the “seven”), from whom he received a special revelation.

E. He now had a purpose: “[t]o …teach men to seek the right [asha].” Though he continued to have revelations, this was clearly the turning point in his life, transforming him from priest to prophet, a critic of religious practices and a mouthpiece for a god.

IV. Zoroaster’s response to his new vocation was both conservative and revolutionary. He called his fellow Iranians to return to the principles of good, order, and harmony. But he added novel dimensions to create a powerful vision of the world. There were two chief thrusts of Zoroaster’s theology, both movements in the direction of simplification.

A. First, Zoroaster wanted the Ahura Mazda to be seen as superior to Varuna and the other ahuras, and he became a passionate advocate for worshiping Mazda as the foremost deity.
   1. In his vision of the heptad, Zoroaster saw Mazda as the dominant deity. In later reflections, Zoroaster suggested that all the other ahuras and divinities were actually emanations or partial manifestations of Mazda.
   2. Zoroaster believed Mazda to be the only uncreated god, who himself created the world in seven stages. This view tended toward monotheism and probably contributed to the religious environment that would ultimately champion this idea.

B. Second, Zoroaster assigned clear moral qualities to the gods. All the spirits—the daevas and the ahuras—were now plainly either good or evil.
   1. Because the daevas, such as Indra, were honored by the cattle rustlers, Zoroaster reserved the word daeva exclusively for the wicked gods and the word ahura for the ethical gods.
   2. He called the good spirits or divine assistants yazatas, beings associated with the principles of good and truth.
   3. Zoroaster also suggested the existence of an independent evil deity, a chief god among the daevas, called by various names but more commonly Ahriman. Thus, two superior beings—one completely good, the other completely evil—were locked in mortal combat, each struggling for triumph.

V. In one of the ancient Gathas, Zoroaster’s theological perceptions are briefly reviewed in a cryptic text called “The Two Spirits.” In this short poem, he describes the two original spirits of good and evil appearing as twins. One problem with this overriding theology is that if Mazda were the original uncreated and wholly benevolent god, where did the evil spirit come from and why?

A. Zoroaster doesn’t attempt to resolve the issue. What is important for him is not an abstract question of theological consistency but the pragmatic and existentially vital point that people must choose between good and evil.

B. Irrespective of the origins of these entities, humans cannot escape their responsibility in aligning themselves with good or evil and must live accordingly.

C. Thus, Zoroaster instigates the transformations of the Axial Age in his call to make a choice between good and evil, to accept personal responsibility for one’s actions and words.

D. The call to this kind of personal obligation is novel in religious history because it is connected with new ideas about what it means to be human and divine.
E. Later, we’ll see that for Zoroaster, an individual’s moral and religious decisions determine the quality of his or her personal destiny. One’s future well-being, especially in the world beyond this one, depends on one’s behavior here and now. This idea was both new for the times and common in and across the Axial centers.

Essential Reading:

Supplementary Reading:

Questions to Consider:
1. What are the theological benefits and liabilities of conceiving the source of evil as within the godhead? What are the benefits and liabilities of locating the source of evil outside of god?
2. The *drujvants’* aspirations seemed to be embodied in the god Indra to a remarkable degree. Are we fated to worship gods who are merely reflections of our own beliefs and values?
Scope: Zoroaster anticipated other Axial sages by connecting human destiny and moral behavior. He imagined human history moving in a linear fashion toward a final conclusion, in which good would at last triumph over evil. At this eschatological moment, those whose lives had been aligned with the Ahura Mazda, the god of good, would be rewarded with an everlasting life of happiness, while those who served Ahriman, the god of evil, would be utterly annihilated. Zoroaster’s use of rituals, particularly those involving fire, was intended to help individuals cultivate moral qualities and ally with the spirit of good.

Although there are relatively few Zoroastrians left—today, it would not qualify as a major world religion—the legacy of Zoroaster’s teachings lives on in other religions. Although a controversial issue, many scholars believe that the Western monotheisms—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—absorbed some important aspects of Zoroastrian thought, such as the devil, the Day of Judgment, heaven and hell, angels, and the concept of a divine savior.

Outline

I. In simplifying Iranian religion, Zoroaster was both zealous prophet and great visionary, whose worldview was one of the most influential in history. His innovative theology helped shape other religious perspectives to come.
   A. Having clearly distinguished which gods were good and which were evil, Zoroaster’s theology was simple: One had to choose between the two forces.
   B. Zoroaster also believed that one’s ultimate destiny, in the afterlife, depended on whether one sided with the good Mazda or the evil Ahriman. This was a remarkable idea for its time because it suggested that individuals had a destiny beyond life. Earlier, such a belief was not widely accepted.
   C. Zoroaster claimed that the afterlife was dependent on one’s moral behavior, which was counter to the popular belief of his day, that destiny depended on whether or not one had performed great deeds or pleased the gods with sufficient sacrifices. This ethicization is one of the great themes of the Axial transformation, the idea that beliefs and practices are interpreted and understood in moral terms.
   D. Zoroaster believed that an individual would be judged on the fourth day following his or her death. Good people went to heaven to be with Mazda, while evil people fell into the abyss of hell.

II. Zoroaster also envisioned a final cosmic destiny in which all of humanity was headed in a particular direction.
   A. He believed that time was linear, from beginning to apocalyptic end, which ultimately would result in a universal struggle between good and evil to be played out in a battle called Frashokereti, the “making glorious.”
   B. According to Zoroaster, good would prevail, establishing paradise on Earth.
   C. Zoroaster may have believed in a bodily resurrection of the dead; those already in heaven would return to Earth and continue life in physical form.
   D. He also expected a savior figure, a saoshyant, an apocalyptic judge who would play a decisive role in humanity’s destiny.
   E. It’s unclear whether all of Zoroaster’s ideas originated with him, but through his influence and prophecies, these ideas were widely disseminated.

III. What made Zoroaster’s vision so compelling to many of his contemporaries?
   A. First, it was incumbent upon individuals to make the essential good/evil choice, which determined one’s future and shaped cosmic drama itself. The gods were at war, and human beings had to act to ensure that good prevailed. This elevated the importance of human moral responsibility.
   B. Second, Zoroaster’s vision provided meaning to suffering and promised compensation for it. For their suffering, the righteous would live an afterlife in paradise, while evil ones, too, received their just deserts.
C. Zoroaster spent his life preaching while missionaries spread his message. Many of his followers were persecuted and killed, but their martyrdom only strengthened the convictions of those who survived.

D. By the 6th century B.C.E., the movement became the state religion of the Achaemenid (Persian) Empire, which it remained until the 7th century C.E., when it was finally displaced by Islam.

IV. Zoroastrianism eventually developed rituals intended to reinforce its basic message and theology.

A. One central practice was to pray five times each day while standing before a fire, which could be the Sun or a fireplace. The Sun was associated with Mazda, and like their Indo-Aryan relatives, Iranians maintained the custom of keeping the sacred fires constantly lit.

B. Purity also became associated with fire rituals.
   1. The constituent elements of the world—earth, fire, and water—needed to be kept pure.
   2. To keep the soil pure, the dead were not buried. Instead, they were laid in “towers of silence,” exposed for birds to pick their bones clean.
   3. The purity code included the death penalty for anyone polluting a sacred fire, but it allowed the killing of snakes and scorpions, both believed to be demonic creatures.

C. Celebrations were also practiced, in particular seven major festivals tied to the rhythms of agricultural life. The most important was Noruz, or “New Day”, a new year’s celebration still held at the spring equinox, making it one of the oldest continuously celebrated festivals in the world.

V. Whether or not Zoroastrianism directly influenced three other major religions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—is a controversial issue. However, there are parallel beliefs among these religions, which all first began to appear in Jewish theology after the Exile, when Jews came into contact with the Persians.

A. Evidence of influence is difficult to prove conclusively. Although there are examples of borrowing from other scriptures in West Asia, there are none from Zoroastrianism.

B. Early Jewish and Christian theologians probably never read Zoroastrian scripture because much of it was in the oral tradition. The infiltration of Zoroastrian ideas most likely occurred as Jews came into contact with followers of the movement during the post-Exile period.
   1. In the 6th century B.C.E., Jews came into contact with the Persian Empire; thereafter, new ideas—curiously similar to Zoroaster’s—began to appear in Jewish and, later, Christian writings.
   2. These ideas were significantly different from the theology of earlier Hebrew writings and bear the traces of outside influences.

C. One of the parallels among these religions is the linear view of time, with a beginning, middle, and end.

D. Another parallel is the belief in a final apocalypse. The idea of the Day of Judgment first appeared in the books of Ecclesiastes and Daniel; the latter vision has the same Zoroastrian themes of an apocalyptic end to history, a resurrection of bodies and a day of judgment, and the determination of human destiny based on the moral quality of the individual’s life.

E. A third parallel is the belief in heaven and hell and the idea that human beings might attain everlasting life in the heavenly realm or experience anguish in hell.

F. The idea of the devil seems clearly to be of Iranian origin. The devil appears nowhere in Genesis, but by the time the New Testament was written, 500–600 years after the Exile, Satan emerged as a god of evil.

G. A final important parallel among these religions is the idea of a universal savior or apocalyptic judge who appears at the end times.
   1. Though the idea of a messiah was part of Jewish tradition before Jewish contact with the Persians, their vision of the messiah, who he was and what his role might be, was far from clear.
   2. Zoroaster’s idea of a saoshyant, a universal redeemer appearing at the end times, may have shaped some of the Jews’ expectations. An apocalyptic figure called the Son of Man first appears in Daniel, in which we read that this figure would descend from heaven at the end of history and play a decisive role in the annihilation of evil.

H. Finally, it is possible that the wise men who appeared at Jesus’ birth were actually Zoroastrians searching for their saoshyant and were led to Judea, where Jesus was born.
Essential Reading:
Foltz, *Spirituality in the Land of the Noble*, chapters 3 and 5.

Supplementary Reading:
Hultgård, “Persian Apocalypticism.”

Questions to Consider:
1. What was revolutionary about Zoroaster’s thought?
2. Why might some people be uncomfortable with the idea that Zoroastrianism influenced primary notions in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam? If you are a Jew, Christian, or Muslim, does the idea that Zoroastrianism may have contributed some important beliefs to your religion affect your faith?
3. How is life different if time is conceived as cyclical rather than linear?
Lecture Five
South Asia before the Axial Age

Scope: From Iran, we move to South Asia and the pre-Axial culture of what came to be India. We first examine the indigenous Indus Valley culture, whose religious practices focused on goddess worship and fertility rituals. Then we witness the migration of the Indo-Aryans, the descendants of the Indo-Iranians who found their way to South Asia. Although no one is quite sure what occurred when the Indo-Aryans encountered the Indus culture—or what was left of it—the meeting of these traditions yielded profound changes for Indian religion and ultimately provided the basis for the Hindu family of religions. The Indo-Aryans brought with them a worldview and a set of rituals based on their revealed scriptures, the Vedas. Through those texts, we glimpse the Aryan pantheon of gods and their understanding of human beings.

Outline

I. To help us understand the transformations that led to the birth of the Axial religions of India, we look at the Indus culture, which flourished along the Indus River valley at least 1,500 years before the Indo-Aryans entered what is now Pakistan and the Punjab area.
   A. By the time the Aryans arrived in the region, around 1500 B.C.E., the Indus culture was declining but still potent enough to influence the evolution of Hinduism, believed to have emerged from the confluence of the ancient Indo-Aryan and Indus religions.
   B. The Indus culture was discovered in the 19th century when ruins were found, indicating that this was the largest civilization of the ancient world, with some cities containing as many as 50,000 people at one time.
   C. We know little about the Indus dwellers’ governance and society, but evidence suggests a centralized authority and law enforcement.
   D. They were likely peaceful agriculturists who traded with the Mesopotamians.
   E. The Indus language remains indecipherable; thus, we don’t know what these people called themselves and have no writings to aid in our understanding of their religion.

II. Indus dwellers were deeply concerned with sexuality and procreation. Archeological finds include figurines of women with exaggerated hips and breasts. Horned animals with powerful flanks and obvious male genitalia depict male sexuality. However, without textual evidence, we can make only educated guesses about these artifacts based on similar findings in other societies.
   A. Female figurines are thought to symbolize a divine goddess, indicating that the earliest humans worshiped a mother goddess long before male gods.
      1. Whether or not Indus dwellers were part of a vast goddess religion, they did revere and celebrate the reproductive powers of women.
      2. Goddess worship is a prominent part of contemporary Hinduism, with a long and deep-rooted history, and it’s plausible that this tradition derives from Indus practices.
   B. The depiction of horned male animals and stone phalluses implies a fascination with sexuality and reproductive functions. But what precisely was the icons’ function?
      1. Throughout recorded history, Hindus revered a god, Shiva, represented symbolically as the male and female sex organs in an icon called the *lingam-yoni*, alluding to the powers of creation and procreation and the importance of male/female balance.
      2. Indus images may have functioned in much the same way as the modern Shiva, thus revering creative power and balance.
   C. Sexual images might have had a magical function, such as good luck charms to enhance fertility and conception.

III. Indus cities also had sophisticated bathing facilities, suggesting an intense concern with purity and cleanliness beyond simple hygiene. But as yet, no obvious places of worship or sacred precincts have been unearthed.
A. Like Hindus today, the Indus peoples seemed focused on ritual purity, or cleanliness necessary for approaching the sacred. Ritual purity also concerns food, clothing, the persons one may touch or associate with, and a host of similar regulations and restrictions.

B. Purity rituals maintained a society’s sense of order; thus, the baths likely served to remove impurities and reinstate the order of things, just as in contemporary Hinduism.

C. Because no positively identified sacred buildings have yet been unearthed in the Indus culture, the home may have served as a sacred space, again, similar to contemporary Hinduism. This underscores the important pre-Axial fact that the sacred and secular were not sharply distinguished.

D. There is no indication that the Indus peoples thought much about an afterlife. Ritual practices seemed to be chiefly for maintaining order in the present.

IV. Already in decline by 1500 B.C.E., the Indus culture came to an end at about the time that the “Indo” branch of the Indo-Iranian people began to arrive in the region.

A. Formerly, historians believed that the Indo-Aryans conquered the Indus culture. But many contemporary scholars of ancient India think that the Indo-Aryans migrated slowly and relatively peacefully into the Indus region, coexisting for a time with the remaining Indus peoples.

B. Some scholars contend that the Aryans were actually indigenous to India, not Central Asia, and migrated from the subcontinent to other locations. Regardless of where they originated, ancient connections can be found between the Indo-Aryans and the Iranians.

C. Initially, the Indo-Aryans were pastoral nomads, not agriculturalists. They called themselves the “Five Tribes” and were led by chieftains. Recall that the Indo-Aryans also referred to themselves as the “Noble Ones,” the literal meaning of Aryan.

V. Our knowledge of the Aryans comes from the Vedas, instructions, prayers, and hymns created for the purpose of performing rituals.

A. Today, the Vedas are the Hindus’ oldest and most sacred scripture of divine knowledge with universal secrets.

B. The Vedas are divided into four collections. The oldest, and the one we’ll look at, is the Rig Veda, which contains more than 1,000 songs to various gods and goddesses.

C. The Vedas tell us that Aryan religion principally involved ritual and sacrifice. As in Indus culture, Aryan ritual appears to focus mainly on acquiring the necessary goods for a happy and comfortable existence in the present.

VI. To understand the Aryans, we explore some of their rituals, why they were performed, and to whom they were addressed.

A. The Vedas describe 33 different gods and goddesses believed to dwell on Earth, in heaven, and in the mid-space between the two worlds, a tripartite world similar to that envisioned by the Iranians.

B. Most of these gods—devas in the Sanskrit—had specific functions or realms.
  1. For instance, Indra was the god of war and, according to Zoroaster, was one of the principal devas associated with chaos and evil.
  2. Agni was the divine fire who lived in the domestic hearth and in plants. He also dwelled in mid-space as lightning and as the fire of the Sun. Because of his versatility, Agni was the mediator between gods and humans and, therefore, figured prominently in Aryan rituals.
  3. Other gods and goddesses included Surya (Sun), Yama (death), Ushas (dawn), Kubera (wealth and prosperity), and a host of other, lesser divine beings of different ranks and qualities, including the asuras, whom the Indo-Aryans considered evil.

C. Different devas took center stage at varying times and were usually worshiped according to whose favors were needed at the moment.

VII. We now look at how the Indo-Aryans viewed themselves and their place in the universe.

A. Significantly, the Vedas have very little to say about views of human nature and destiny. Aryans rarely analyzed themselves nor had they a systematic self-understanding.
B. The Vedas are more interested in praising gods and performing rituals than understanding what it means to be human.

C. The Rig Veda hymns portray fairly wide speculation about what occurs at death. One hymn alone lists numerous possible fates for humans, from going to heaven, to dissolving into the elements of the natural world, to being “cooked” by the funeral pyre and subsequently consumed by the gods.
   1. Other hymns suggest that the soul descends to the underworld, ruled by Yama.
   2. The hymns contain no consensus about the makeup of the human personality or about what determines one’s final destiny.

D. The Aryan relationship to the body is not spelled out, and it’s unclear what determines fate.
   1. Sometimes, it appears that the correct performance of rituals decides one’s destiny; sometimes, it seems to depend on deeds; and sometimes, one’s fate is unrelated to the life lived.
   2. The Vedas make no pronouncements that destiny is related to moral choices, as Zoroaster believed.

E. The Aryans surely regarded death as an occasion for grief and sadness, yet there is no indication that death was terrifying or that an afterlife—if there was one—was unpleasant.

F. The Rig Veda also says nothing of reincarnation, an Axial development that receives widespread acceptance as the Vedic tradition evolves into Hinduism.

**Essential Reading:**

**Supplementary Reading:**

**Questions to Consider:**
1. What are the similarities between the Indus culture and contemporary Hindu tradition?
2. What are some of the differences between Indus peoples’ beliefs and Zoroastrianism?
Lecture Six
The Start of the Indian Axial Age

Scope: Central to Aryan life, rituals gave meaning to everything from the creation of the universe to the death of the individual. Vedic rituals ensured the proper functioning of the world. The most important ritual was the shrauta rite, in which elaborate ceremonies and special functionaries, the priests of the Brahmin caste, helped an individual gain the favor of the gods for particular benefits. But as the Indo-Aryans spread and settled over northern India, many began to question the value of rituals and the power of the priests. Some Aryans began to worry about their individual fates, and death increasingly became a matter of serious concern. The Upanishads, a collection of texts later included among the Hindu scriptures, were composed to help provide answers to the emerging questions about life, death, and the significance of both. This time period marks the beginnings of classical Hinduism and the start of the Indian Axial Age.

Outline

I. Ritual, the essential means for appealing to the divine, was of vital importance to the Aryans in pre-Axial India. To understand the impulses that led to the reinterpretation of ritual during the Axial period, however, we’ll first look at the dynamics of pre-Axial ritual.

   A. The Vedas are vague about how the Aryans understood human nature and individual destiny, yet the belief structure supporting their rituals was complex and specific.

   B. A passage from the Rig Veda illustrates this complexity in a creation story about Purusha, the primordial sacrificial victim. Purusha was a man with “a thousand heads, a thousand eyes, [and] a thousand feet,” whose dismembered body was the origin of all creation in the universe.

   C. This story illustrates how sacrifice became the method of renewing creation. But the powers responsible for the well-being of life often needed human assistance—priests.

   D. Ritual dismemberment as the basis for creation also implies a relationship between the ritual and the world beyond it. By manipulating certain aspects of the ritual, the priests themselves were controlling aspects of life—making them tantamount to gods. The technical term for this belief is sympathetic magic.

   E. Finally, the myth of Purusha allows us to understand the caste system. The stratification of priests, producers, warriors, and servants was intended by the gods, a fundamental element in the nature of reality. To challenge the system would be akin to challenging the gods, and the consequences would be dire.

II. The Aryans performed many different rituals and for many different reasons, but the most important may have been the shrauta rites, particularly the fire sacrifice.

   A. Shrauta rituals were more elaborate than others and were performed for different occasions, but ordinarily, they were thought to influence worldly gains, such as breeding more and better cattle, producing “manly” sons, or promoting health and longevity.

   B. Only members of the Brahmin, or priestly, caste could conduct these rituals, because only they had the skill to do so. Setting up and performing the sacrifice might take several days or weeks.

   C. Under Brahmin supervision, workers created a sacred space using precise measurements. Earthen altars contained sacred fires and corresponded to Earth, mid-space, and heaven.

   D. The gods were invited to attend, and participants drank soma and sacrificed animals, which they cooked and offered to the gods and human participants.

   E. The most important aspect of the ritual, however, was the singing of prayers and hymns, using verses from the Vedas, by Brahmin priests. The sacred words had to be correctly uttered or the ritual might be ineffective, perhaps even dangerous.

   F. In the early Vedic period, the Aryans believed that the sacrifices persuaded the gods to act on behalf of the one making the sacrifice. Over time, however, the ritual itself was the transformat ive agent. By manipulating the objects of the sacrifice, and especially by uttering powerful words, the Brahmins came to believe that they themselves were controlling the cosmic powers.
Eventually, uttering sacred words during rituals became akin to tapping into the creative power of the sacrifice. The priests regarded themselves as the custodians of this power, called *Brahman*, or “that which makes great.”

III. Following the Vedic period (1500–800 B.C.E.), the period of *classical Hinduism* marks the time when the complex traditions of Hinduism began to take shape, coinciding with the advent of the Axial Age in India. During this transitional time, significant changes took place.

A. Despite the rise of classical Hinduism, Vedic traditions were retained. Older Vedic notions and practices were kept intact and, to some extent, reinterpreted. In addition, a set of new ideas and concerns was added to the mix, resulting in what we call Hinduism.

B. But changes did occur, and the most important was the expansion of the Indo-Aryans into the Gangetic plain of northeastern India around 1000 B.C.E., sometimes called the “second urbanization” of India. The Aryans eventually gave up the nomadic life, settling in towns and becoming farmers.

C. These basic sociological changes coordinated with certain developments in Indo-Aryan religion, such as growing doubts about the value of ritual.
   1. The middle castes may have resented the power of the Brahmins and their monopoly on ritual performance.
   2. But perhaps even more important was an emerging sense that rituals were not all that worthwhile.

D. Further, a collection of writings—the *Upanishads*—from this period began to reevaluate Vedic practices. One story illustrates a dialogue between a young Brahmin, Nachiketas, and Yama, the King of Death.
   1. Through an interesting set of circumstances, Nachiketas is sent to the underworld, where Yama grants him three wishes.
   2. For his third wish, Nachiketas asks Yama to explain what happens when a person dies, but Yama is reluctant to answer.
   3. As an alternative to answering the question, Yama offers Nachiketas wealth and longevity on Earth, precisely what the Vedic rituals were intended to secure and what the Indo-Aryans may have considered the highest goods of life. Nachiketas refuses these gifts in favor of his desire to know about the afterlife.

E. The story of Nachiketas at the dawn of the Axial Age signifies an important shift among some practitioners of Indian religion: Earthly riches now count for little. It wasn’t that practitioners believed the old rituals didn’t work but that what the rituals provided was ultimately unimportant.

F. Finally, for the first time in early Indian literature, expressions of anxiety about death appear. In earlier passages from the Rig Veda, there is no agreement about the ultimate fate of human beings and no sense that the Indo-Aryans were even concerned about the afterlife. The stage is now set for change.

**Essential Reading:**

**Supplementary Reading:**
Mascaró, *The Upanishads*, “Katha Upanishad.”

**Questions to Consider:**
1. How did the concept and practice of ritual evolve among the Aryans?
2. What is the significance of the story of Nachiketas and his encounter with Yama?
Lecture Seven
Death and Rebirth

Scope: A key element in the evolution of Hinduism was the widespread acceptance of the concept of samsara, the belief that beings endure a beginningless series of births, deaths, and rebirths, governed by the moral principle known as karma. This lecture explores the development of these major concepts and the novel problems they presented to Indian religion and philosophy. Once these ideas were accepted, virtually every school of philosophy or sect of religion that arose in India’s history—including Buddhism and Jainism—took samsara as the fundamental predicament of existence, and each in its own way sought to address this problem. This new religious problematic signaled India’s entrance into the Axial Age.

Outline

I. Between 800–600 B.C.E., Indian religious life began to change dramatically. The old Vedic ritual system, which had dominated Aryan religion for centuries, came under scrutiny, and material earthly riches became less important than spiritual gains.
   A. As people became more prosperous, sages began to wonder if there were more to life—if human existence could transcend the acquisition of material success.
   B. There was an increasing concern with death and the ultimate fate of individuals, a departure from the Vedic focus on the complete enjoyment of earthly life.
   C. For certain groups of Aryans, probably Brahmins and others acquainted with the Vedas, the question of death and afterlife was a matter of much discussion and speculation, though opinions were diverse and inconsistent.
   D. Doubts began to arise about the Vedic picture of the afterlife, in which one enjoyed a pleasant and permanent existence among the gods and ancestors. Although this was not a universal Aryan view, many believed it and thought that performing the appropriate rituals was the way to secure it.

II. At the end of the Vedic era and the start of the Axial Age, the fear arose that one might initially reach heaven only to lose it again through death. The word redeath now entered the religious lexicon, implying that one died, ascended to heaven for a time, then died again, dissolving into the elements of the natural world.
   A. The notion of redeath was probably an intermediate step toward the concept of reincarnation, or transmigration of the soul, where one endures a continual series of births, deaths, and rebirths.
   B. No one is sure how belief in reincarnation appeared and became widely accepted throughout India, but it likely began in northern India among a small coterie of philosophers and holy persons at the start of the Axial Age.
   C. Not unique to India, the concept of reincarnation is found among some Native Americans, the Trobriand Islanders, and in West Africa. The idea was also popular with Pythagoras, Socrates, and other Axial Age philosophers of ancient Greece—descendants of the Indo-Europeans.
   D. Rebirth became the fundamental assumption of virtually all Indian religions and philosophies, including Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism. Though these religions interpret rebirth in different ways, the common term used to denote this concept is samsara, or “wandering.”

III. The ancient Indian Upanishads give us the first clear sense of reincarnation. But before we delve deeper into that topic, let’s look more closely at this classic text, because it is vital to understanding subsequent developments in Indian religion.
   A. The most important Upanishads were probably composed between 800–400 B.C.E., squarely in the Axial Age. The number of Upanishads varies, but most editions contain 13 or 14 “principal” Upanishads.
   B. By tradition, the Upanishads are considered part of the Vedas and, like the Vedas, are not systematic or always consistent. But the Upanishads represent a different view of the world from the earlier Vedic texts, such as the Rig Veda.
C. Whereas the earlier Vedas are centrally concerned with rituals and sacrifice, the Upanishads are much more contemplative. They seem to reflect the outlook of the solitary ascetic or seeker, rather than the world of the priest or religious official.

D. Despite the clear differences with earlier Vedic texts, the Upanishads are still regarded as śruti—revealed knowledge—sharing the same sacred status as the Vedas.

E. Like the Old and New Testaments, the Upanishads and the Vedas were written during different epochs. As with the New Testament, the Upanishads more clearly and completely describe revelations than the Vedas (or Old Testament); this explains the apparent inconsistencies and tensions between the two works. Thus, the Upanishads are often called Vedanta, which means the “completion of the Veda.”

F. Written earlier, the Vedas make no mention of the concept of transmigration, but by the time the Upanishads appear, the concept of rebirth has started to enjoy widespread acceptance. Yet the Upanishadic passages deal with rebirth through metaphor or analogy, rather than clearly spelling out what it is.

G. Some passages imply that reincarnation is driven by one’s desire to be reborn. Other views hypothesize that cremation fires convert corpses into smoke, which carries the dead to heaven; there, they become food for the gods, before returning to Earth through a series of natural events and being reborn in male semen.

IV. As the Axial Age progresses and the Upanishads develop further, the details of reincarnation are refined. One of the most important of these developments is the concept of karma. Whereas the idea of rebirth is not exclusive to India, the belief that one’s future incarnation depends on how one behaves in this life is a distinctive Indian contribution.

A. In older Vedic times, karma referred to ritual action that priests performed to make a sacrifice effective. But in the development of classical Hinduism, karma came to include the idea of moral action. Like Zoroaster’s beliefs, the Upanishads make one’s moral behavior the decisive element in human destiny.

B. Karma is a theory that states that the events in one’s life—good or bad—are neither chance occurrences nor foreordained by realities outside of oneself. Rather, the concept refers to one’s actions and their consequences.

C. Karma does not separate action from consequences; the effects of one’s acts will eventually return to the actor in what is known as the fruiting of karma.

D. Karma is inevitable, always returning to the agent who created it, no matter how long it takes, even more than one lifetime.

E. Karma pertains not only to physical acts but to thoughts and words, indicating a growing focus during this time on the interiority of the spiritual life, a characteristic of Axial transformations throughout the world.

F. Karma can be good or evil, positive or negative. In essence, by performing good actions, one produces positive karma; wicked or irresponsible actions create negative karma.

G. Karma is a principle of absolute justice, a process that occurs ineluctably and impersonally, with no god or divine being meting out justice. According to Hinduism, even the gods themselves are subject to karma.

Essential Reading:
Sharma, Classical Hindu Thought, chapters 11–13.

Supplementary Reading:
Obeyesekere, Imagining Karma, chapter 1.

Questions to Consider:
1. The idea of samsara may have developed independently of the concept of karma. Is it possible to believe in karma without holding to the notion of rebirth?
2. Does it take more faith to believe in reincarnation than to believe in the annihilation of the self at death or in the resurrection of the dead?
3. What would it take to persuade you to accept the principle of karma?
Lecture Eight
The Quest for Liberation

Scope: India may be the most intensely religious place on Earth, and nowhere is that intensity more evident than in the Axial Age movement that led Indian men and women by the hundreds to renounce the material world and their lives in society to seek the final liberation from samsaric existence. Virtually constituting a fifth caste, ascetics, wandering hermits, teachers, yogis, and holy persons of every stripe left the ordinary life in search of the knowledge that would bring them eternal repose from the endless wheel of rebirth. The search for this knowledge took a wide variety of forms and expressions, giving rise to some of the characteristic religious practices often associated with Hinduism. The historical roots of Buddhism and Jainism can also be traced back to this movement.

Outline

I. The ideas of rebirth and karma may have arisen independently of each other, but if so, they came to be inextricably linked in the Indian imagination during the Axial Age, spawning a new attitude toward life and the world. Karma meant that one’s current condition was shaped by the deeds one had performed in the past, creating a level of hierarchy in the present.
   A. One might be reborn at any level on this hierarchy, ranging from plant life, to various levels of animal life, to the human realm (and its several castes), and then, to various levels of divinity.
   B. Too much bad karma could take one from human existence to that of a buzzard, for example. Good karma might enable an outcaste to be reborn as a Brahmin.
   C. To be reborn as a god or a Brahmin or, in some senses, simply as a human being was extremely rare and required a great deal of karmic merit.
   D. What made rebirth as a human so precious was that humans could positively affect their future existence. Animals, in contrast, weren’t capable of generating much karma, which meant that they couldn’t greatly affect their rebirths. Humans, however, had almost limitless opportunities to act morally, that is, to produce karmically relevant deeds.

II. In the pre-Axial era, the Indo-Aryans weren’t obsessively concerned about death. But that perspective changed significantly when the concept of samsara, or multiple rebirths, became adopted. One of the facets of rebirth is that samsara is not a desirable situation.
   A. Most people who believed in reincarnation didn’t want to be reborn because even the best possible life is fraught with suffering, pain, and grief and eventually ends in death.
   B. It may take a million more lifetimes, but individuals would eventually realize the futility of samsaric existence. In the end, one must seek the ultimate aim of life: liberation from samsara altogether.
   C. The Hindus call this liberation moksha, complete release—the end of reincarnation.
   D. From the samsaric standpoint, endless lifetimes and the prospect of infinitely more caused Indians in the Axial Age to reconsider the value of the material world

III. As the idea of samsara spread, it spurred individuals to leave their families and jobs to seek a way to escape rebirth. This mass movement included men and women of all ages and castes but especially attracted those from the upper and middle castes.
   A. It was during this period (800–400 B.C.E.) that Aryan culture became settled in towns. Farming and commerce flourished, and more people enjoyed material prosperity during a time of economic, social, and religious activity.
   B. Traditional practices and beliefs were no longer taken for granted. The power of the Brahmin priests was called into question, and many people became dissatisfied with the shape of the new culture.
   C. There was also a yearning for high adventure, for the quest of the perfect life that few dared to try. Those who joined the homeless and ascetic life saw in renunciation their only hope for freedom and fulfillment.
   D. Sages believed that by perfecting the spiritual life, the samsaric realm might be conquered to achieve even greater bliss.
E. Many of these *samanas*, as they were called, lived alone in caves or forests; some lived with their families in ascetic communities; some wandered from village to village carrying only a change of clothes and a bowl used to beg for food.

F. So large and so familiar was this countercultural movement that the *samanas* were virtually regarded as a fifth caste, alongside priests, warriors, producers, and servants. Others sought out these ascetics for advice and lessons for living.

G. The relationship between ascetics and ordinary people became symbiotic. Non-ascetics gained good karma by giving to ascetics food, clothing, and shelter. Ascetics needed the support of ordinary folk to make their quest for *moksha* possible.

H. There was an intensely experimental quality to this period in Indian religious history. *Samanas* wandered from place to place seeking various gurus, trying different disciplines, and adopting diverse doctrines. Meditation, hatha yoga, and countless varieties of self-denial and self-mortification arose during this time.

I. Teachers competed for the allegiance of students and lay followers. Debates were held, conversations became heated, and rivalries were common. The intensity and energy of these competitions point to the profound importance and urgency of the quest.

IV. Though their lifestyles and beliefs varied widely, ascetics were united in their quest for relief from *samsara* and the belief that freedom lay in acquiring knowledge.

A. Knowledge had always played an important role in Vedic religion. But in the Axial Age, the quest for knowledge was urged on by the desire to know the deep reality that was the foundation for the whole of life.

B. The quest was for a knowledge that was comprehensive and fundamental. It was no longer enough to know the correct words to chant and rituals to perform. *Samanas* wanted to understand the deepest principles of reality.

C. The trend to view the world, not as collection of unrelated objects and beings, but as an integrated totality that could be understood by knowing its fundamental basis was so pervasive that this effort is seen as one of the salient characteristics of the Axial Age.

D. The sages searched for the key to the basic forces in the cosmos, hoping to reduce them to a singular principle, thus affording genuine freedom and fulfillment.

E. This knowledge was necessarily extraordinary and could only be gained by rigorous methods of asceticism and introspection, not transmitted through lectures or read from books.

F. Many of these ascetic seekers claimed to have found the way to final liberation, the answer to life’s deepest questions, the knowledge of the secrets of the universe itself.

Essential Reading:
Sharma, *Classical Hindu Thought*, chapters 14–16.

Supplementary Reading:

Questions to Consider:
1. What was the fundamental force in motivating people to become ascetics during the Axial Age?
2. What are the chief differences in the quest for knowledge between early Indo-Aryans and the sages of the Axial Age?
Lecture Nine
The Vedantic Solution

Scope: For many ascetics, the quest for liberation focused on discovering the knowledge of ultimate reality and the self. The results of their search are disclosed in the ancient collection of texts known as the Upanishads. Recorded in these texts are the speculations of generations of Axial Age sages. The general viewpoint of the Upanishads is that the soul is invisible and immortal, never created and never destroyed, and separate from both the body and the mind. Eventually, the Upanishads reaches the conclusion that the soul is identical with Brahman, the deepest reality, far beyond the reach of concepts, words, or any other product of the human mind. Atman and Brahman are simply different words for the same reality. Maya, or illusion, leads us to act as if individuality were real, but in fact, there is only one reality, and that is atman-Brahman. To realize the Absolute thus entails penetrating maya’s veil and acknowledging the identity of the self and ultimate reality.

Outline

I. The Upanishads were the first texts to offer a solution to the problem of samsara through Vedanta, a principal branch of Hindu philosophy. In seeking to unlock the deepest mysteries of existence, end the samsaric cycle, and bring about utter bliss, sages sought two particular bits of knowledge. One was the nature of the self and the discovery of what lies deep within the individual as his or her essence. We focus first on this essence.
   A. The vast majority of religions and philosophies of the last 3,000 years have asserted that the human essence is something more than our material bodies. Religion gives various names to this essence, such as self, spirit, mind, heart, and soul.
   B. The Sanskrit word for “soul” is atman, an ancient Vedic term that was reinterpreted in the Axial Age.
   C. In the early Vedas, the atman was closely associated with breath. By the time the Upanishads had begun to be composed, however, the breath was seen as too physical, too closely associated with the body.
   D. The sages of the Upanishads sought to define the soul as something that transcended the body and survived death, in other words, an immortal substance.
   E. Some authors suggested that the mind or consciousness was the soul. But almost all of the Upanishadic sages were reluctant to agree because of the mind’s capriciousness and unsettled nature.
   F. Some sages believed that what is beyond the senses and the mind itself could not be sensed or thought about. From this insight, the Upanishads derived the unique quality of the soul—that it must be beyond comprehension.
   G. Because the soul transmigrated from body to body through rebirth, the atman must also be immortal. It is not created; it simply always has been.
   H. Upanishadic thinkers didn’t all agree on the specific details of the human self, but they all subscribed to a general understanding that distinguished a higher self from a lower self.
      1. The lower—phenomenal—self comprised the body, the senses, and the mind. These aspects are all transitory and mortal.
      2. The higher self—atman—was distinguishable from these other elements by virtue of its eternal and spiritual nature. Confusing the higher with the lower self is what brings anguish to the human condition.

II. Just as Indian thinkers sought to understand the nature of the self, they also wanted to comprehend the ultimate reality, the fundamental power or principle supporting all there is, which would also free them from samsara.
   A. Like the quest for the soul, the sages’ pursuit of ultimate reality was founded on an idea from the old Vedas, rooted in the Brahmans’ mysterious power hidden within ritual—Brahman.
   B. By the Axial Age, Brahman had come to mean more than the power of ritual; it now referred to ultimate reality itself, which was a logical development in Indo-Aryan religion.
      1. The ritual and its sacred words had always been understood to correspond to greater cosmological and moral realities beyond the simple ceremony itself.
2. The story of the sacrifice of Purusha suggested that society, various elements of the world, ritual practices, and the Sanskrit language itself were all intrinsically and mystically connected to one another. Seeking the deeper meaning to the nature of existence by understanding Brahman was a natural outcome of this line of thinking.

C. Sages didn’t agree about the exact nature of Brahman, but they did agree that Brahman is one undifferentiated unity with no parts or divisions.

D. Brahman is said to permeate all things but cannot be perceived. It embraces good and evil yet transcends both. Paradoxically, it encompasses the whole of reality yet surpasses it.
   1. However, Brahman was not the same as god, a supreme being. More aptly, it was described as the Absolute or being itself. These words obviously do not tell us much or give us concrete images with which to conceive of Brahman, but that is precisely the point.
   2. Brahman thus transcends all human categories and images; Hindu theologians defined Brahman as nirguna, “without qualities.”

E. Gradually, the Upanishadic sages came to realize that Brahman was ultimately unknowable, at least in the conventional sense. Brahman eluded conception and perception, and thus, these faculties were ineffective in discovering the absolute reality.

III. As the sages of the Upanishads continued their quest of the human essence and ultimate reality—the mystical—an epiphany emerged in the later Upanishads. The concepts of atman and Brahman converged such that the soul was seen as identical to ultimate reality itself, one and the same, and to believe otherwise was the source of our misery.

A. In addition to their assertion that the soul carried a divine spark, the sages believed that atman and Brahman were two names for the same reality. The true self is ultimate reality; therefore, Brahman-atman is the only reality there is.

B. Despite the Upanishads’ exalted view of humanity, the soul still finds itself in an endless cycle of death and rebirth, seeking ever-new manifestations until it finds its rest in God.

C. The Upanishads address the seemingly contradictory claim that Brahman and atman are one and the same yet the soul still suffers from samsara, by stating that samsara is a consequence of our ignorance and misunderstanding of reality.

D. Maya is the veil over reality that accounts for our ignorance, causing us to perceive and conceive of the world as composed of many different things rather than the one reality it is.

E. Maya also deceives us into thinking of ourselves as separate entities, individuals separate from one another and from ultimate reality.

F. Maya causes us to forget who we truly are and prompts us to identify with our lower selves, thus trapping us in samsara until we fully recognize the truth about Brahman and atman.

G. People tend to think and act in self-centered ways, focusing on desires and deeds that perpetuate the illusion of our separateness from Brahman. This sense of separateness engenders fear and hatred, greed for material goods and power, and ultimately, fear of death.

Essential Reading:
Mascaró, The Upanishads.

Supplementary Reading:
Brereton, “The Upanishads,” in Approaches to the Asian Classics, de Bary and Bloom, eds.
Questions to Consider:
1. What qualities distinguish humans from other animals?
2. How might early Axial Age sages have concluded that the nature of reality and the nature of the soul (Brahman and atman) were one and the same? What are the theological benefits and liabilities of this identification?
3. How did Brahman come to be considered ultimate reality itself?
Lecture Ten
The One and the Many

Scope: The realization of the identity of atman and Brahman required more than mere conceptual knowledge. To attain the knowledge that liberated one from samsara, it was essential to gain a deep, existential understanding wrought by various spiritual practices, including meditation and asceticism. These techniques were intended to turn the adept within, enabling him or her to dissociate from the “lower” self and identify with atman. This reorientation of identity allowed individuals to relinquish the desires that kept them bound to samsara.

But the Vedantic solution was not for everyone. Many found it too demanding or too rarefied. Ordinary people preferred a spirituality in which ultimate reality could be conceptualized and to which they could relate. Through the theology of Saguna Brahman, it was possible for the ultimate reality to be partially depicted through images without lapsing into idolatry. The Bhagavad-Gita, written late in the Axial Age, advanced this view of personal theism and asserted its consistency with the path of the Vedanta.

Outline

I. Two fundamentally different theologies and practices emerged during the Indian Axial period. One was the belief that ultimate reality is incomprehensible to ordinary consciousness. To attain complete awareness of Brahman and atman, different methods evolved among different practitioners.
   A. The Vedantic way insisted that truth could be found only within one’s deepest self; to discover this was to discover the highest reality.
   B. One method of discovering the divine within is through the Hindu practice of meditation.
      1. By the Axial Age, meditation had eclipsed ritual as the chief discipline for samanas seeking moksha (a state of equanimity toward the world). Restraining the body and mind to achieve a state of inner stillness was most important.
      2. When the mind was focused in meditation, one could avoid distracting thoughts and sensations.
      3. Serious and regular meditation could bring about visions, ecstasy, intensified awareness, and transcendence of thoughts, which brought one to the higher self, or atman.
   C. Meditation complemented the samanas’ efforts to dissociate from the lower self. Some of the techniques were intended to close off avenues that led seekers astray, keeping them trapped in the net of maya.
   D. Some ascetics took vows of silence, because the knowledge of Brahman was beyond language.
   E. Some tried to overcome their attachments to the material world through poverty, fasting, and celibacy.
   F. Others took more extreme measures, such as “mortifying” the body, which might include standing immobile for long periods of time, piercing the flesh, lying on a bed of nails, or practicing self-flagellation.
   G. These varied practices were meant to train ascetics to give up all attachments that encourage a sense of individuality or separateness from the rest of reality.
   H. To realize the higher self and its identity with Brahman, one had to relinquish all selfish desires. Desire created karma, and karma bound one to samsara.

II. For the Upanishadic sages, the true self had nothing to desire or fear. And because one lacked for nothing and feared nothing, taking this path brought about a deep sense of serenity and indescribable joy, beyond all earthly pleasures.
   A. Breaking the cycle of samsara meant no rebirth, no clinging to life, no dread of dying, just a state of equanimity toward the world, called moksha.
   B. Those who worked toward moksha were jivanmuktas—living, liberated souls.
   C. Some texts refer to the experience of moksha as “merging with” or “returning to” Brahman, but those images mislead because the soul does not need to unite with Brahman if it already is Brahman.
   D. Another paradox is that the jivanmukta must strive to reach liberation, but effort is not what accomplishes unity with Brahman. Moksha is less an achievement than it is a simple understanding of truth.
III. The Upanishads blended tantalizing and provocative ideas with just enough uncertainty to inspire successive generations to continue reinterpreting their essential features. Here, we uncover more philosophical problems of Vedanta.

A. One question to be explored is that if Brahman-atman is the only reality there is, why does the illusion of maya exist and how is it created?
B. Another logical problem arises: If there are no individuals, then there are no souls in the plural. But if there are no souls—only Brahman-atman—is transmigration real or is samsara itself an illusion?
C. Despite these questions, the Upanishads’ significance to the overall Hindu tradition was that they established key elements that provided Hinduism with its many characteristic features:
   1. The belief in the unity and the incomprehensibility of ultimate reality.
   2. The notions of samsara, karma, atman, and moksha.
   3. The sense that the world and ourselves are not really the way they appear.

IV. Despite its profound importance in the development of the Hindu tradition, the Vedantic perspective didn’t satisfy everyone’s religious sensibilities. As Hinduism evolved through the Axial period, new perspectives and practices were added to accommodate individual beliefs and tastes.

A. Hinduism became a family of religions without a creed or core of beliefs. It embraces differences rather than excluding them.
B. Hinduism recognized that people were at different stages in their spiritual lives, and the practices and beliefs of one person might not be suitable for another.
C. Many Indians found the Upanishads’ path of knowledge too demanding and unappealing to live.
D. Most Hindus preferred a more traditional piety focused on worshiping personal gods and goddesses, as opposed to the highly abstract Brahman.
E. The worship of personal deities continued unabated in the Axial Age and became even more popular near its end with the composition of the Bhagavad-Gita, perhaps the most frequently read Hindu scripture.

V. In addition to the belief that ultimate reality is incomprehensible to ordinary consciousness, a second theistic view arose during the Indian Axial period. Here, we see the divine represented by symbols and images, allowing devotees to draw closer to the divine.

A. To incorporate the vast numbers of venerated gods and goddesses, Hinduism refined the theology of Brahman, providing a way for both the devotees of gods and the seekers of Brahman to understand that they were venerating the same ultimate reality.
B. Though the Upanishads clearly emphasized the incomprehensibility of Brahman (nirguna, or “without qualities”), later thinkers offered the idea of a partially knowable Brahman, called Saguna Brahman—or “one with qualities.”
C. The many gods and goddesses of popular piety were now many manifestations of the one inconceivable reality, each a conduit to the ultimate reality.

VI. The Saguna Brahman acknowledges the individual need for a concrete focus, an image toward which each can orient his or her devotion, direct prayers, and grasp the nature of the ultimate reality. Throughout their history, Hindus have fashioned physical representations of their gods and goddesses to serve as centers of faith.

A. Hindu images can be anthropomorphic, appearing humanlike. To imagine ultimate reality as similar to us allows devotees to feel close to the highest reality.
B. Hindu images can also be non-anthropomorphic, taking the form of stones, trees, rivers, and celestial bodies.
C. The danger in personalizing the divine, however, is making it seem too human until it becomes unworthy of devotion. To avoid this danger, Hindu images incorporate non-human elements, such as half-human/half-animal features. These remind devotees that gods and goddesses are not like us.
D. When an icon is first handcrafted, elaborate rituals are sometimes performed to invite the god or goddess that the image represents to inhabit the icon. The consecrated image is treated as if it were alive; it is bathed, clothed, decorated, and offered food.
E. At specific times during the day, worshipers are offered a special viewing—darśan—of the divine image. Seeing the god or goddess and being seen by it is vastly important to Hindus.

F. Ordinarily, the incarnation of the god or goddess is only temporary, and the physical image is destroyed to remind devotees that the image itself is not the divine.

G. Even though the Hindu pantheon is immense—330 million gods and goddesses—individual Hindus do not worship them all. Each devotee has an īstā-devatā, a personal deity of choice.

H. Some consider the religious use of images idol worship, but even religions that refer to the divine as “father” or “king” are, in essence, giving form to that which is ultimately formless. Unless one is absolutely silent about ultimate reality, it is not possible to avoid human-made images and concepts, whether physical or linguistic.

I. The idea of Nirguna Brahman, therefore, reminds devotees that the ultimate reality always transcends any image.

VII. The best resource for understanding the worship of Hindu gods is probably the Bhagavad-Gita, the popular scripture written at the end of the Axial Age.

A. Primarily a dialogue between the warrior Arjuna and the god Krishna, the Gita is a taste of Hinduism’s many practices and beliefs, including Vedic rituals, karma and morality, meditation and yoga, and devotion to the gods. One of its central points is that all these disciplines are spiritually beneficial.

B. The Gita also suggests that devotion to god is the best practice of all. In it, Krishna encourages Arjuna to focus his mind, will, and heart on god and to let go of all else in order to find liberation from samsara.

C. All that matters is to do all things with faith in and dedication to god. The Gita says that faith can be so potent that it doesn’t matter if one is devoted to the god Krishna by name. What matters is not the object of faith but its quality and sincerity.

Essential Reading:
Sharma, Classical Hindu Thought, chapters 1 and 3.

Supplementary Reading:
Huyler, Meeting God, chapters 1–2.

Questions to Consider:
1. The Western theistic traditions have generally resisted and often condemned physical images of the divine. The Second Commandment of the Hebrew Bible forbids the making of “graven images” (Exodus 20:4). Nonetheless, these same traditions are full of linguistic images and metaphors for god. Are there good reasons to prefer linguistic images over physical ones for understanding divine reality?

2. In what ways do monotheistic traditions tend toward polytheism? How might monotheism and polytheism be problematic categories?

3. What is the main difference between Saguna Brahman and Nirguna Brahman, and how does that affect one’s pursuit of the divine?
Lecture Eleven
The Life of Siddhattha Gotama

Scope: Among the many seekers of liberation in the South Asian Axial Age was a man whose given name was Siddhattha Gotama. Prompted by a shocking encounter with sickness, old age, and death, Gotama became one of the thousands of renouncers in northeastern India seeking relief from the endless suffering of samsara. With attention to both the historically verifiable and the mythic aspects of his biography, this lecture traces Gotama’s life from his birth into privileged circumstances through his practice of extreme asceticism and, finally, to his determination to seek liberation by the Middle Way.

Outline

I. Siddhattha Gotama was among the thousands of intrepid individuals who sought to end samsara in northeastern India during the Axial Age, the figure who eventually became known as the Buddha. We begin with some accepted historical knowledge about his early life, distinguishing the historical Buddha from later embellishments of his life.
   A. The earliest Buddhist scriptures existed in oral tradition and were not written down until 300–400 years after his death. As the tradition developed and spread, new scriptures were added, and views of the Buddha’s life and significance also changed.
   B. The Pali Canon, the Buddhist texts closest in time to his life, is the most reliable source for constructing his life. For our purposes, the most important part of the canon is the set of writings called the Suttas, or discourses, which the Buddhist tradition considers the direct words of the Buddha himself.
   C. The Pali Suttas say little about the Buddha’s life before his awakening; thus, we can construct only an outline of his life using these scriptures.
   D. We know that there was an individual named Gotama who was born into a privileged life in the area near the current border between India and Nepal. Though there is debate on the actual dates, according to tradition, he was born in 563 B.C.E., well within the Axial Age. (The majority of scholars today place his date of birth near 490 B.C.E.)
   E. Historical scholarship tells us that Gotama underwent a profound, life-changing experience that eventually led him to new insights into the human condition and to a new spiritual movement. He taught his ideas to a growing body of followers throughout northeastern India during the period of great social change and religious ferment.
   F. Following his awakening, the Buddha’s teaching ministry lasted for several decades until he died. Tradition says that he lived until the age of 80.

II. Little else can be said about the historical Buddha with much certainty, but there are several versions of his early life and how he came to claim the title the Buddha. Most of them are variations on a basic storyline, as follows.
   A. Though modern historiography places doubt on this royal lineage, Siddhattha was born to the king and queen of the Sakyan peoples. Although it is true that Siddhattha’s family was privileged, it is unlikely that his parents were monarchs, because the small states of this area were tribal republics ruled by councils of elders.
   B. One late addition to the narrative suggests that Siddhattha was conceived by his mother, Queen Maya, during a dream in which she was impregnated by a god-like King Elephant, a divinely ordained and supernaturally accomplished conception.
      1. Ten months later, the child Siddhattha was born, while his mother was on a journey to the home of her parents.
      2. He sprung from his mother’s side while she stood upright, holding the branch of a tree.
      3. Immediately, the newborn took seven steps and confidently declared that he was born for the good of the world and this would be his last birth in the samsaric realm.
   C. Other versions of Siddhattha’s birth include his father’s consultation with court astrologers, who agreed that the child would become a cakravartin, a “wheel-turner,” one whose existence would decisively change
the lives of others. Whether or not he would become a great monarch or forsake the world and follow the path of the spiritual pioneer was unclear to the astrologers.

D. Determined that his son become a monarch like himself, Siddhattha’s father was advised to shield his son from unpleasantness and raise him in a wholly delightful environment, with the best food, the best clothes, and the best entertainment. He couldn’t be exposed to the brutal realities of existence until he firmly committed himself to being king.

E. Some say Siddhattha wasn’t allowed to leave the palace; others suggest that he made occasional excursions, but only after his father had arranged to have Siddhattha’s route purged of potentially upsetting sights. Beggars, elderly people, and the sick and disabled were kept off the streets.

F. At 16, Siddhattha married his beautiful cousin Yashodhara, who eventually gave birth to his son. Everything seemed right with the world. And so it was, for Siddhattha’s first 29 years.

G. Whether historical or not, the story of Siddhattha’s early life suggests that without even working for it, he already had everything other people spend their lives pursuing: riches, power, celebrity, and every imaginable creature comfort.

III. Though young Siddhattha epitomized the fulfillment of humanity’s greatest dreams, having it all was still not enough. At the age of 29, he realized this insight after coming face-to-face with suffering for the first time.

A. Siddhattha encountered a person in the throes of illness, another ravaged by age, and a corpse en route to the charnel ground. Up until that moment, he had never witnessed or heard of any of these things.

B. Siddhattha was distressed to learn about the realities of life and to discover that all beings were subject to old age, illness, and death.

C. At the same time, he also encountered a wandering samana who had renounced everything but nonetheless appeared happy in the midst of a suffering world.

D. Distraught by the first three spectacles and intrigued by the fourth, Siddhattha decided to give up the comforts of the privileged life to seek a way to soothe his now troubled mind. The Buddhist traditions refer to this episode as the “Four Sights.”

E. Siddhattha left his family and home forever, taking up the life of a samana.

F. Some elements of this story seem preposterous; for example, could he really have been sheltered from life’s harsh realities or been oblivious to suffering, old age, and death for nearly 30 years?

1. It’s possible that Siddhattha’s real epiphany, significantly occurring at the age when the lives of Jesus, Zoroaster, Ezekiel, Mahavira, and Guru Nanak also took dramatic turns, came when he recognized that he himself was subject to the realities of life.

2. At this critical moment, Siddhattha’s illusion was shattered, and there was simply no returning to a life that ignored suffering and death.

G. Rather than serenity, Siddhattha’s first epiphany brought profound agitation. It meant dropping the pretense of uniqueness and accepting wholeheartedly one’s common share with everyone else.

IV. Siddhattha traveled throughout the cities of the Ganges basin, a novice samana in search of ascetics who could teach him the disciplines that would end his samsara.

A. His first teacher was a renowned master of yogic meditation. After mastering this doctrine and reaching a state of “nothingness,” however, Siddhattha found that it did not bring him freedom.

B. Under the tutelage of his second instructor, Siddhattha was able to reach the level of “neither perception nor non-perception,” but this, too, failed to provide the wisdom he sought.

C. These practices brought extraordinary—but only temporary—experiences. Siddhattha wanted to attain permanent freedom from suffering and samsara. He continued to find value in meditation, but he rejected his teachers’ claims that their states of meditation were the highest realization of the spiritual life.

D. Siddhattha then practiced self-mortification, depriving himself of food until he became emaciated. He concluded that far from terminating suffering, this practice only intensified it. Surely, there had to be some other way to conquer samsara.
Essential Reading:

Supplementary Reading:

Questions to Consider:
1. Why might the myth of Siddhattha’s life be just as important as factual information in understanding what came to be known as Buddhism?
2. What is significant about the age at which Siddhattha had his first epiphany?
Lecture Twelve

“I Am Awake”

Scope: As a consequence of a profound enlightenment experience at age 35, Siddhattha Gotama claims the title the Buddha, the “Awakened One.” Based on the insights of this experience, the Buddha inaugurated a 45-year ministry of teaching to renouncers and householders alike. In this and the next two lectures, we explore the substance of his Dhamma, or teaching, as expressed principally through the Four Noble Truths. The first of these principles concerns the nature of suffering. The Buddha’s understanding of suffering was deep and subtle and, hence, requires careful explanation lest his entire teaching, which is based on this idea, be misunderstood. This lecture looks at how the Buddha could see suffering as a pervasive and insidious mark of all existence, even though life manifests moments of pleasure and happiness.

Outline

I. Siddhattha Gotama fervently practiced the contemplative and ascetic arts for six years after renouncing his former privileged lifestyle. Yet he realized that neither pleasure and delight nor self-denial and mortification would bring him the peace he sought. Setting a course between the two extremes, he devised an approach called the Middle Way.

A. Once he decided to find this Middle Way, Siddhattha began caring for his ravaged body; physical well-being would be necessary to pursue liberation.

B. He meditated beneath a tree near the village of Gaya, recalling how he had once paid close attention to his breath, which had brought him a heightened sense of awareness and a pervasive calmness.

C. This type of meditation differed from the practices of his former teachers because it emphasized mindfulness, making one attentive to what was happening in the mind, body, and external environment without judgment. As a result of mindful meditation, the Buddha believed that the mind would become more receptive to the true nature of the world and the self.

D. According to Buddhist tradition, Siddhattha sat beneath a huge tree—later known as the Bodhi, or “wisdom,” tree—and vowed not to leave until he had realized the liberating knowledge that he had sought for so many years.

E. His period of contemplation took him deeper than he had ever gone before. But far more important were the deeper insights into the human condition that he attained, the liberating knowledge he sought.

F. As he advanced toward the goal, he was approached by Mara, the demonic tempter, who tried to lure Siddhattha away by offering him the pleasures of the world and taunting him with threats and doubts.

G. Finally, Siddhattha won the understanding that liberated and conquered samsara. He also realized that he would never be reborn into this world again. At this moment, he earned the title the Buddha, or the “Awakened One.”

II. For 49 days, the Buddha enjoyed his liberation and decided to teach his insights to others. He traveled the region talking to ascetics and anyone who would listen.

A. He first thought of his two teachers but discovered that they had died. Next, he approached his former disciples, five ascetics who had chided him earlier for giving up the ascetic path. When they saw their former mentor, they were astounded by his demeanor and recognized that something profoundly significant had happened to him.

B. The Buddha talked about his insights, laying out what he called the Four Noble Truths. The talk is sometimes called the Buddha’s “First Discourse” and “Turning the Wheel of Dhamma.” The Pali word Dhamma might be translated simply as “the truth that leads to liberation.”

C. The Four Noble Truths are considered the essence of Buddhism. Most of the Buddha’s subsequent teachings might be thought of as explanations and amplifications of these basic points.

D. The Buddha never expected his teachings to be accepted on his authority and, in fact, discouraged such acceptance. He rejected many of the common reasons people find for accepting religious beliefs; instead,
he encouraged individuals to take responsibility for their own convictions. His teachings included the following caveats:

1. Do not accept anything simply because it is said to be revelation, or because it comes from sacred texts, or because it is traditional.
2. Do not accept hearsay, or anything on the grounds of pure logic, or because it seems rational.
3. Do not accept anything because you agree after reflecting on it, or because the teacher is competent, or simply because he is regarded as a teacher.

E. The Buddha did not mean, however, that one should accept viewpoints based only on gut feelings, or even if they agreed with one’s conscience or reasoning. He believed that reasoning was no more reliable than judgments based on texts or spoken by charismatic individuals.

1. According to the Buddha, a belief should be tested by its results when put into practice.
2. To guard against the possibility of bias or limitations in understanding, acceptable views should be checked against the experience of those who are wise.

III. In his discourse, the Buddha declares the first of his Noble Truths, setting out the primary basis for his worldview. The other three Noble Truths will be discussed in subsequent lectures.

A. The First Noble Truth is that life itself is suffering. All that we experience—birth, aging, illness, and death—is suffering, as are the presence of displeasing things and the absence of pleasing things. Not getting what one wants is also suffering.

B. The word suffering was translated from the Pali term dukkha, though scholars believe it does not effectively convey what the Buddha meant by dukkha.

C. There is “ordinary” dukkha, the suffering that accompanies injury, sickness, old age, and death. Then there is the dukkha of change, or suffering caused by loss or associated with unpleasantness.

D. The world is in constant flux, creating a state of impermanence, or anicca. Though impermanence doesn’t cause dukkha, one’s unwise or unskilled response to the world of change does.

E. When the Buddha referred to dukkha, he was describing the fundamental quality of the whole of existence, not merely saying that life had moments of tragedy and sorrow. He suggested that human existence is entangled in dukkha.

F. If dukkha is comprehensive and constant, it becomes clear that understanding dukkha is not just a problem of translation; it is also an experiential issue.

G. What makes dukkha a Noble Truth is that we do not fully appreciate the extent to which we suffer or feel the dissatisfaction of existence. Thus, individuals are challenged to discover the depth and breadth of dukkha through introspection and observation. The true depth of suffering can be seen only from the perspective of the enlightened mind.

H. Dukkha might also refer to disappointment, a pervasive feature of life.

1. Disappointment and dukkha are both the consequence of our own habits of mind. Disappointment is the result of reality not conforming to our expectations.
2. It is more truthful to say that our desires and expectations do not conform to reality, causing suffering. When the Buddha characterized dukkha as not getting what we want, he implicitly put the onus on us, not the thing we want or don’t want.

I. The Buddha also states that getting what we want causes disappointment; therefore, both the frustration of desire and the fulfillment of desire contribute to suffering.

J. The problem with achieving our desires is that doing so does not really satisfy us in the way we had hoped. We end up wanting more in order to attain the satisfaction we lack.

K. Desire itself has basic causes that urge us to crave things. In the Second Noble Truth, the Buddha explains the factors that lead us to desire in the first place.

Essential Reading:
Rahula, What the Buddha Taught, chapters 1–2.
Supplementary Reading:

Questions to Consider:
1. What were the qualities of the Buddha’s Middle Way?
2. What are the difficulties with translating the Pali term *dukkha* into English? In what ways might this problem reflect the obstacles an observer has in understanding another religion?
Timeline

B.C.E.
c. 3000–1500 .................................. Indus Valley culture (South Asia)
c. 2300–1200 ................................. Composition of the Rig Veda (Central and South Asia)
c. 1500–1000 .................................. Migration of Aryans into the Indus Valley (South Asia)
c. 1500–1045 ................................. Shang Dynasty (East Asia)
c. 1045–221 .................................. Zhou Dynasty (East Asia)
c. 1045–771 .................................. Western Zhou Dynasty (East Asia)
c. 1000 ............................................ Migration of Aryans into Gangetic plains (South Asia)
c. 1200 ............................................ Zoroaster (West Asia)
c. 1000? .......................................... Composition of the Gathas of the Avesta (West Asia)
c. 800–200 ...................................... Composition of the Upanishads (South Asia)
771–221 ........................................ Eastern Zhou (East Asia)
722–481 ........................................ Spring and Autumn Period (East Asia)
595–573 .......................................... Ministry of Ezekiel (West Asia)
586–536 .......................................... Babylonian Captivity of Judah (West Asia)
582–507 .......................................... Pythagoras of Samos (Greece)
c. 551–479 ...................................... Confucius (East Asia)
c. 540–468 ................................. Vardhamana Mahavira (South Asia) (tradition says he was born in 599)
535–475 .......................................... Heraclitus of Ephesus (Greece)
c. 490–410 ..................................... Siddhattha Gotama, the Buddha (South Asia) (tradition says he was born in 563)
475 or 403–221 ............................... Period of the Warring States (East Asia)
c. 470–390 ...................................... Mozi (East Asia)
470–399 ........................................ Socrates of Athens (Greece)
c. 427–347 ...................................... Plato (Greece)
c. 385–312 ...................................... Mencius (East Asia)
c. 384–322 ...................................... Aristotle (Greece)
369–286 ........................................ Zhuangzi (East Asia)
327–325 ................................. Campaign of Alexander the Great in India
c. 310–c. 219 ................................. Xunzi (East Asia)
273–232 ....................................... Reign of Ashoka (South Asia)
c. 250 ........................................ Composition of the Book of Qoheleth (Ecclesiastes)
221–206 .......................................... Qin Dynasty (East Asia)
206 B.C.E.–220 C.E. .......................... Han Dynasty (East Asia)
c. 200 B.C.E.–100 C.E. ........................ Composition of the Bhagavad-Gita (South Asia)
c. 200–100 ...................................... First Buddha images in Gandhāra (South Asia)
c. 167–164 ........................................ Final redaction of the Book of Daniel

C.E.

c. 150 .............................................. Pali Canon put in writing (South Asia)

570–632 ........................................ Muhammad (West Asia)

c. 788–820 ................................. Sankara (South Asia)

c. 1077–1157 ............................... Ramanuja (South Asia)

1469–1539 ............................. Guru Nanak Dev

1844–1900 ...................... Friedrich Nietzsche

1869–1948 ....................... Mohandas K. Gandhi

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Glossary

Scholars often use diacritical marks in transliterating some of the languages used in this course. Because one may occasionally encounter the diacritics, alternative spellings are given in parentheses to help avoid confusion. The Chinese terms have been transliterated according to the Pinyin system rather than the older Wade-Giles.

**Agam Sutras (Āgam Sutras):** The central Jain scriptures, believed by Jains to be the words of Vardhamana Mahavira as recalled by his chief disciple, Indrabhuti.

**ahimsa (ahimsā):** The practice of doing no harm to living beings, according to Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism.

**Ahriman:** The evil god in Zoroastrian theology; also known as Aeshma and Angra Mainyu.

**ahuras:** The Avestan word for the gods or spirits aligned with the principle of good.

**airyana vaējah (airyana vaējah):** “The land of the noble” in the ancient Iranian language; the name from which Iran is derived.

**Analects:** The collection of sayings and dialogues of Confucius, compiled (and at least partially composed) by his students after his death; known in Chinese as the Lunyu (“Conversations”). This text is the basis for what we know about Confucius’s life and teachings.

**Ananda:** The Buddha’s personal attendant, who memorized the Buddha’s discourses and recited them at the First Buddhist Council; his recollections became the Suttas of the Pali Canon.

**anatta:** The Pali term for Buddha’s denial of a permanent, substantial self or soul. Translated as “no-self” or “not-self”; known in Sanskrit as anatman, or “no-atman.”

**ancestor reverence:** Treating one’s forebears as living spirits whom one should honor, worship, and consult on important family decisions; an especially important practice throughout Chinese religious history.

**anekanta (anekānta):** “Many-sided”; the Jain idea that the world is composed of an infinite number of material and spiritual substances, each with an infinite number of qualities and manifestations. Because of this complexity of the universe, all claims to truth must be tentative.

**anicca:** Pali word for impermanence.

**arahant:** A living individual who has attained awakening in Buddhism.

**Ardhanari (Ardhanārī):** Iconic representation of the god as half Shiva, half Parvati; intended to symbolize the male/female, form/power aspects of the divine.

**ariya:** Noble.

**Arjuna:** The warrior whose ethical dilemma forms the basis of a wide-ranging dialogue with Lord Krishna in the Bhagavad-Gita.

**Aryans (Āryans):** The central Asian pastoral nomads who migrated into Iran and India prior to the Axial Age.

**Aryavarta (Āryavarta):** “The land of the noble”; the Indo-Aryan name for their homeland in northern India.

**ascetic:** One who practices forms of self-denial (for example, fasting, celibacy, abstinence from luxury and comforts) in order to attain higher spiritual goals.

**asha:** The Iranian principle of right and order; opposed to druž, the principle of disorder and chaos.

**ashavans:** Those who follow and revere asha.

**Ashoka (Āśoka), King:** Ruler of the Mauryan Empire in India (r. 273–232 B.C.E.); a Buddhist convert who was responsible for the spread of Buddhism throughout India and other parts of Asia.

**asuras:** Sanskrit term for a class of divinities opposed to the devas; usually demonic in character.

**atman (ātman):** The soul. Initially understood as the breath in the early Vedic era, the atman is later regarded by Hindus as immortal and transmigratory.
Avesta: The central scripture of Zoroastrianism. The most sacred sections of the Avesta are the Gathas, or Hymns of Zoroaster.

Avestan: The Indo-European language in which the Zoroastrian Avesta was originally written.

avijja (avījja): Pali word for ignorance or misknowing.

awakening: Traditional metaphor for the experience of realizing the highest spiritual wisdom. When Siddhattha Gotama completely understood the causal factors of dukkha and the way to nibbana while sitting under the Bodhi tree, he claimed to have had this experience; sometimes called enlightenment.

Axial Age: Term coined by philosopher Karl Jaspers to denote the era of exceptional religious and philosophical creativity between 800–200 B.C.E. that gave rise to the major world religions.

Babylonian Captivity: The deportation and exile of a large segment of the population of Judah to Babylon by King Nebuchadrezzar (586–536 B.C.E.); this event marks the start of the Jewish Diaspora; also known as the Exile.

Banaras (Banāras): The holiest city in India; situated on the Ganges River in the contemporary state of Uttar Pradesh. The Buddha gave his first discourse at the Deer Park near Banaras; also known as Varanasi and Kashi.

bao: Chinese word for the desire to repay kindness with a similar act of kindness.

Bhagavad-Gita (Bhagavad-Gītā): Much-beloved Hindu text recounting the dialogue of Lord Krishna and Arjuna before the war between the Kurus and the Pandavas.

bhikkhu/bhikkhuni: Buddhist monk/nun.

Bodhi tree: Buddhist term for the tree under which Siddhattha Gotama realized awakening and became the Buddha.

Brahman: The Absolute, ultimate reality. Originally, Brahman was the Vedic word for the power inherent in ritual; later, the term came to designate the highest reality beyond all conceptualization.

Brahmin (Brāhmin): The caste of priests and intellectuals.

Buddha: One who grasps the causes of suffering and puts an end to it. In the Theravada Buddhist tradition, the Buddha is a title reserved for one who realizes awakening on his or her own; those who see nibbana through the teaching of a Buddha are called arahants. Buddha literally means the “Awakened One.”

Buddhism: Religious tradition whose origins date to the ferment that initiated Jainism and classical Hinduism. Following the conversion of Emperor Ashoka, Buddhism became the dominant religion of India and remained so until the advent of Islam returned Hinduism to the ascendancy.

caste: Portuguese term to describe the stratification of Hindu society based on occupation and purity. Caste usually refers to the varna system, the fourfold classification of Brahmans, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras.

Celestial Masters: Early movement of the Daoist “church” whose followers sought to attain immortality through elixirs.

Charlie Chan: Character in American movies in the 1930s and 1940s who shaped popular Western impressions of Confucius.

cosmic maintenance: The pre-Axial function of religion in which the processes of the world are supported or controlled by human activity.

cosmogony: Creation story.

daeva (daēva): Avestan cognate of deva, a “shiny one”; considered by Zoroaster to be a class of malevolent divinities. This is the word from which devil derives.

Dao: The reality underlying and governing the universe; Chinese for “the way.”

Daodejing: The Chinese classic (jing) of the way (dao) and the power (de); the basis of philosophical Daoism.

Daojia: Philosophical Daoism; literally, the School of the Way.

daojiao: The Daoist “church.”; literally, the Teaching of the Way.
Darshana: To “take darshana” means to see and to be seen by the deity. Darshana is also the word for a philosophical system, such as Yoga or Vedanta.

Day of Judgment: The end of the world as we know it. According to Zoroaster, the Day of Judgment will entail the final triumph of good over evil; this concept also appears in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

de: Virtue or power.

Deer Park: The site of the Buddha’s first discourse; located in present-day Sarnath, near Banaras, India.

deva: Sanskrit term for god; literally, “shiny one.”

devī (devī): Sanskrit term for goddess.

Dhamma: The teaching of the Buddha.

dhārma: Sacred duty according to caste; the principle of cosmic order; “religion.” Dharma is the principle that succeeded the Vedic concept of rta.

di: Chinese term for Earth.

di: Shortened form of Shangdi, the early Chinese high god.

Digambaras: One of the two orders of monastics in Jainism; members of this order renounce even their clothes, inspiring their name, the “sky-clad.”

divination: The practice of communicating with the spirits through the interpretation of tangible elements.

dragon bones: Nickname for the inscribed cattle bones used for divination in the Shang Dynasty; so-called by modern Chinese pharmacies when the bones were sold as ingredients in medicines.

druj: Avestan term for the principle of disorder, evil, chaos; Sanskrit: druḥ.

drujvants: “Followers of the Lie”; those who, according to Zoroaster, aligned themselves with the principle of druji.

dukkha: Pali term usually translated as suffering, disappointment, and unsatisfactoriness.

Durga (Durgā): One of the manifestations of the goddess in Hinduism.

Dyaos, Dyaus-Pitr: Ancient names for the high god in the Avesta and Vedas, respectively; cognates of Zeus and Jupiter.

Eastern Zhou: See Zhou Dynasty.

Epistemology: The philosophical study of knowledge.

Equanimity: The attitude of calmness and serenity.

Eschaton: The end of time.

Ethicization: The interpretation of events or practices in ethical terms; one of the characteristic processes of Axial Age religions.

Evil, problem of: The dilemma posed by the belief in a god who is considered both all-good and all-powerful in a world in which evil exists; logically, according to the traditional formulation of the problem, if evil exists, then god must be either not all good or not all powerful.

Ezekiel: Prophet of ancient Judah.

Ficus religiosa: Scientific name for the Bodhi tree.

Filial piety: The practice of reverencing and honoring one’s parents; Chinese: xiao.

Five Aggregates of Being: According to the Buddha’s teaching, these are the ever-changing forces comprising what is conventionally called the self: matter, sensation, perception, mental formations, and consciousness.
**Five Precepts:** The vows taken by Buddhists to guide wholesome action. They include the promise to abstain from harming sentient beings, to abstain from false speech, to abstain from misusing sexuality, to abstain from taking what is not offered, and to abstain from taking intoxicating substances.

**Four Noble Truths:** The essence of the Buddha’s teaching as expressed in his first discourse following awakening. The truths are *dukkha* (suffering and disappointment), the cause of *dukkha*, the cessation of *dukkha*, and the Eightfold Path to *nibbana*.

**Four Sights:** The experience that prompted Siddhattha Gotama to renounce home life to seek an end to suffering. According to tradition, Gotama saw a sick person, an old person, a corpse, and a *samana* in an excursion outside the palace precincts.

**Frashokereti:** The “making glorious”; Zoroaster’s term for the eschatological battle in which the forces of good defeat the forces of evil once and for all, ushering in an everlasting reign of peace and harmony.

**Gandhara (Gandhāra):** The region of northwestern India and eastern Afghanistan where the first anthropomorphic Buddha images were produced some 500 years after the life of the Buddha.

**Gathas (Gāthās):** The “verses”; part of the oldest Avesta, the foundational scripture of Zoroaster’s religion. These verses are believed to have been actually composed by Zoroaster himself under moments of religious inspiration.

**Gaya (Bodh Gaya):** Northeastern India town, location of the Buddha’s awakening.

**ghosts:** In Chinese religion, the spirits of the unburied.

**Gotama, Siddhattha:** Given name of the Shakyan (Śākyan) noble who became the Buddha.

**guru:** Teacher.

**Han Dynasty:** The family who ruled China from 206 B.C.E.–220 C.E., one of the most prosperous and stable periods in Chinese history.

**Haoma:** See Soma.

**heptad:** “The seven”; the spirits or gods, including Ahura Mazda, seen by Zoroaster in his call to be a prophet.

**High Hara:** The holiest mountain on Earth, where souls would be judged on the fourth day following death, according to Zoroastrian theology.

**Hinduism:** The Western term for the Indian religions that regard the Vedas as the highest authority.

**householder:** The second stage of life for both men and women of caste. At the householder stage, Hindus marry, raise children, work, and contribute to the good of family and society.

**idolatry:** Confusing the ultimate reality with what is less than ultimate.

**Indo-Aryans (Indo-Āryans):** Modern designation for the Central Asian people who eventually settled in India in the second millennium B.C.E.

**Indo-European:** Modern term for the Central Asian ancestors of many of the inhabitants of India and Europe.

**Indo-Iranians:** Modern term for the Central Asian people who migrated southward from the steppes and eventually split, with some going to Iran (the Iranians or Irano-Aryans) and some to India (the Indo-Aryans).

**Indra:** The war god of the Aryans; the ascendant deity of the Rig Veda; the *deva* who also controlled the waters.

**Indus Valley culture:** One of the great cultures of the ancient world; flourished from c. 3000–c. 1500 B.C.E. in northwestern India along the Indus River system; also known as the Harappan (Harappān) civilization.

**“Inner Chapters”**: Part of the Zhuangzi, a text of early philosophical Daoism; possibly written by Zhuangzi himself.

**ista-devata (ista-devatā):** One’s personal deity of choice in Hinduism.

**Jainism:** Religious tradition whose origins date to the ferment that initiated Buddhism and classical Hinduism. Jainism and Buddhism are regarded by Hindus as heterodox philosophies because they deny Vedic authority.
Jambudvipa (Jambudvīpa): “The island of the rose-apple tree”; a term for the earthly realm used by Jains, Buddhists, and Hindus.

Jaspers, Karl: German philosopher (1883–1969); often associated with Existentialism; coined the term die Achsenzeit, or Axial Age, to designate the period from 800–200 B.C.E.

jīna: A spiritual victor in Jainism.

jīvanmukta: In Hinduism, a living, liberated soul.

jnāna (jñāna): Sanskrit word for knowledge; related to the Greek gnosis.

jnāna-marga: The path of liberation from samsara based on the quest for wisdom and the dissolution of illusion. The jnāna-marga usually requires ascetic practice and great discipline.

junzi: The gentleman or noble man in Confucianism; the most important ideal type for Confucius.

karma: Action and its consequences. In the Hindu view, karma is a principle of justice, ensuring that the effects of one’s actions return to the agent. Karma is what binds the soul to the cycle of endless existence and determines its station in future existences.

Kisagotami: A young woman who begs the Buddha to bring her dead son back to life; the Buddha instructs her to find a mustard seed from a home that has never been touched by death.

Krishna: One of the principal avatars or manifestations of the Hindu god Vishnu; Krishna instructs Arjuna on devotion to god in the Bhagavad-Gita.

Kshatriyas (Kśatriyas): The caste of warriors and administrators.

Kushinagara: Northeastern Indian village near the site of the Buddha’s parinibbana, or final liberation.

Laozi: The legendary founder of Daoism and the traditional author of the Daodejing, which is also known as the Laozi.

Legalism: The Chinese philosophical school opposed to Confucianism. Embraced by the Qin Dynasty, Legalism advocated a strict law-and-order approach to maintaining social stability.

li: Originally, the Chinese term for religious rituals and ceremonies. Confucius broadened the term to include everyday behavior and manners.

lingam: Representation of the phallus. Thousands of stone lingams were discovered in the excavations of the Indus Valley civilization and are presumed to be associated with rites of fertility. Today, the lingam and yoni (its vulvic counterpart) symbolize the god Shiva and his Shakti.

Magi: Term for the “wise men from the East” who visited Jesus as an infant; derived from magus, an Old Iranian word for priest.

Mahāvira (Mahāvīra): The “Great Hero”; a traditional title for Vardhamana (Vardhamāna), the 24th Tirthankara of Jainism.

Mahāyāna (Mahāyāna): Sanskrit for the “Great Vehicle”; a branch of Buddhism that developed in the early centuries of the Common Era that brought a new understanding of the Buddha and the nature of liberation.

manas: Vedic word for that which animates the body; translates as mind, heart, or life force.

Mandate of Heaven: The moral authority by which the ruler rules. The concept—believed to have been first articulated by the Dan, the Duke of Zhou—was used to justify the Zhou overthrow of the Shang Dynasty; Chinese: Tiānnìng.

mantra: A sound or phrase embodying sacred power.

Mara: The tempter in Buddhism; as Siddhattha Gotama approached awakening while sitting under the Bodhi tree, Mara attempted to thwart attainment of his goal.

māyā (māyā): Illusion; the veil over reality that prevents the unenlightened from seeing the world as it truly is. Maya causes us to see multiplicity where there is in reality only unity.
Maya, Queen: Wife of King Suddhodhana and mother of Siddhattha Gotama. Queen Maya died seven days after the birth of Siddhattha, who was then raised by Queen Prajapati, Maya’s sister.

Mazda: An ahura of early Iranian religion; according to Zoroaster, Mazda was the principal (and perhaps sole) benevolent deity, locked in combat with the Evil One until the end of time.

Middle Way: The course of life promoted by the Buddha, in which one avoids the extremes of indulgence and deprivation.

Mithra: One of the major gods of Indo-Iranian religion; initially associated with promise-keeping.

Mohism: School of Chinese philosophy developed by Mozi. In contrast to Confucianism, Mohism advocated universal love of humanity.

moksha (moksha): Release or liberation from the wheel of samsara. Pursued and conceptualized in a variety of ways, moksha is the ultimate goal of Hindus.

Mozi: Chinese philosopher who advocated “impartial caring” or “universal love” and criticized Confucius’s belief that one should love others in proportion to the benefit one receives from them.

Nachiketas: Young Brahmin in the Upanishads who engaged Yama, the King of the Underworld, in a dialogue about death.


nibbana (nibbāna): Pali term for the end of suffering and rebirth; Sanskrit: nirvāna.

Nietzsche, Friedrich: German philosopher (1844–1900); author of Also Sprach Zarathustra.

Nirguna Brahman: Ultimate reality without qualities. This term is used to describe the aspect of Brahman that is ineffable.

Noble Eightfold Path: The Buddha’s prescription for realizing nibbana; includes right understanding, right intentions, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right concentration, and right mindfulness.

Noruz: “New Day”; the celebration of the new year in Iranian religion.

no-self, not-self: The Buddha’s denial of a permanent, substantial self or soul; Pali: anatta, Sanskrit: anatman.

Odes, Book of: A collection of more than 300 poems from the early Zhou Dynasty to the Spring and Autumn periods. Perhaps the earliest such collection in Chinese literature; considered part of the Wu Jing, the Five Classics of Confucianism; Chinese: Shi Jing.

One Hundred Philosophers, Period of: The Chinese era during the late Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods in which many schools of philosophy were established, including Confucianism and Daoism.

oracle: A communication from the spirit world or the medium of that communication.

pairi-daeca: Ancient Iranian term meaning “enclosed garden”; the basis for the word paradise.

Pali (Pāli): A simplified vernacular form of Sanskrit in which the discourses of the Buddha were first written.

Pali Canon: The earliest collection of Buddhist scriptures, comprising the Suttas (discourses), the Vinaya (monastic rules), and Abhidhamma (the codification of the Dhamma).

parinibbana (parinibbāna): The final liberation of a fully realized person.

Parsi: The Zoroastrians (and their descendants) who fled to India to escape the Islamic conquest of Iran.

Prajapati, Queen: Aunt and foster-mother to Siddhattha Gotama; sister of Queen Maya; the first Buddhist nun.

prophet: One who speaks for the god, often urging people back to an authentic form of religious practice at a time when religion has become corrupt.

puja (pūjā): Sanskrit word for the ritual worship of a god, goddess, or object representing sacred reality.
**Purusha:** The primordial human who was sacrificed and dismembered to create the parts of the cosmos, society, and the ritual according to the Rig Veda.

**Qin Dynasty:** The period of Chinese history between the Zhou and Han Dynasties (221–206 B.C.E.); during the Qin, China was unified and Legalism was the dominant philosophy.

**Rahula (Rāhula):** Son of Siddhattha Gotama and his wife, Yashodhara; in later life, Rahula became a Buddhist monk.

**Ramanuja (Rāmānuja):** Indian philosopher (c. 1077–1157 C.E.); founded the school of the Vishishtadvaita Vedanta, or qualified non-dualism.

**redeath:** The Vedic belief that the soul may ascend to heaven at death, live there for a while until it exhausts its karma, and die again to be reborn on Earth.

**ren:** Chinese word for humaneness.

**renunciation:** In the South Asian context, renunciation is giving up home, possessions, social standing, and family ties to “go forth” into the world to seek liberation from *samsara*.

**Rig Veda:** The oldest and most important of the Vedas; compiled between 2300 and 1200 B.C.E. The Rig Veda comprises more than 1,000 hymns to various Vedic deities; *rig* means “praise.”

**ritual purity:** The state of cleanliness that is necessary for being in the presence of the sacred.

**rose-apple tree:** A south and southeast Asian tree with small edible fruits. It was under this variety of tree that Siddhattha had his first meditation experience as a boy.

**rta:** The Vedic principle of order and harmony.

**Saguna Brahman:** That aspect of Brahman that can be conceptualized and discussed.

**samana:** Pali term for a wandering ascetic. Sanskrit: *shramana*.

**samsara (samsāra):** The phenomenal world of change and transience. *Samsara* denotes the situation in which the soul sequentially incarnates in different bodies at different levels of existence.

**Sangha:** The order of monks and nuns in Buddhism.

**Sanskrit:** Indo-European language in which the Vedas were composed.

**saoshyant:** A savior or judge who appears at the end of time, according to Zoroaster; literally, “one who brings benefit.”

**satya:** Sanskrit word for truth, specifically, the higher truth.

**satyagraha (satyāgraha):** Literally, “grasping for the truth”; Gandhi’s term for his philosophy and practice of non-violent resistance to injustice.

**Shakya (Śākya):** The clan of Siddhattha Gotama.

**Shang Di:** Term for the high god of early Chinese religion; also known as Di.

**Shang Dynasty:** Circa 1500–1045 B.C.E.; the earliest Chinese dynasty for which there is historical evidence.

**Shankara (Śankara):** Indian philosopher (c. 788–820 C.E.); founder of the school of Advaita Vedanta, or non-dualism, based on the Upanishads.

**Shiva (Śiva):** One the great cosmic gods of Hinduism and the center of one of Hinduism’s largest and most important religions.

**shruta (śrāuta) ritual:** Ordinarily complex Vedic ceremonies using the verses of the Vedas for the purpose of maintaining divine-human relations.

**shruti (śruti):** Sacred literature of the highest authority in Hinduism; believed to have been revealed to the ancient *rishi*, shruti includes the Rig Veda and the Upanishads.
shu: Chinese word for reciprocity.

Shudras (Śudras): The lowest of the four varnas in India; the caste of peasants and servants.

Siddhartha (Siddhārtha), King: The father of Vardhamana Mahavira, the 24th Tirthankara of Jainism.

Siddhattha: The given name of the one who became the Buddha; Siddhattha means “he who attains the goal.”

Sikhism: An indigenous Indian religion inspired by Kabir, a mystic-poet from Varanasi, and founded by Guru Nanak, a Hindu from Punjab. Both men condemned Hindu and Muslim sectarianism and sought to establish authentic worship of the one true god.

Soma: The Sanskrit name for the god whose manifestation as a particular plant produced visions and a sense of well-being in those who ingested it. Avestan: Haoma.

Son of Man: Jewish concept of the individual who appears at the apocalypse as a divine judge; the title Jesus most often applies to himself in the Gospel of Mark.

Soul of the Bull: The divine being in ancient Iranian religion who sustained and nurtured animal life.

Spring and Autumn Period: The first of two eras of the Eastern Zhou Dynasty in China; circa 722–481 B.C.E.

Stupa (stūpa): A Buddhist reliquary; also known as dagoba and pagoda.

Siddhodhana, King: Ruler of the Shakya kingdom; husband of Queen Maya and Queen Prajapati; father of Siddhattha Gotama.

Suttas: The discourses of Buddha.

Shvetambaras (Śvetāmbaras): One of the two orders of monastics in Jainism; the “white-robed.”


Sympathetic magic: The practice of attempting to affect realities by manipulating objects or words representing those realities.

Taijitu: The Chinese diagram representing the relationship of the yin and yang principles.

tanha: Pali term for craving; literally, “thirst.”

Theravada (Theravāda): The “way of the elders”; the oldest extant variety of Buddhism. Also called Southern Buddhism because of its prominence in South and Southeast Asia.

Three Sages, Era of the: Mythic period of early Chinese history.

Three Sovereigns, Era of the: Mythic period of early Chinese history.

tian: Chinese word for heaven.

Tianming: See Mandate of Heaven.

Tirthankara: According to Jainism, one who teaches the truth and the way to liberation; literally, a bridge-builder or ford-maker.

Transcendental consciousness: Term used by S. N. Eisenstadt to refer to the Axial Age thrust to gain a larger or deeper understanding of the nature of reality.

Transmigration of the soul: Reincarnation; samsara.

Triple Practice: The traditional division of the Noble Eightfold Path into Moral Behavior, Concentration, and Wisdom.

Triple Refuge: A statement of Buddhist identity: “I take refuge in the Buddha; I take refuge in the Dhamma; and I take refuge in the Sangha.”

Trishala (Triśala), Queen: Wife of King Siddhartha and mother of Vardhamana Mahavira, the 24th Tirthankara of Jainism.
Upanishads (Upaniśads): Collection of early Hindu writings in which the ideas of transmigration of the soul and the identity of Brahman and atman are first proposed; considered shruti, the highest form of authority in Hinduism.

Vaishyas (Vaiśyas): The caste of farmers, cattle herders, artisans, and businesspeople.

Vajrayana (Vajrayāna): The third major form of Buddhism, practiced mainly in Tibet and Mongolia; literally, the “diamond” or “thunderbolt” vehicle.

Varuna: Indo-Iranian god associated with promise-keeping.

Vedanta (Vedānta): The “end of the Vedas.” Vedanta is one of the most important and influential of the Hindu philosophies. Deriving inspiration particularly from the Upanishads, the last part of the Vedas, Vedanta emphasizes unity of the soul and the Absolute.

Vedas: Sacred wisdom believed to have been revealed to ancient rishis. The Vedas are now the most sacred of Hindu scriptures.

Vesak: Festival that celebrates the birth, awakening, and parinibbana of the Buddha.

via negativa: The way of negation; a theological technique of referring to ultimate reality by saying what it is not.

Vishnu: A minor Vedic god who ultimately became one of Hinduism’s most important gods and the object of a major Hindu religion; according to tradition, Vishnu has assumed 10 principal manifestations, including Krishna, Rama, and the Buddha.

Warring States, Period of: The second of the two eras of the Eastern Zhou Dynasty in China, from 475 or 403 B.C.E. until 221 B.C.E.; a time in which the warlords of small feudal kingdoms sought to annex other states to extend and consolidate their power.

Wen, King: The symbolic first ruler of the Zhou Dynasty.

Western Zhou: See Zhou Dynasty.

Wu: The man who led the overthrow of Shang rulers and established the Zhou Dynasty of China; son of King Wen.

Wu Jing: The “Five Classics”; used by Confucianism as a basis for study; includes the Book of Odes (Shī Jīng), the Book of Changes (Yì Jīng), the Book of Rites (Lǐ Jīng), the Book of History (Shū Jīng), and the Spring and Autumn Annals (Lín Jīng).

wu wei: Actionless action; one of the fundamental virtues of Daoism.

yajña: Sacrifice; Avestan: yasna.

Yama: The Vedic/Hindu god of death and ruler of the underworld; Avestan: Yima.

Yashodhara (Yāśodhara): Wife of Siddhattha Gotama; mother of Rahula; later a Buddhist nun.

yazatas: Class of divinities in Zoroastrianism associated with the principle of good; perhaps the prototype for angels in the religions of Semitic origin.

yin/yang: The Chinese principles accounting for change; yin is associated with the feminine and yang with the masculine; the Chinese ideal is to maintain a balance between yin and yang.

yoga: A discipline for the purposes of enlightenment and liberation. Yoga literally means “yoke.” In a narrower sense, Yoga refers to a specific school of orthodox philosophy given classical expression in the Yoga Sutras of Patañjali.

Zhou, Duke of (Dan): The brother of King Wu and founder of the Zhou Dynasty, who ruled as regent for his nephew following Wu’s death; the Duke of Zhou embodied many of the highest virtues, according to Confucius.

Zhou Dynasty: The period of Chinese history between the Shang and the Qin Dynasties (1045–221 B.C.E.); divided into the Western and Eastern Zhou when invaders forced the move of the capital eastward.

Zoroastrianism: The religion based on Zoroaster’s reforms of ancient Iranian religion.
Religions of the Axial Age: An Approach to the World’s Religions
Part II
Professor Mark W. Muesse
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MWM
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The years 800–200 B.C.E. comprise one of the most creative and influential eras in world history. The German philosopher Karl Jaspers termed this epoch die Achsenzeit, or the Axial Age, to indicate its pivotal importance in the evolution of human thought. Around the globe, sages and moralists, philosophers and priests grappled with novel ideas about the nature of humanity, the world, and ultimate reality and approached these issues with fresh ways of thinking. Of such importance was this era that modern people continue to live out their moral and religious lives through the fundamental categories and patterns of thought established during this time.

The ferment of religious and philosophical activity centered in four distinct regions of civilization: East Asia, South Asia, West Asia, and the northeastern Mediterranean. Each of these areas witnessed the emergence of several imaginative individuals whose exemplary lives and teachings prompted their followers to create the traditions that led to the birth of the world religions. By setting these traditions and thinkers in juxtaposition, we are able to see more clearly the nature of the questions with which they struggled and to appreciate the similarities and differences of their solutions. We can also understand how their ideas have determined theological and religious thought and practices down to our day.

The course begins with a discussion of the idea of the Axial Age and its characteristics and contours. The introductory lecture accents the importance of this period and explains the value of studying religions comparatively across a specific period of time, rather than merely as traditions isolated from one another and unrelated to larger developments in the evolution of the human spirit. Although the Axial Age had an impact on four major regions, this course will attend principally to the three Asian sites, primarily because of their importance in shaping the world religions and because The Teaching Company already offers a number of excellent courses devoted to the world of the ancient Greeks. In this series, we will focus on the developments of Zoroastrianism in Iran and its influence on Judaism, Christianity, and Islam; Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism in India; and Confucianism and Daoism in China. The course will unfold regionally, beginning in Central Asia, then tracing developments in West Asia, South Asia, and finally, East Asia.

Although it is not an Axial center, we begin in Central Asia to study the early Indo-European peoples, who later migrated to West and South Asia and decisively shaped the religious outlook and practices of those regions. We will examine the shared culture of a group of these Central Asians known today as the Indo-Iranians and explore their similarities and differences after they divide in the second millennium B.C.E. When we get to West Asia, particularly ancient Iran, we examine the context out of which came perhaps the most mysterious of all major Axial sages: Zoroaster, also known as Zarathustra. Zoroaster, who may have been the world’s first prophet, was responsible for reforming the ancient Iranian religious tradition and for numerous theological innovations, such as the apocalyptic Day of Judgment, the devil, and perhaps even the idea of a messiah or savior. We will look at these new conceptions both in their native Iranian context and as possible influences on Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

In South Asia, we start with the indigenous Indus culture and witness the impact of the migration of the branch of the Indo-Iranians (retrospectively called the Indo-Aryans) that eventually made its way to northwestern India. We explore the elements of both Indus and Indo-Aryan religions to prepare for the examination of the Axial transformation of Indian religion. Pre-Axial religion in India focused on this-worldly concerns, such as the acquisition of material needs and comforts, long life, and successful reproduction, and was decidedly oriented toward ritual. With the advent of the Axial Age, Indian sages began to question the values associated with the material world and ritual practices. Indian religion became increasingly preoccupied with understanding the destiny of the individual and the nature of the deepest reality underlying all appearances. After a great deal of speculation, the ideas of reincarnation and karma were widely accepted, creating a new problem for Indian religion: attaining release from the endless rounds of death and rebirth known as samsara. Individuals by the hundreds began to renounce worldly life and experiment with solutions to this predicament. Among the scores of new spiritualities developed during this time, we examine three of the most important and most enduring: the mysticism of the Upanishads, which provided the foundational structure for the massive conglomerate of religious beliefs and practices later known as Hinduism; the teachings of the Buddha, based on an approach he called the Middle Way; and the beliefs and practices of the Mahavira, whose movement became known as Jainism. Setting these traditions side by side will afford us the chance to see how they responded to many of the same problems but offered distinctive and innovative solutions.
Our final destination is East Asia. We begin with a study of the pre-Axial culture of what will later become China. Understanding this early period, which is barely within reach of current historiography, is important to appreciate the Axial transformations brought about by Confucius and thinkers associated with the tradition of Daoism. We look at the earliest attestations of religious practices that have been important throughout Chinese history, including divination and ancestor reverence. Later, when we turn to Confucius and his followers and then to the Daoists, we observe how these practices are retained and reinterpreted to fit the new concern with moral behavior brought by the Axial Age. Claiming only to transmit ancient traditions, Confucius taught a comprehensive ethic of personal development that remained influential throughout Chinese history and provided the basis for the Chinese educational system. Daoism, often associated with the mythic figure of Laozi, was concerned with many of the same issues as Confucius but suggested other solutions. Throughout Chinese history, Confucianism and Daoism functioned as complements to each other in such a way that individuals could claim allegiance to both Daoist and Confucian traditions.

The series concludes with a set of reflections on the Axial transformations, emphasizing both the common themes across the centers of development and their distinctive qualities. We will consider the overall significance of this age for human history and its major contributions to human spirituality.
Lecture Thirteen
Why We Suffer

Scope: Proceeding like a physician, the Buddha continued to analyze the human condition with medical precision. If suffering is the malady that afflicts humanity, it is necessary to explore its etiology and to determine whether or not a cure is available. The Buddha concluded that suffering was caused by a number of interrelated factors. He thought that belief in a permanent, substantial self; the denial of impermanence; and desire and attachment all contributed to suffering, frustration, and disappointment and kept beings bound to samsara.

Outline

I. The Buddha was more a healer with remedies for specific problems than a philosopher with opinions about metaphysical questions. In the First Noble Truth, he names the disease and its symptoms—suffering, or dukkha. In the Second Noble Truth, he declares that a principal cause of dukkha is desire, which leads to rebirth, accompanied by delight and lust. The Second Truth is at the heart of the Buddha’s vision and is what most distinguishes it from other religious perspectives.

A. Though craving, or tanha, generally translates to “desire,” its literal meaning is “thirst.”
B. The difference between desire as wish and desire as thirst is one of degree. A desire first conceived can easily become intense craving. Thirst suggests an intensity, an immediate need for something specific.
   1. One aspect of tanha is the nature of the experience that arises from it—the state of being conditioned by thirst. Exploring it helps to explain why tanha makes us prone to suffer.
   2. A second issue is the prior state of being that originally fostered thirst. Exploring this helps us understand how to alleviate it.
C. The Buddha is not wholly opposed to desire. The problem arises when desires are self-centered and become intense cravings—when an object of wishing becomes a matter of necessity, as if our lives depended on it.
D. Further, we may already possess what we desire and believe that losing it would be devastating to our existence.
E. Desire leads to attachment, or clinging, and both Buddhism and Hinduism recognize attachment as one driving mechanism of samsara. Attachment is the nature of the relationship we have to objects, people, values, beliefs, ideas, power, status, experiences, and sensations.
F. The problem is not with the objects of attachment themselves but with the nature of our relationships to them, which can become like addictions.
G. In a world of constant change, nothing can sustain our attachments; anything we become attached to is subject to change, causing suffering. To allay this suffering, we seek something else to cling to, but the more we try to secure happiness through acquisition, the more we suffer.
H. Attachment can also include aversion to an object or situation, causing a negative relationship that is just as difficult to relinquish. The Buddha’s answer to the dual dangers of clinging and aversion is equanimity, the Middle Way between the two extremes.

II. What makes us thirsty?

A. When we misapprehend the nature of the world and ourselves, we are said to be ignorant. Ignorance, avijja, is simply a lack of knowledge.
B. In addition to not knowing, avijja suggests the further imposition of wrong ideas and beliefs onto reality. Not only do we fail to know reality, but we also “mis-know” it.
C. Fundamentally, we mis-know reality because we erroneously believe in permanence without understanding that everything is impermanent. We view as a thing something that is a process.
1. For the Buddha, change was constant and persistent; even solid objects are in constant flux. Quantum physics seems to confirm the Buddha’s view that the foundational elements of the world are more like energy fluctuations than solid, substantial materials.

2. The Buddha viewed the cosmos as a complex array of processes rather than a set of things. It’s not just that things change but that change is the only thing there is.

D. The difference in the Buddha’s thinking about the nature of change appears in the way he applies this concept. Many who acknowledge the world’s transience try to sneak permanence through the back door by declaring a part of existence exempt from change. The concept of god is one such effort; the concept of the soul living after the body perishes, as in the Vedanta tradition of Hinduism, is another.

III. Perhaps the Buddha’s most distinctive contribution is his belief that there is no permanent, immortal, substantial soul. This feature of the Buddha’s thought is called *anatta* in Pali, but the Sanskrit term, *anatman* (“no-self”), makes it clear that the Buddha denies the *atman*, the Hindu idea of the soul or true self.

A. Most interpreters of Buddhism refer to *anatta* as a doctrine or concept, but perhaps it’s better described as a practice or anti-concept. *Anatta* is more a denial of a belief than a belief itself. The moment we think of *anatta* as a concept, we have placed an obstacle in the way of its realization.

B. The Buddha asserts that the concept of self can lead to fruitless speculation and contribute to our suffering. Rather than put forward another view of self, the Buddha simply indicates that the concept of self is an unskillful way of thinking about human beings.

C. We can refer to the self reflexively, as in talking about ourselves, but the Buddha says we should never think that it refers to anything substantial or permanent. Neither should we think that the Buddha denies our existence or suggests that human life is an illusion or unreal.

D. *Anatta* essentially means that we do not exist in the way we think we do. The Buddha’s denial of self declared that no concept is capable of expressing the reality of who we are.

IV. The Buddha’s description of humans may seem negative on the surface: The so-called self is not a thing; it is no-thing, nothing. It is insubstantial; it lacks permanence and immortality. But on further inspection, it is clear that he merely attempts to disrupt our old habits of thinking about who we are.

A. Rather than viewing individuals as immortal souls housed in a perishable body, the Buddha saw the human as a complex of interconnected and ever-changing energies or forces, which he called the Five Aggregates of Being.

1. The first aggregate is matter, which refers to our physical makeup, changing each moment as cells die and are replaced.

2. The second is sensations or feelings, including the tonal quality of our experiences, the way we judge experiences as pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. These judgments condition our tendencies of attachment and aversion.

3. The third is perception, not only what we perceive but also what we perceive it as—apperception.

4. The fourth is mental formations, the sources of desire, craving, and intention. This component is the source of karma for Buddha. Hence, as long as there is craving, there will be rebirth.

5. The fifth is consciousness, the process of awareness.

B. Nothing about these components endures. Our perceptions, thoughts, bodies, and consciousness are all in flux. There is no permanent subject or agent underlying these processes either.

C. The soul or self is simply an illusion, an unsubstantiated belief in the same way a rainbow is an optical illusion, created by the convergence of various conditions. To the Buddha, *atman* is an illusion supported by changing conditions. This is why no one is able to identify or pinpoint the soul or essential self.

D. The Buddha says that our problems arise when we ascribe reality to this illusion. Believing in a permanent, substantial self is the root of suffering, setting in motion a series of thoughts, words, and deeds that precipitate anguish, misery, and disappointment.

Essential Reading:
Supplementary Reading:

Questions to Consider:
1. Why might *anatta* be considered more of an anti-concept than a concept itself? What are the potential problems with regarding it as a concept?
2. Compare the ways in which the Buddha’s view of humans might be considered negative with how he truly viewed humans.
Lecture Fourteen

The Noble Path

Scope: The Buddha’s good news is that we need not suffer and that freedom from samsaric existence is, indeed, possible. Liberation, however, is not the product of a divine gift of grace. Individuals seeking freedom from samsara and the suffering that accompanies it must discipline themselves and follow a strict regimen to break the habits that bind persons to the illusion of selfhood. This lecture outlines the Buddha’s Eightfold Path to nibbana, which emphasizes the importance of acting ethically, developing virtue, and restraining the body and mind through the practice of meditation. We will see how each element of the path contributes to loosening the grip on the samsaric sphere and emptying the mind of its misconceptions about the nature of the world and the self.

Outline

I. Though there is much in the Buddha’s teaching that seems gloomy on the surface, the good news for humanity can be found in the third and fourth Noble Truths. The Third Noble Truth was straightforward: You do not have to suffer. Genuine, enduring happiness is possible, a reality Westerners know as nirvana.
   A. If tanha—thirst or craving—is the cause of dukkha—suffering—then clearly, the solution is to stop craving. By ending our craving, attachments slip away, and we end the cycle of suffering and rebirth.
   B. Understanding the objective of ending craving helps us understand why the Buddha formulates the path in the way he does. The objective is nibbana, or nirvana, the Sanskrit term more familiar to Westerners.
   C. Simply stated, nibbana is the end of suffering, the point at which one stops craving for reality to be other than what it is, radically accepting the way things are.
   D. The Buddha called nibbana the eradication of desire, the cessation of thirst, and the destruction of illusion. In this sense, nibbana is self-annihilation, as some Westerners have interpreted Buddhism. But what is really annihilated is the illusion of a separate, substantial self.
   E. Like moksha in Hinduism, nibbana can be realized in life. There is also a final nibbana realized at death.
      1. One who achieves nibbana in life is known as an arahant. An arahant has fully realized the Dhamma, the truth of the Buddha’s vision, and is free of craving, aversion, and misknowing.
      2. Arahants experience physical pain and other forms of old karma, but they do not generate new karma; this is called nibbana with remainder.
      3. At final nibbana, or parinibbana, all karmic energies sustaining existence are dissipated, and the arahant is released from rebirth. This is nibbana without remainder.

II. The Third Noble Truth is simple, but the difficulty lies in giving up craving. Because craving is a deeply ingrained pattern of experience, ending craving requires a multifaceted and incremental approach. The method for quenching thirst is detailed in the Fourth Noble Truth.
   A. The Buddha’s message of freedom from suffering was not about grace or a gift from god. Because we are the cause of our own suffering, only we can free ourselves from it, which requires discipline and effort.
   B. The Fourth Noble Truth shows the way for this discipline with an outline of what the Buddha called the Noble Eightfold Path: right understanding, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration.
   C. The word right means more than just “true,” as in the opposite of “false.” It also suggests that which promotes the end of suffering.
   D. Because the eight parts are interrelated, the practice of one supports the practice of the others, but not in a linear fashion. All eight elements are pursued concurrently.
III. The eight components of the Buddha’s discipline have traditionally been divided into three sections: study, conduct, and concentration. For this reason, the Noble Path is sometimes called the Triple Practice. For our purposes, these components are referred to respectively as cultivating wisdom, developing moral conduct, and disciplining the mind.

A. Study, or cultivating wisdom, requires at least some measure of understanding in order to begin the practice of Dhamma.
   1. To gain right understanding, one must become acquainted with the basic principles of the Buddha’s teaching by study, discussion, and reflection.
   2. But concepts take one only so far. Eventually, Dhamma must be understood in a deep way that comes only at enlightenment.

B. In developing moral conduct, the Buddha’s path is not about commanding correct or moral behavior. The Buddha understood morality to be rooted in human nature because it is our nature to be compassionate.
   1. Developing moral conduct is done through right intention, specifically, avoiding the natural human tendencies toward greed, hatred, and harm by practicing non-attachment, good will, and harmlessness.
   2. Developing moral conduct also involves right action, which is epitomized in the Five Precepts, one of the most important practices for all Buddhists. The Five Precepts are ideals that one vows to live by, not commandments.
      a. The first precept states: “I will refrain from harming sentient beings.” Some Buddhists interpret this precept strictly, becoming vegetarians and refusing to kill any form of sentient life. Others, realizing the great difficulty of living in this world without taking life, strive to minimize the amount of harm they do.
      b. The second precept states: “I will refrain from taking what is not offered.” In other words, Buddhists do not steal or covet.
      c. The third precept states: “I will refrain from sexual misconduct.”
      d. The fourth precept states: “I will refrain from false speech.” This includes lying, slander, gossip, cursing, loud talk, idle chatter, and meaningless babble.
      e. The fifth precept states: “I will refrain from stupefying drink.” Alcohol and substance abuse can lead to addiction, dull the senses, and hinder the capacity to see the world and oneself clearly.
   3. Another aspect of moral practice involves right speech. Right speech means communicating in the most generous and beneficial ways possible, encouraging kind, gentle, and edifying speech.
   4. A fourth aspect of moral practice is right living, to earn a living in ways that foster the well-being of others. The Buddha specifically named military service, trading in intoxicants or poisons, and selling animals for slavery or slaughter as unwholesome occupations.

C. The third aspect of the Triple Practice involves disciplining the mind.
   1. For the Buddha, the mind was not a static reality, nor did he identify it with the brain. The mind meant the totality of thoughts, sensations, feelings, and consciousness that in each moment arise and fall away.
   2. In its unenlightened state, the mind is unruly and undisciplined, like an untamed horse. Until it’s tamed, it can cause more harm than good. To bring the mind under control requires patience, skill, and persistent training.
   3. Right effort, right concentration, and right mindfulness can train the mind, harnessing its considerable powers for the benefit of others and ourselves.
      a. Right effort means giving deliberate attention to developing positive qualities and thoughts and letting go of negative ones. Generosity, friendliness, equanimity, and patience are positive qualities to aim for.
      b. Right concentration is the discipline of regular meditation to sharpen our awareness of the world and ourselves by attending to the features of ordinary life in the present moment.
      c. Right mindfulness is the practice of meditative awareness taken in daily life. Attentiveness, non-attachment, and other Buddhist virtues were regarded as skills that anyone could develop and reinforce with regular practice.

D. In addition to initial study of the Middle Path, the Buddha outlines a second form of right understanding: awakened understanding, the wisdom one attains at the end of the path.
   1. To have awakened understanding means to see reality the way it is, unencumbered by expectation, belief, or defilements of any kind.
2. In the Buddha’s view, this form of comprehension means to know for certain the authenticity of the Four Noble Truths without reliance on authorities other than one’s own experience.

3. To realize the Dhamma at this level means to live one’s life in accord with the truth. One no longer aspires to nibbana, for it has been seen.

**Essential Reading:**

**Supplementary Reading:**
Bodhi, *The Noble Eightfold Path*.

**Questions to Consider:**
1. Why might some think that practicing Buddhism is akin to annihilation? Is this a fair assessment?
2. How are the elements of the Eightfold Path interrelated? How does following this discipline lead to nibbana?
Lecture Fifteen
From Buddha to Buddhism

Scope: For nearly half a century, the Buddha roamed the Gangetic basin, teaching his Dhamma and building a community of followers. Many sought ordination in his monastic community, known as the Sangha. At age 80, the Buddha peacefully passed into parinibbana, the final release for an awakened being. Following his death and cremation, his relics were housed in special structures called stupas, which provided a focus of religious practice for many. (It was not until about 300-400 years after his death that images of the Buddha were created.) Shortly after his parinibbana, his followers gathered to consider how to preserve the Buddha’s Dhamma. Early Buddhist councils led to the creation of authoritative texts (Suttas) and to the discussion of important doctrinal issues that ultimately split the community into several factions. The conversion of the Mauryan emperor Ashoka at the end of the Axial period was instrumental in making Buddhism a major international religion.

Outline

I. The Buddha’s five original disciples, bhikkhus, quickly understood his message and realized nibbana to become the first arahants of Buddhism. Soon, their number grew, and they formed a Sangha (monastic community). The Buddha’s enlightened disciples toured the Gangetic plains, preaching the Dhamma in the language of their listeners and bringing wisdom to the masses.

A. These missionaries found a receptive audience during a time when many of the traditional political, social, and economic institutions were rapidly changing. The Buddha’s message of the impermanence of existence certainly rang true for many.

B. The Buddha’s emphasis on spiritual self-sufficiency, rather than on tradition or the Brahmin priests, appealed to those who accepted individual responsibility for their well-being and ultimate destiny.

C. The Buddha and his disciples spoke to people from all walks of life, without discrimination based on gender, age, social status, or moral standing. The Buddha’s openness to all was inspired by his conviction that spiritual attainment was not limited to certain castes, as many believed.

D. As the Dhamma spread, so did local Sanghas, which provided an ideal setting for individuals seeking to follow the Middle Way. Though it was not essential to join a Sangha to find enlightenment, the Sangha relieved one of the obligations and responsibilities of everyday life that could hinder progress toward nibbana.

E. Sangha life was simpler but could also be more restricted than domestic life. Members were expected to adhere to five additional precepts: not eating after midday; not watching secular entertainment, such as dancing, singing, or theatre; not using perfume or jewelry; not using a luxurious couch or sleeping on a soft bed; and not handling money.

1. The intent of these precepts was to keep practitioners within the Middle Way by disallowing luxuries or distractions.

2. Beyond these additional precepts, monastics followed a daily routine of meditating, engaging in study and discussion, and begging for food.

F. The Sangha was also the principal means by which to spread the Buddha’s message. Eventually, the role of monastics as missionaries evolved into teachers and custodians of Dhamma.

G. Five years after the founding of the Sangha, women were admitted as ordained members of the order. The Buddha’s stepmother, Queen Prajapati, became the first Buddhist nun, a radical step for the time. The Buddha’s wife, Yashodhara, and their son, Rahula, also joined the community.

II. In his 80th year, the Buddha became ill on one of his teaching expeditions. Aware of his impending death, he asked his attendant to prepare an outdoor bed between two sala trees.

A. As his death approached, the Buddha asked his disciples three times if they had any doubts about the teachings or disciplines. They stood silent. He then uttered his final words: “All compounded things are subject to decay. Work out your salvation with diligence!” He passed into a deep meditative state and entered mahaparinibbana, the great final release.
B. The Buddha died during the full moon of the month of Vesakha (April–May) around 410 B.C.E. Tradition says that he was also born and enlightened on this same day. Today, the chief Buddhist holiday is Vesak, which celebrates his birth, enlightenment, and attainment of parinibbana.

C. The Buddha’s body lay in state for six days. On the seventh day, he was cremated on a pyre of fragrant wood. The remains were collected as relics and divided into eight portions, distributed to representatives of the eight city-states connected to his life.

D. The relics were interred in burial sites called stupas, reserved for royalty during pre-Buddhist times. Atop the stupas stood poles with a series of disks, a stylized representation of a parasol and an object associated with royalty. For Buddhists, the parasol-shaped structure also represented the Bodhi tree.

E. The stupas became pilgrimage sites, and for some, walking around such sites could help ensure a favorable rebirth. Others saw the stupa as the Buddha himself, containing his bodily relics that might release them from suffering or heal ills.

F. It wasn’t until after the Axial Age, between 200–100 B.C.E., that images of the Buddha appeared in human form, first created in the region of Gandhara, now in modern Afghanistan. Earlier, he had been represented by such things as an empty throne, footprints, the Bodhi tree, the wheel of Dhamma, and the parasol.

III. Soon after the Buddha’s parinibbana, the Sangha gathered to discuss the future of the movement, the first Buddhist council. The Buddha had not named a successor but recommended a representative form of governance, with the Dhamma as guide and teacher.

A. The first council met to discuss and concur on exactly what the Buddha had taught. One member recited all of his discourses, and these recollections became the basis for the Suttas in the Pali Canon. Another member recited all the rules of monastic discipline, which others then memorized; these were kept in oral tradition until they were written down three or four centuries later.

B. A second council was convened 70 years later, and a third around 250 B.C.E. These Sangha gatherings were intended to discuss and settle doctrinal and practical disagreements.

C. In some respects, the Buddha’s teachings had not provided a foundation on which to build a religion. He neither encouraged nor discouraged belief in gods; he offered little in the way of worship or ritual practice; and there were no congregational meetings or weekly services. Sangha meetings were held to conduct business or discuss Dhamma, not to encounter the sacred.

D. Eventually, conventional religious elements were incorporated. A type of creed known as the Triple Refuge was developed and became a declaration of one’s Buddhist identity.

E. The stupas satisfied the needs of some followers for tangible symbols. Other Buddhists continued to worship the devas. Divine worship, however, was reserved for asking particular favors from the gods, not for achieving nibbana. Veneration of the gods coexisted comfortably alongside Buddhist practices, as it does today.

F. The Buddha himself would later become part of the Hindu pantheon as one of the 10 principal manifestations of the god Vishnu. Interestingly, many Hindus venerate the Buddha as a god and many Buddhists venerate the gods of Hinduism.

IV. With the patronage of one of India’s greatest rulers, King Ashoka, the Buddhist presence was more keenly felt in India and other parts of Asia.

A. Ashoka, at first a ruthless monarch, reigned more than a century after the Buddha’s death.

B. Following one campaign, he toured a battlefield and witnessed the corpses of thousands of soldiers and civilians. Stunned by the carnage, he began to fully embrace Dhamma.

C. According to legend, Ashoka outlawed animal sacrifices and took pilgrimages, built hospitals and schools, and opened the original stupas to retrieve the Buddha’s relics, redividing them to establish 84,000 new stupas.

D. He sent missionaries throughout India, Southeast Asia, and the Greek kingdoms in Afghanistan and Central Asia to spread Dhamma.

E. Ashoka also called a third council in 250 B.C.E. to deal with doctrinal issues that were troubling the community. In large measure because of his sponsorship, what started as an obscure Hindu sect was soon elevated to the status of an international religion.
F. With Ashoka’s influence, Buddhism eventually became a predominant presence in India, until it finally died out between the 12th and 14th centuries C.E.

V. Early Buddhism was marked by a number of doctrinal disputes and disagreements concerning practice and monastic polity. Debates often led to divisions within the community; at least 18 different schools regarded the Pali Canon as authoritative.

A. Of the 18 different schools, only the Theravada school remains, making it the oldest extant Buddhist tradition. Of the three major varieties of Buddhism today, Theravada (‘way of the elders’) probably represents the form closest to the way Buddhism was practiced around the time of the Buddha.

B. Around the 1st century C.E., the Mahayana form of Buddhism began to take shape in northwestern India, adding a substantially different dimension and new views about the Buddha and his role in making salvation available to humanity.

1. New mythologies appeared, giving the Buddha a more divine, god-like status. Mahayana developed the idea of the bodhisattva, an enlightened being who remained in the samsaric realm to help others attain awakening.

2. Mahayana was exported to China and other parts of East Asia. It gradually became the most popular variety of Buddhism but has also fragmented over time into new schools.

C. Out of the Mahayana also emerged the third major form of Buddhism, Vajrayana. Observed for centuries in Tibet and Mongolia, Vajrayana is the Dalai Lama’s practice.

Essential Reading:
Carrithers, Buddha, chapter 5.

Supplementary Reading:
Harvey, An Introduction to Buddhism, chapters 4–5.

Questions to Consider:
1. Like practices that came before it, Buddhism saw many different schools of thought arise from the Buddha’s original teachings. What might have caused these schisms?

2. What role did stupas play for followers of the Buddha, and how does that relate to earlier Hindu traditions? How might the veneration of stupas exist in tension with teachings of the Buddha?
Lecture Sixteen

Jainism

Scope: Near the time of the Buddha and in the same region of northeastern India lived another prominent individual who renounced worldly ties following the death of his parents. Vardhamana practiced extreme asceticism for 12 years, until he gained a new understanding of the self and the world. His achievement earned him the title Mahavira, the “Great Hero.” Like the Buddha, he gathered a community of followers and taught them for a long period of time, until his death at age 72. Mahavira’s teachings shared much in common with the Dhamma of the Buddha and the philosophy of the Upanishads. Yet Mahavira gave innovative interpretations to the ideas of the soul and karma and emphasized different practices for the achievement of liberation. His teaching is perhaps most noteworthy for the prominence it gave to the practice of non-harming (ahimsa), which greatly influenced Indian religion and had a particularly profound effect on Mohandas Gandhi’s program of non-violent resistance.

Outline

I. In spite of its small size, Jainism has had a tremendous influence on Indian history and religions. The most significant contribution is its practice of ahimsa, not harming living beings, similar to Buddhism. Unlike Buddhism, however, Jainism’s doctrines—according to the Jains—did not arise from one founder.
   A. Modern history locates the origins of Jainism in the same cultural environment that gave rise to classical Hinduism and Buddhism, but devout Jains believe that Jainism is an eternal religion whose truths have no beginning in time.
   B. The world is subject to a universal life cycle, wherein Jainism’s truths are reintroduced to humanity because they are forgotten and lost. When an Axial Age sage named Vardhamana Mahavira taught the doctrines of Jainism, he was only transmitting a religion that had been taught many times before by others.
   C. Jainism’s teachers are called Tirthankaras, or bridge-builders, and show the way to salvation (liberation from samsara) through their words and example. They represent the highest possible attainment for the soul.
   D. There have been 24 Tirthankaras, the most recent of which was Mahavira, and there will be 24 more in the current universal cycle; the next is expected in 81,500 years.

II. Modern scholarship must begin its study of Jainism in the Axial Age because there is no evidence to support the historical existence of the first 22 Tirthankaras. Evidence is thin for the 23rd, an ascetic named Parśva who lived in about the 9th century B.C.E.
   A. The historical Mahavira may have been born in 599 B.C.E. in Kundagram, now in the Indian state of Bihar.
   B. According to some accounts, Mahavira was born to King Siddhartha and Queen Trishala, followers of Parśva, the 23rd Tirthankara.
   C. Before his birth, his mother dreamed that the child would become either a great emperor or a Tirthankara.
   D. According to another birth story, Mahavira was conceived by a Brahmin couple, but his embryo was supernaturally implanted in Queen Trishala’s womb. This episode was probably meant to ease the rising tensions between the Brahmin and warrior castes, because many Brahmins resented the fact that some members of the warrior caste were encroaching on their spiritual territory.
   E. According to some Jain traditions, Mahavira married a young woman called Yashodhara—curiously, the same name as the Buddha’s wife—and together, they had a daughter. Another Jain sect denies this marriage.
   F. At the age of 30, Mahavira became a samana, renouncing his kingdom and wealth and pulling out his hair by the roots. To overcome all desires and attachments, for the next 12 years, he practiced intense asceticism, including fasting, mortification, meditation, and silence.
   G. He discarded his clothing and spent the remainder of his days in the nude. Clothing, like anything else, could be an attachment. Mahavira avoided harming other living beings, including plants.
H. At the age of 42, he attained enlightenment and was recognized as a Tirthankara and a jina, or spiritual conqueror. His followers were called Jainas or Jains because they were disciples of the jina.

I. For the next 30 years, Mahavira traveled throughout the Ganges region, teaching his principles and practices for attaining freedom from samsara.

J. Tradition says that Mahavira died at age 72; his chief disciple, Indrabhuti, realized enlightenment a few hours afterward and later recollected his teacher’s words, which became the basis for the Agam Sutras, one of the most important Jain scriptures.

III. Like Buddhists and Hindus, Jains appropriated many of the basic assumptions and beliefs circulating in the Ganges basin in the early Indian Axial Age. But in almost every case, Mahavira reinterpreted these ideas to fit his worldview, including time, conceptions of the world’s structure, the nature of the soul, and karma.

A. Mahavira believed that the world was never created and will never be destroyed, thus following a cyclical pattern. Each cycle is divided into two halves, a period of ascendancy and a period of decline.
   1. During the period of ascendancy, people are tall, live long lives, and are wise and virtuous without the need for ethics or religion.
   2. As the cycle proceeds, the world gradually succumbs to corruption and deterioration, ethics and religion are introduced, and writing is invented because people’s memories have failed. It is during these stages that the Tirthankaras appear.
   3. At the lowest point of the cycle, people are short and live only 20 years, dwelling in caves and pursuing immoral activity.
   4. When it reaches its lowest point, the world enters another period of ascendancy, and the cycle repeats forever.

B. Mahavira believed that the physical world comprised three levels: the underworld, the Earth’s surface (the middle realm), and the heavens.
   1. The underworld contains seven or eight realms of hell, where the wicked are punished to remove negative karma. When souls have suffered enough for their sins, they may be reborn in another realm.
   2. The middle level is the home of life, called Jambudvipa, “the island of the rose-apple tree.”
   3. The upper level is home to the gods. Above the universe’s ceiling is a crescent-shaped structure where the Tirthankaras and the completely liberated souls dwell.

C. Like the sages of the Upanishads, Mahavira believed that the soul is real, unchanging in essence but not characteristic. All souls are equal and embody sentient as well as nonsentient beings. In their pure state, souls have perfect perception, knowledge, happiness, and power.

D. The Jains believe that karma is a material substance made of fine particles that cling to the soul. When a soul acts, it attracts these particles, which adhere to it, weigh it down, and stain it with a particular color according to the karma’s moral and spiritual quality.
   1. The Jains believe that karma determines one’s future births and keeps humans in bondage to the material, samsaric world.
   2. Karmic defilements distort our perceptions and limit our knowledge of the world, leading to attachment and self-centered thoughts and deeds.

E. Jains believe that the world is composed of an infinite number of material and spiritual substances, each with an infinite number of qualities and manifestations. Because of this complexity and the limitations of human knowledge, all claims to truth must be tentative. This principle of non-absolutism means that we must be humble and acknowledge that we could be wrong.

IV. With this outline of the Jain worldview, we can now consider the Mahavira discipline for attaining liberation. The objective of the Jain path is, first, to stop the accumulation of new karma and, second, to eliminate old karma that weighs down the soul. To reach the first goal, Mahavira advised his followers to fulfill five Great Vows. To reach the second, one must do good deeds and practice asceticism.

A. The first and foremost Great Vow is ahimsa, to refrain from harming any living beings. Unlike Buddhists, Jains believe that even unintentionally injuring another creature generates negative karma.
   1. Jains are vegetarians and refuse to use leather or other animal products. They avoid occupations that might cause harm to life forms and some even sweep the pathway before them as they walk to avoid stepping on bugs.
2. But *ahimsa* also involves practicing right thought and right speech.
3. The other four vows include speaking the truth, never stealing or taking what is not given, practicing non-attachment, and practicing chastity.

**B.** The elimination of accumulated karma principally involves doing good deeds and practicing asceticism.
1. Those who would attain enlightenment must fast, meditate, perform penance, practice yoga, and study and recite scripture.
2. The ultimate ascetic practice is to fast to death, symbolizing absolute renunciation.

**C.** Mahavira also preached a path of self-salvation. Because each soul is accountable for its own karma, only the individual can reverse his or her karmic accumulations.

**D.** Disagreements about doctrine and practice among Jainism’s ascetics were mostly minor, but one major division resulted in two different orders.
1. The Digambara order renounced clothing and held that women could not reach liberation; they would have to await rebirth as men.
2. The Shvetambaras contended that nudity was optional and that women were capable of enlightenment.

**E.** Although differences exist, all Jains agree on the central message of non-violence, non-absolutism, and non-attachment. These practices are basic elements for personal liberation from *samsara* and the collective goal of peace for the world.

**Essential Reading:**

**Supplementary Reading:**

**Questions to Consider:**
1. In what ways are Buddhism and Jainism similar?
2. What is the principle of non-absolutism, and how does it relate to the other dimensions of the Jain worldview?
Lecture Seventeen
East Asia before the Axial Age

Scope: We conclude with the land that came to be called “China,” an anachronistic term in the era we are considering. As with the other regions, we focus first on the pre-Axial religion and culture to provide the context for understanding the changes brought about by the Axial Age. After a glance at the mythological “pre-history” of China, the discussion moves to the Shang Dynasty, the first period for which there is historical evidence. The artifacts from the Shang provide a wealth of information on religious practices of the pre-Axial era. The most important of these practices was divination, a form of communicating with the spirit world and predicting the future. We also examine the concepts of heaven and Earth and investigate the ways in which the ancient Chinese conceived of their gods and related to them. Finally, we will discuss the practice of ancestor worship and the notion of virtue, both of which significantly shaped the development of later Chinese culture.

Outline

I. Throughout most of its recorded history, China has been home to three major religions: Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism. To make sense of Confucianism and Daoism, we look at Chinese life before these traditions developed. Scant recorded evidence of this period, however, requires scholars to make educated conjectures.
   A. The Chinese trace their history back 5,000 years. Though there is no written or archaeological evidence to support it, legends speak of the Era of Three Sovereigns and the Era of Three Sages several millennia before our current era.
   B. During these ancient eras, the basic features of Chinese civilization were established: hunting and fishing, agriculture, boats and carts, religious rituals, silk, centralized governments, and writing.
   C. Whether based in fact or myth, these ancient eras hold important symbolic value for the Chinese, explaining why the culture exists as it does and providing standards by which later people could judge their values and behavior.
   D. Using the past as a moral yardstick can sometimes show contemporary life to be lacking. Confucius thought that the China of his day had strayed from the mores of an earlier golden age, believing that a return to the old ways was the only option for promoting moral harmony in society.

II. The Shang Dynasty is the earliest Chinese period that can be historically substantiated, arising during the 15th or 14th century B.C.E. in the northeastern region of China. An important 19th-century discovery shed some light on religious beliefs and practices during the era of the Shang Dynasty.
   A. During the 19th century, traditional Chinese doctors had been selling a curious medicine they called “dragon bones.” Investigations revealed that these were the shoulder blades of cattle and shells of tortoises, which had been inscribed and used by Shang kings to communicate with the gods and ancestors.
   B. The inscriptions were actually questions about matters these ancient peoples considered important: the best time to plant or harvest a crop, why someone had become sick, why a military expedition had failed, the meaning of a dream, the best location to erect a building, or the best time to take a journey.
   C. Once inscribed, the bone was heated or burned, causing it to crack. The cracks were interpreted for answers, and the procedure was repeated several times to ensure accuracy. The answers were also engraved on the bones.
   D. More than 100,000 such fragments have been recovered, indicating that this type of divination was an important part of early Chinese history and that it was used for both political and religious purposes.
      1. Divining is a common practice throughout the world’s religions. For many societies, making a political decision without conferring with the spirits could be risky or blasphemous.
      2. In ancient China, political and religious matters were intimately connected, and no one would ever consider separating them.
   E. The bone inscriptions also revealed that these ancient people believed there was a close connection between the spirit realm (heaven, or tian) and the human realm (Earth, or di).
1. In Chinese thought, heaven and Earth are continuous realms, in which the gods and spirits are immediately available to humans.

2. A great part of Shang religion focused on maintaining harmony between these realms, essential to the well-being of everyone. Preserving harmony was one of the king’s principal functions.

F. In Shang theology, the divine composed a heavenly court that paralleled the earthly royal court. As the king ruled on Earth through a bureaucracy of nobles, advisors, and other functionaries, the high god ruled heaven with his minions and assistants.

1. Shang Di, the Lord Supreme, presided over many lesser divinities who influenced the powers of the natural and human worlds. The Chinese beseeched them for favors in matters of agriculture, hunting, military campaigns, and health and longevity.

2. Some gods were more local, and their power extended only as far as the city or village limits.

G. Relationships between the ancient Chinese and their gods were businesslike. The bone inscriptions show no indication that people wanted friendships or other intimate relationships with the gods.

1. There is no evidence that the gods were concerned with the moral behavior of human beings. These gods did not give commandments or grant favors based on how well humans treated each other.

2. The central concern in the divine-human relationship was for the gods to receive pleasing sacrifices and tributes and for humans to receive divine assistance with worldly matters.

3. The Indo-Aryans at this same point in history were similarly concerned with meeting basic needs and leading prosperous lives, more so than becoming morally or spiritually aware.

H. Ancestors also played an important part in early Chinese history, as they do today. Though existing in the spirit world, deceased family members continued to exert influence on the living. Hence, they were consulted on important family matters and honored with sacrifices and gifts.

1. Ancestors mediated with the gods, especially ancestors of a powerful earthly family, such as those of the king. The importance of this practice throughout Chinese history suggests that it was widespread among everyday people in the Shang period, not just royalty.

2. Some of the first theorists of religion thought that ancestor reverence may have been one of the earliest forms of religion; given that burial of the dead was probably the earliest religious ritual, this is an easy leap to make.

3. People also felt the need to keep their ancestors happy and to appeal to them for favors. The king’s relationship to his ancestors was especially important because Shang peoples believed that his ancestors could mediate between the king and Shang Di, the Lord Supreme.

I. Ghosts were also part of the unseen spirit world, and they could cause great misfortune, sickness, or other problems. Ghosts were spirits of the dead who had not been properly buried and would haunt the living until their bodies received a fitting funeral.

III. Another concept that plays an important role in the development of Axial Age thought is de, a word found on many of the bone inscriptions. De is translated as “virtue,” although its meaning in pre-Axial China differs from our current definition.

A. The word de referred to a power or force generated by an act of compassion or by a sacrifice that was pleasing to a god or ancestor. The attitude with which the act was performed was most important.

B. Virtue had the power to affect the lives of others in a positive way because an act of kindness encouraged the receiver to act kindly.

C. Those who benefited from compassionate acts felt an indebtedness to the benefactors and would want to repay them with a similar act of kindness, called bao.

D. Virtue is important in Chinese religions—for example, consider the issue of family obligations.

E. According to the ancient understanding of virtue and the sense of obligation it evokes, children are greatly indebted to their parents for giving them life. Because this debt can never be repaid, the only proper response is reverence.

F. Including ancestors as part of the ongoing life of the family is associated with what the Chinese call filial piety, or reverence for one’s parents.
G. The importance of filial responsibility has been foundational for Chinese culture throughout the Axial Age and up to modern times. Similarly, other aspects of the Shang religion discussed in this lecture have endured in some fashion through much of Chinese religious history.

Essential Reading:

Supplementary Reading:

Questions to Consider:
1. What were the similarities between the Shang Dynasty religious beliefs and practices and those in the Indo-Iranian culture?
2. What is the significance of virtue in early Chinese religion?
Lecture Eighteen
The World of Confucius

Scope: The Axial Age in China largely coincides with the Zhou Dynasty. The Zhou Dynasty supplanted the Shang yet retained many of its religious beliefs and practices. The Zhou family justified its overthrow of the previous ruling dynasty through the Mandate of Heaven, which claimed that the divine world bestowed favor upon just rulers and withdrew favor from corrupt ones. This concept had a profound influence on subsequent Chinese politics and religion. But the Zhou’s claim to possess heaven’s mandate did not always translate into a just and peaceful reign. Political instability in the later Zhou Dynasty led to the chaotic Period of Warring States, in which minor kingdoms vied for hegemony while men of learning sought solutions to the pressing political and moral issues of the day. Against this backdrop, we meet the figure of Confucius, one of these learned men and perhaps the most influential figure in Chinese history.

Outline

I. Around 1045 B.C.E., the Shang rulers were deposed by the Zhou Dynasty. In turn, the Zhous would be supplanted by the Qin Dynasty in 221 B.C.E., placing the Zhou Dynasty roughly within the span of the entire Axial Age. To help understand the religious dimensions of this time, we present some of its political and cultural aspects.
   A. The Zhou Dynasty is traditionally traced to King Wen who, despite his title, never ruled China; instead, he was a feudal lord imprisoned by the last Shang king.
   B. Wen’s son, Wu, overthrew Shang rule to become king, freed his father, and bestowed on his father the honorific title “king.” When King Wu died, his younger brother Dan (Duke of Zhou) ruled as regent for Wu’s young son.
   C. Later, these figures were regarded as the paragons of leadership and moral behavior. In particular, Confucius thought highly of the Zhous and reported having frequent dreams about the duke.
   D. Zhou culture lacked writing, though the Zhous quickly adopted the Shang system. Zhou rulers also adopted parts of the Shang religion and may have even worshiped Shang ancestors—the descendants of whom they had ousted.
   E. In addition to countless other gods, Zhou rulers worshiped a high god called Tian. To the Shang, tian had been a generic term for the heavenly realm, but for the Zhou, Tian became more ambiguous.
   F. For the Zhous, Tian was a personal deity, but over time, heaven came to be regarded as an ultimate principle; thus, Tian later meant both a personal god and an impersonal principle.
   G. The crucial difference between the Zhou high god Tian and that of the Shang was that Tian cared about moral behavior. The Shang Dynasty gods had no interest in how humans behaved, nor was moral behavior a condition for granting favors. This difference represents a significant shift from pre-Axial beliefs about the gods.

II. It is not clear how far Tian’s moral interests extended, but heaven did have an interest in the ruling class and how its members treated their subjects, ushering in a new concept of the Zhou Dynasty: Tianming, the Mandate of Heaven, which implied moral sensibilities and interests on behalf of the ultimate powers.
   A. Some credit the Duke of Zhou with articulating the Mandate of Heaven, which decreed that a ruler governed with divine blessing as long as he was virtuous. Heaven withdrew its mandate for wicked or inept rulers, declaring their reigns morally illegitimate.
   B. Not just a birthright, a ruler’s legitimacy was now contingent on his virtue. The Mandate of Heaven may have even been developed by the Zhou Dynasty to justify the overthrow of its predecessors on moral grounds.
   C. Within the context of this period of Chinese history, to regard the divine as moral was a major development.
III. The Mandate of Heaven was not universally or immediately accepted. Historical evidence from the Zhou period allows us to glance at the religious life of common folk, and here, we see elements of dissent from official Zhou theology.
   A. Some aspects of folk religion are found in a classic work, the Book of Odes (Shi-jing), which contains passages that directly protest heaven’s apparent injustices. These laments suggest that not everyone was convinced of heaven’s moral character.
      1. A theological problem now arises that plagues believers to this day: the issue of evil. The problem occurs when we attribute both omnipotence and morality to god. How can god be both all good and all powerful when evil exists in the world?
      2. Countless solutions to the problem of evil have been proposed, but none has gained universal acceptance. Some religions, such as portions of Hinduism, see god as the source of both good and evil; in this view, evil is a practical problem, not a theological one.
   B. Dissent from official Zhou theology might be related to one’s social status. A king, who lives a privileged existence and is divinely endorsed, might regard heaven as just and benevolent. A peasant, who struggles for daily subsistence and suffers misfortunes, might reject the idea of a moral god.
   C. However, there may not have been such a substantial divergence between the religious beliefs of the privileged and ordinary people. Both shared many of the same beliefs and practices yet with distinct interests and orientations.
      1. The rituals of common people involved their own welfare or, perhaps, that of the village, but might not extend much further.
      2. The rituals of the elite were more focused on benefiting the state itself.

IV. Despite the Mandate of Heaven and the fact that the Zhou Dynasty lasted 800 years—China’s longest-lasting dynasty—serious rifts began to appear early in the dynasty’s history.
   A. In 771 B.C.E., the Zhou king was murdered by invading nomads, and the capital was moved farther east, creating the Western Zhou and Eastern Zhou periods. The Eastern Zhou era, which lasted about 550 years, was divided into the Spring and Autumn Period and the Period of Warring States.
   B. The Spring and Autumn age took its title from The Spring and Autumn Annals, traditionally attributed to Confucius. During this time, Zhou ruling power began to decline, creating instability throughout the region.
   C. Chaos followed in the Period of Warring States. Though particularly brutal and disruptive, this era was also immensely creative from a philosophical and religious standpoint.
   D. This time was also known as the Period of One Hundred Philosophers, suggesting that political disorder prompted intellectuals to address the pressing issue of the day: How can people get along with one another?

V. In the midst of political upheaval and philosophical creativity arose China’s most important Axial Age figure and, perhaps, the most influential Chinese figure of all time—Confucius.
   A. The most historically reliable information about Confucius comes from a book called the Analects (Lunyu), a collection of his sayings, conversations, and anecdotes compiled posthumously by his disciples.
   B. No one knows to what extent the Analects is historically reliable, but most agree that much of it reflects the perspectives and words of Confucius’s followers, some of whom may have lived several generations later.
   C. Others claim that Confucius was not a historical figure but a literary invention symbolizing certain values for the elite. This lecture presents the majority view concerning Confucius.
   D. Confucius was born around 551 B.C.E. (and died c. 479) during the Spring and Autumn Period in the state of Lu, a small principality that began to compete with others as the Eastern Zhou Dynasty declined.
   E. Although he is known in the West as Confucius, throughout Chinese history, he was called Kongzi, or Master Kong. The name Confucius was coined by Jesuit missionaries in the 17th century.
   F. He was born into the lower nobility and was relatively poor; his father died when the boy was around 3. He was also a dedicated student.
   G. In the first half of the Analects, we encounter a man of great humility; he was more concerned with self-improvement than with judging others.
H. Passionate about the arts, he believed that music had a moral dimension; listening to appropriate music could make one a better person.
I. Confucius respected authority and believed that a humane society depended on respect for one’s superiors.
J. Though he wanted to gain significant political power, Confucius was never able to do so. His interest in politics was not for the sake of power but for the good of the realm and the well-being of all citizens.
K. Confucius believed that the key to human harmony lay in good government and in the moral character of the ruler and other public servants. If the leader is virtuous, the people will follow suit.

**Essential Reading:**

**Supplementary Reading:**

**Questions to Consider:**
1. What were the differences in how the Shang Dynasty viewed the high god and how the Zhou rulers viewed their high god?
2. What might account for the appearance of so many philosophers during the Period of Warring States?
Lecture Nineteen  
The Foundations of Confucianism

Scope: We make acquaintance with the teachings of Confucius through a collection of his sayings known as the *Analects*, a rather unsystematic and difficult text. We first consider whether or not it is appropriate to call the teachings of the *Analects* “religious.” Confucian thought is not founded on a particular vision of the divine but, rather, on human potentiality. Yet because Confucius emphasized the practice of ritual and the ancient religious forms, it is not inappropriate to consider his teachings as religious in nature. Religious rituals, he believed, enabled individuals to cultivate the qualities of the *junzi*, or “gentleman,” the Confucian ideal of the perfected human being. Self-cultivation served to strengthen and manifest *ren*, or humaneness, the foundational virtue in Confucianism.

Outline

I. Virtually everything we know about the thought of Confucius comes from the *Analects*. However, the book is not an easy read; it has no apparent systematic philosophy or underlying order, but from it, we can glean some of the foundations of his thinking.

A. Confucius lived during a particularly brutal time in Chinese history; for this reason, many of his teachings were directed toward rulers and government officials, as well as family life. He was not interested in abstract questions of philosophy but practical ones.
   1. Given the current state of Chinese civilization, how best do rulers rule?
   2. What are our obligations to family members, and how are they best carried out?

B. Confucius’s main interest was in ethics or morality, which he restricted to humans. Though generally considered China’s greatest religious figure, Confucius had little to say about souls, gods, or spirits, much less morality in relation to these entities.

C. Confucius thought it wise to keep gods and spirits at a distance yet to practice reverence. He never denied their existence, but neither did he make belief in them central to his view.

D. He urged people to be moral and to practice goodness and kindness but never indicated that one would be rewarded by god or enjoy a pleasant afterlife for doing so.

E. In view of this lack of god-talk, why is Confucianism classified as a religion and not merely a philosophy? Actually, it can be considered both.
   1. Buddhism and Vedanta Hinduism are both considered religions, and Confucianism shares their perspective of a basic disinterest in gods and the spirit world.
   2. Asians do not typically distinguish between philosophy and religion, as Westerners do. For Asians, philosophy must be practical and practiced; it cannot be just speculative or theoretical. This emphasis on practicing one’s beliefs closely resembles Westerners’ views on religion.
   3. Confucius did speak of heaven, or *tian*, suggesting that heaven authorized him to teach and, in so doing, applied the Mandate of Heaven to his own work. Though not particularly concerned with divine beings as such, Confucius was interested in rituals, especially those performed for the welfare of the state.

II. The central thrust of Confucian thought is practical. But the practical concerns are informed by a specific vision of the way human beings and society ought to be. What were some of his ideals for individuals and relationships?

A. Though Confucius confessed later in life that he had never actually met one, he viewed sages as the highest level of humans. The sage was the complete embodiment of Confucian values, but Confucius did not regard himself as one.

B. Confucius also mentioned the ideals of the “good man” and the “complete man,” and often, these were associated with particular stations in society.

C. He stressed one ideal person above all others: the *junzi*, usually translated as “gentleman” or “superior man.” By this, Confucius meant someone who had attained a noble character and superior status as earned by hard work, not bestowed as a birthright.

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D. Confucius laid out certain qualities that defined a gentleman in terms of his nature, not his deeds. Confucius’s teaching was centered on character rather than actions, and he thought that moral improvement was part of our very humanity, the way we express and fulfill our deepest nature as people.

E. Specifically, what distinguished a gentleman from others was the quality of ren, translated as “humaneness” or “humanity.” It can also refer to kindness, benevolence, or goodness.
   1. Ren was an old aristocratic term similar to noblesse oblige, the obligation of the aristocrat to be kind to those of lower station. Confucius was the first to make ren central to his teaching, though it is not clear whether he thought that ren was innate to human nature or a characteristic to be acquired.
   2. Ren was a virtue to which one aspired. If it were an inborn quality, it still needed to be cultivated and nurtured to come to full expression. If it were an acquisition, then it would also need cultivation and nurturance to be instilled.

F. For Confucius, cultivating ren involved following a version of the Golden Rule, which also entailed reciprocity—the method of determining what others may want or not want. By understanding our own wishes, we may imagine what others desire. The Buddha called this practice “seeing others as being like yourself.” We might call it empathy.

G. Confucius said that the humane person acts to promote the success of others. Whether one’s hidden desire to see others fail is inherent in human nature or a product of conditioning, Confucius believed that it was a major obstacle to realizing our full humanity. With great effort, the gentleman can remove it.

H. Confucius also speaks of humaneness in the language of love, summarizing ren as “love of others.” However, Confucius did not believe that the humane person should love everyone equally.
   1. Another leading school of the day, the Mohists—led by Mozi—argued that the highest virtue for humans was “impartial caring” or “universal love.” But Confucius found this impractical and inhumane.
   2. Confucius believed that we should love others in proportion to the benefit we receive from them. Thus, the Mohist belief undermined the ancient and deeply ingrained practice of filial piety, which Confucius believed was the basis of all forms of loving.
   3. Confucius also believed that family life is where we learn to love. From learning to fulfill our filial responsibilities, we extend our love to friends and neighbors in the village, to the common people, and ultimately, to the whole of humanity. But as our love extends, it rightly decreases in intensity.

I. The gentleman was not only compassionate but wise, one who knew right from wrong, was a good judge of character, and possessed self-knowledge.

J. The quality of wisdom also meant that one thought for oneself. A gentleman did not blindly follow others.

K. The junzi possessed equanimity, siding with what was right. Like the Buddhist arahant or Hindu jivamukta, the gentleman did not allow external circumstances to dictate his disposition.

L. The quality of equanimity pertained also to the opinions of others. Confucius defined this quality as not being resentful of others’ failure to appreciate oneself; instead, the gentleman should be more concerned about appreciating others.

M. The disciples of Confucius found his path a hard one to walk. Striving for goodness is a lifelong process, and in the end, the goal may be unattainable. Confucius never guaranteed a conclusion to his way, such as Buddhahood or liberation of the soul. Those who took the path of cultivating goodness did so for its own sake.

Essential Reading:

Supplementary Reading:

Questions to Consider:
1. Why is Confucianism considered a religion and not merely a philosophy?
2. What are the important qualities of becoming a “gentleman,” and why should one strive to do so?
Lecture Twenty

The Cultivation of Virtue

Scope: The quality of humaneness (ren) and the other virtues presented in the Analects comprise an image of what Confucius envisioned for individuals and for society. He believed that being good was the essential purpose and primary objective of human beings. Unlike modern ethics, Confucian morality focused on the development of character rather than the performance of ethical acts. But acting in ethical ways is fundamental in shaping moral character, and for this reason, Confucius also stressed the value of certain disciplines—particularly li (ritual and propriety), filial piety, and reverence—in the realization of ren. Although his vision centered on the individual, Confucius believed that the cultivation of goodness would have salutary effects throughout society.

Outline

I. Because the problems facing his society were too profound to be resolved by mere legislation or policing, Confucius thought the solution would come through virtue. Instilled and refined in the individual, virtue could promote greater harmony within and among societies.
   A. Both the Buddha and Confucius believed that kindness and compassion required cultivation through discipline. But unlike the Buddha, who focused on ending samsara, Confucius promoted social harmony in this life.
   B. Confucius called his guideposts for virtue the Dao, or the “way.”
   C. The Dao instructed followers to avoid eating too much and becoming too comfortable. Indulging the appetite dulled the senses and created lethargy. Furthermore, conscious self-restraint helped “subdue oneself” from lapsing into ego-centered thought.
   D. Discipline required self-awareness in word and deed. A form of meditation called quiet-sitting helped one devote attention to personal thoughts and experiences, which sharpened awareness and created space for critical self-examination.
   E. Confucius could look at himself with ruthless honesty, which contributed to at least two other worthy qualities: openness to being taught by others and humility. One had to be humble to be receptive to being corrected and taught. Such humility is based on self-knowledge.
   F. Those following the Dao were devoted to learning, especially the study of certain Chinese classics.
      1. Sages studied books on ritual, the Yi Jing, and the Book of Odes. Eventually, the most important writings were designated as the Wu Jing, or the “Five Classics”—the first canon of Confucian writings.
      2. When Confucianism was later established as the basis of Chinese education, the Wu Jing formed the foundation of the curriculum.
   G. An educated appreciation of the refined arts of music, dance, and poetry was also essential. Confucius believed that particular kinds of music had the power to evoke and refine moral sensitivities. By the same token, certain forms of music could disrupt and degrade capacities for kindness and harmony.
   H. Confucius encouraged his followers to devote attention to the minute details of daily life, such as clothing, food, and even one’s posture.
      1. One of the books of the Analects contains an extensive list of rules for wearing clothes, including the proper colors to wear and appropriate materials for each season, as well as rules for folding clothes correctly.
      2. One should refrain from eating one’s fill in the presence of someone in mourning. This showed solidarity in grief and allowed for reflection on our common lot—we all mourn and we all die. That simple recognition would help deepen one’s sense of compassion and reverence for life.
      3. Though they may sound harsh, such regulations served an important purpose for cultivating moral character. Matters of proper posture, clothing, and reverence demonstrated respect for society and for oneself. Confucius emphasized the need to observe these rules with utmost humility and never to gain advantage for oneself.
I. Despite Confucius’s attentiveness to seemingly mundane aspects of life, he also encouraged detachment to possessions. He believed that happiness had nothing to do with wealth, recognition, or comfort and everything to do with righteousness.

II. The most important dimension of self-cultivation in the Confucian view is proper observance of li. Li has a rich history in Chinese religions, which Confucius infused with new meaning. Originally, li meant the ritual sacrifice performed for the gods, ancestors, and other spirits. But Confucius transformed the concept, regarding li as a discipline for refining humaneness.

A. For Confucius, li referred not only to public formal occasions of ritual but to all occasions of human interaction. He believed that in all our dealings with others, we ought to comport ourselves with all the dignity appropriate to a sacred rite.  
   1. Confucius illustrated examples of social etiquette, such as banishing violence and rudeness and maintaining sincerity. In the Confucian sense, the gentleman is indeed a mannerly individual.  
   2. But manners were not simply for the sake of keeping up appearances. Confucius believed that when practiced with the proper inner disposition, being mannerly had the potential to make us more humane.

B. Confucius also understood li as a form of moral development. For example, performing a ritual was not simply going through the prescribed motions but, rather, should invoke an inner sense of reverence and sincerity for participants and observers. Sacrifice had to be enacted in the proper spirit lest it be ineffective and displeasing to those it was intended to honor.

C. Rituals were elaborate events that required extensive study and direct involvement of many people, which provided an opportunity for refining humaneness.  
   1. Gods were invited to attend rituals and were offered sacrifices of food or other gifts. More important than gifts, however, was the reverential and gracious attitude with which they were offered. According to the Book of Odes, those who sacrificed in the correct frame of mind were rewarded with long life.  
   2. To study what was required to perform the ritual itself was a form of discipline and self-restraint and provided knowledge about the meaning of the ritual, which Confucius believed embodied the mysteries of heaven.  
   3. Ritual evoked certain emotions and states of mind, such as reverence, gratitude, and humility. It promoted cooperation among people and instilled the importance of subordinating personal needs and desires in favor of society’s.  
   4. Finally, ritual underscored the interconnectedness of humanity and divinity, reminding participants of the interdependency of gods, Earth, and other people.

III. How did individual moral cultivation contribute to a better society and better government? Confucius did not believe that problems would be solved by putting everyone on a program of moral self-cultivation. Common people did not have the time or the intelligence to undertake this regimen; they required another approach.

A. For Confucius, the primary function of the ruler and the ruling class was to provide for the welfare of the common people. Thus, it was essential for rulers to practice moral self-cultivation and lead by example: the more virtuous the ruler, the more virtuous the people.

B. By practicing virtue, one might accumulate enough virtuous energy to be morally charismatic, inspiring others to become more virtuous themselves.

C. Without legislation or proclamations, the virtuous ruler could affect the well-being of his state almost effortlessly by being a moral example.

D. Confucius advised rulers to refrain from using force; rather, he said, “desire the good yourself and the common people will be good.” He even predicted that 100 years of moral rule could eliminate killing within the realm.

E. Confucius believed that social superiors could be influenced by their subordinates. This is one reason why he encouraged his followers to take government positions, where they could influence the lower classes, as well as the ruler and his court.

F. Even the commoners could contribute to the welfare of society by cultivating virtue. Confucius believed: “Simply by being a good son and friendly to his brothers, a man can exert an influence upon government.”

G. For Confucius, the personal moral character of all citizens has ramifications throughout a society. The goodness of the individual does make a difference in the world.
Essential Reading:

Supplementary Reading:

Questions to Consider:
1. What are some of the ways in which one can cultivate virtue?
2. Why were rituals significant to Confucius?
Lecture Twenty-One
Early Confucianism and the Rise of Daoism

Scope: After Confucius’s death, his teachings were interpreted by his followers. The two most important Confucian philosophers, Mengzi and Xunzi, agreed on much but disagreed about the quality of human nature. Mengzi argued for the basic goodness of human beings while Xunzi contended that humans were fundamentally neither good nor evil. Their debate, which arose because Confucius himself was ambiguous on the point, reflected a central preoccupation for many Axial Age thinkers across cultures. After its adoption by the Han rulers as state ideology, Confucianism enjoyed a long history of influence in China.

From Confucianism, we turn to Daoism, a philosophy and religion often in tension with Confucianism. According to tradition, Daoism was founded by a figure named Laozi, reputedly an elder contemporary of Confucius. Scholars today almost universally agree that Laozi was the invention of early Daoist practitioners to provide a foil to the figure of Confucius. Probably from the very beginning, Daoist philosophers regarded themselves as providing an alternative to the Confucian perspective.

Outline

I. Confucius preferred to make forthright assertions and brief statements that provoked further thought, rather than to construct logical arguments to support his viewpoints. Because of this style of teaching, his disciples had to interpret his wisdom for themselves and defend Confucianism against rival philosophers who insisted on rational arguments for their perspectives. One such follower, called Mencius (or Mengzi), was a 4th-century disciple of Confucius’s grandson.

   A. As the first major Confucian interpreter, Mengzi’s explanation of the sage’s thought was influential, and many understood Confucius through Mengzi. A thousand years later, in the Song Dynasty, his version was officially accepted as Confucian orthodoxy.

   B. Like Confucius, Mengzi was an itinerant political consultant, traveling from state to state offering advice to rulers—though apparently none accepted it—and taking a three-year sabbatical to mourn his mother’s death, in true Confucian filial reverence.

   C. He finally settled with a small school of disciples who compiled his teachings into a collection known as the "Mengzi" or the "Mencius"—mainly conversations with his students.

   D. Mengzi’s philosophy focused on the role of government in promoting human goodness and the fundamental quality of human nature. Like Confucius, Mengzi encouraged rulers to foster moral development in their subjects, maintaining that virtue was more effective than the use of force or punishment.

   E. But whereas Confucius had said virtually nothing about human nature, Mengzi based his philosophy, in part, on his understanding of human nature.

   F. Mengzi contended that human nature was inherently good, that something deep within us responds naturally to others out of compassion, without ulterior motive. The argument is strong but not incontrovertible.

   G. Yet if humans are born with intrinsic benevolence, Mengzi had to explain why humaneness appeared to be largely absent during his era.

      1. The reason humans fail is that they have neglected to cultivate their innate virtue or have had goodness stripped away by environmental factors, such growing up under abusive conditions.

      2. Mengzi asserted that compassion was innate but needed encouragement to be fully expressed. Here, the home was especially important; the practice of filial piety and a parent’s love for a child were essential to actualize the potential for kindness.

   H. Because of this innate goodness, humans are more responsive to rulers who govern by virtue than by force. Seeing others acting morally and compassionately evokes a desire to do likewise.

   I. Though the concept was unclear in Confucius’s writings, Mengzi believed that all humans were endowed by heaven with goodness.
1. The human responsibility was to foster those good qualities within; by so doing, we serve heaven itself.
2. Serving heaven became less a matter of sacrificing meat to the gods and more a matter of following the “way of heaven”—sacrificing ourselves—in our daily lives.

II. Xunzi, born about the time Mengzi died, provided the chief opposition to Mengzi’s views. Although the two were probably more alike than different, Xunzi disagreed that human nature was basically inclined toward goodness, signifying the first major disagreement within Confucian ranks.
   A. Originally, some thought that Xunzi asserted the fundamental wickedness of human nature, believing that he was influenced by the harsh political and social problems of his day. Others suggested that he was merely trying to balance Mengzi’s overly sanguine estimation of humanity.
   B. Recent scholarship suggests that Xunzi more likely believed that human nature was amoral and had to be refined toward moral sensitivity, which was a long, hard process involving family, education, and the state.
   C. For Xunzi, the practice of rituals and social etiquette was central to cultivating morals. But unlike Mengzi, he believed these were artificial human constructs designed for the benefit of people living in society. He maintained that the way was not rooted in heaven but in human societies that deemed morality as essential to their welfare.
   D. Like Confucius and Mengzi, Xunzi believed in the value of moral education, along with tradition and ritual, and that human beings were morally perfectible. For Mengzi, perfection came by nurturing an innate character. For Xunzi, it involved using humanly devised strategies for shaping amorphous raw material.

III. In the last quarter of the 3rd century B.C.E., the Qin Dynasty came to power, spelling temporary rejection for Confucianism. During the Han Dynasty, the philosophy was revived, and eventually, Confucianism evolved into more of a religion, whose popularity has waxed and waned over the centuries.
   A. Legalism was the ruling philosophy of the Qin Dynasty, which embraced military and police force to keep order and relied on centralized authority.
   B. Because Confucianism threatened Qin sovereignty, Confucian texts were burned, and many Confucians were tortured and killed.
   C. The Han Dynasty replaced the Qin rulers from about 200 B.C.E. to about 200 C.E. China prospered, and Confucianism was once again favored. Han rulers made Confucianism the official state religion and required government officials to study the Confucian texts and pass civil service exams based on them.
   D. By the 1st century C.E., people offered sacrifices to Confucius and built temples in his honor. Mahayana Buddhism was introduced to China, and Daoism began to establish institutional structures, intertwining Confucianism with these religions. During the Song Dynasty, a new philosophical movement, called Neo-Confucianism, attempted to synthesize Buddhism and Confucianism.
   E. Confucius’s prestige has waxed and waned over the centuries, but overall, the Chinese have overwhelmingly admired him. His philosophy was also influential in Korea, Japan, and Vietnam.
   F. A 1906 imperial decree made Confucius “Co-Assessor with the deities of Heaven and Earth.” Under Mao Zedong’s rule, Confucianism was portrayed as anti-revolutionary, and much of it was eradicated. Today, it enjoys a renewed interest among Chinese and others around the world.

IV. From Confucianism, we turn to Daoism, whose early philosophy was a response to the same social and political conditions addressed by Confucianism. Daoism, however, may not have arisen from a single person.
   A. Sinologists distinguish between philosophical Daoism (or daojia, which means the “School of the Way”) and religious Daoism (or daojiao, the “Teaching of the Way”).
      1. Philosophical Daoism is associated with the literate and intellectual class and is primarily concerned with two classic texts, the Daodejing and the Zhuangzi.
      2. Religious Daoism was developed for the common people and was also called the Daoist “church,” a Han Dynasty development when the tradition established priests, temples, rituals, and hierarchies.
   B. Some scholars believe that there is no sharp distinction between the two forms, but because religious Daoism’s origins fall outside the Axial Age, it is not part of this course.
   C. Instead, we turn to philosophical Daoism, which also had religious components: It provided a comprehensive view of the world involving the sacred and a concept of the ultimate.
D. Daoism originated in the 3rd or 4th century B.C.E., when its principal text, the Daodejing, was written. The text must have appeared after the rise of Confucianism because much of it clearly refutes central Confucian ideas.

E. According to traditional Chinese belief, an elder contemporary of Confucius named Laozi wrote the Daodejing. A suspect biography says that Laozi worked in the archives of the Zhou rulers and, after becoming frustrated with society and government, left to spend his life in quiet contemplation.

F. According to tradition, as Laozi left the city, he penned a remembrance of his wisdom, which he gave to the city’s gatekeeper; this later became the Daodejing, or Laozi.

G. Today, most scholars believe that early Daoists created Laozi to provide an author for the Daodejing and a counterpart to Confucius.
   1. The evidence for this conclusion is strong: The stylistic and linguistic differences throughout the text clearly indicate the work of many minds working over a long period of time.
   2. Furthermore, Laozi is not really a name in Chinese; it means “old master” or, perhaps, “old baby.” But of far greater interest are the ideas in the Daodejing and the role they played in China’s Axial Age, to which we will turn in the next lecture.

Essential Reading:

Supplementary Reading:
Lau, *Mencius*.
Watson, *Xunzi: Basic Writings*.

Questions to Consider:
1. Do our laws and social mores assume that human beings are fundamentally good, fundamentally wicked, neither, or both? Can a position on the quality of human nature ever be decided empirically?
2. Why might early Daoists have invented the figure of Laozi?
Lecture Twenty-Two
The Daodejing

Scope: The Daodejing (also called the Laozi) and the Zhuangzi are the principal classics of philosophical Daoism (daojia). The Daodejing is the text most translated into English next to the Bible. It is a mysterious book, difficult to interpret because of its poetic, evocative style and its elusive subject. The mysterious quality of the text is probably deliberate, given that it appears to valorize the obscure and indistinct in life. We will attempt to make sense of this classic work by discussing its root metaphors, including water, emptiness, and the way of nature. This exploration leads to a discussion of how the Daodejing addresses the Axial concerns about selfhood and morality by encouraging a life of ease, free from calculation and self-centered desires.

Outline

I. Surrounded by uncertainty about its origins, authorship, and meaning, the Daodejing is a book of mystery. Daodejing is translated as the “Classic of the Way and the Virtue.” We begin by attempting to shed some light on what is essentially indefinable.
   A. A concept used by all forms of Chinese philosophy, Dao is ordinarily translated as the “way” or “path.” In a formal, philosophical sense, Dao meant the ideal way, or the manner in which something goes well.
   B. The Daodejing uses Dao in a more important sense: “the way of nature.”
   C. The Daodejing calls Dao the “universe’s mother,” suggesting that it is the source of all things and that which nurtures and sustains. But there is no sense that Dao is a god or goddess.
   D. The Daodejing’s cryptic opening passage suggests that there are two aspects to Dao: that which can be talked about and that which cannot; both are part of the same reality. Though human understanding of the Dao is limited, it is not unattainable; it simply goes beyond conceptual understanding and speaking of Dao.
   E. The aspect of Dao that can be discussed is its manifestation in the many individual things that make up the world. Despite this, its ultimate ineffability restricts what we can say of it and how we speak of it.
   F. This tension between the named and the nameless Dao accounts for the form of the Daodejing itself. The entire text is terse, avoiding over-analysis and rational justification and appealing more to imagination than discussion.
   G. The Daodejing rarely talks about Dao despite the fact that this is its subject. Instead, the book describes the persons or things that follow or embody Dao.
   H. When the text does talk about Dao, it does so obliquely, through imagery and paradox that baffle rather than illuminate.

II. The twofold nature of Dao helps explain a paradox that runs throughout the Daodejing. At times, Dao is said to be stable, eternal, constant. At other times, it’s described as the source of change or perhaps even change itself.
   A. The eternal, stable dimension can be identified as the primordial, ineffable Dao. The changing Dao is understood as all that manifests into and passes out of the world.
   B. The Chinese icon Taijitu, known as the yin/yang symbol in the West, helps illuminate this paradox, though it does not explain or resolve it.
      1. The Chinese term for the black swirl is yin, representing the dark, hidden, passive, receptive, yielding, cool, soft, and feminine. The white swirl is yang, representing the light, open, active, aggressive, controlling, hot, hard, and masculine.
      2. The symbol represents the Chinese ideal of harmony and wholeness, suggesting that each thing requires its equal and opposite to maintain balance. Dao is the power underlying yin and yang.
      3. Neither yin nor yang can exist without the other. Each contains the seed of the other within it. This relationship accounts for the phenomenon of change, each giving rise to the other.
   C. The Taijitu icon represents the coexistence of change and constancy within Dao. Dao causes—or is—change in the world. Simultaneously, it is the source of balance, harmony, and wholeness.
D. Perhaps the relationship of Daoism to Confucianism is like the relationship of yin and yang: The yin of Daoism offsets the yang elements of Confucianism. For this reason the Daodejing valorized many things associated with the yin side of life: depth, mystery, intuition, the feminine, receptivity, darkness, enigma, passivity.

E. The use of water imagery in the Daodejing illustrates the yin concept by suggesting that Dao—or the sage who abides in it—is yielding, flexible, and compliant, just as water is as it flows around rocks in a stream.
   1. The sage avoids strife and conflict (rocks) and, thus, appears weak to others; yet what seems weak is really a powerful force, able to overcome resistance with patience.
   2. Over time, water erodes the rocks (obstacles) until they dissolve. Thus, the weak and flexible conquer the stiff and strong.

F. The image of emptiness also appears throughout the Daodejing, illustrating yin principles.
   1. For example, a clay pot and a room are yin things because of their receptivity and emptiness. Though a room has four walls, a ceiling, and a floor, the Daodejing invites us to look at what is not there; the room is actually the empty space within the physical boundaries. Its true usefulness is its emptiness. The same is true for a clay pot.
   2. These Daodejing images encourage us to reorient our perceptions and recognize the value of what appears to be valueless, prompting us to think in a different way and encouraging us to be empty.

III. Like the Confucians, the Daoists understood Dao as the appropriate way for humans to order and live their lives. But for the Daoists, following the way was participating in the Dao of nature, the changes and rhythms of the universe and the natural world.

A. The Dao of humanity was the Dao of nature because humans are part of the natural world. Confucians, on the other hand, connected the way not with nature but with culture: the observances of tradition, ritual, and  

B. For Daoists, to neglect the way of nature was the root of society’s misery. Early Daoism saw Confucianism not as the solution to the problem but as its cause.

C. Confucianism further alienated humans from the Dao of nature through anthropocentrism and close regulation of human relationships. To Daoists, Confucianism ruined life’s spontaneity.

D. Daoists accused Confucianism of advocating the very things that led to corruption in an earlier golden age, claiming that in better times, there were no virtues, no talk of benevolence or compassion, no need to discriminate right from wrong, and no ritual to cultivate moral goodness. The solution to human suffering, the Daoists believed, was a return to the way of the universe.

IV. Because Daoists believed that the welfare of society depended greatly on the character of its rulers, much of the Daodejing expounds on social and political philosophy. But the book is often read mainly as a manual for individual spiritual development. We must look at both the political philosophy and spiritual practices of the Daodejing, focusing here on the spiritual aspect and saving the political for the next lecture.

A. There is a strong element of mysticism in the ideal of the sage or master, the mystical being the experience of losing one’s sense as a separate, individual self while perceiving a much greater reality. This mystical sense is both encouraged by and expressed through particular practices and ways of being in the Daodejing.

B. The first and perhaps most important of these practices involves diminishing the ego and its associated cravings for attention, recognition, and control. True sages were not interested in career advancement or receiving credit for their accomplishments.

C. The sage’s concern was the welfare of others. In accordance with the way of nature, heaven, Earth, and humanity must be balanced; “Sages blend into the world,” says the Daodejing.
   1. To blend into the world, one lives a simple existence, close to nature. Daoist sages were counterparts to India’s samanas, who also wandered or lived simply with few possessions.
   2. The Daoists, however, were not seeking to escape samsara, nor did they consider the world covered by a veil of illusion. Instead, the world was real and a source of genuine pleasure and insight.

D. By welcoming everything conventionally shunned, ostracized, and rejected, the sage also sought to avoid the dualisms of good and bad, right and wrong, beautiful and ugly, praise and blame.
E. The ideal of overcoming the dualisms created by human judgments challenged ordinary perceptions and modes of thinking. This type of thinking drew attention to the fact that systems of value were human constructions, not necessarily absolute and perhaps not necessarily the best we are capable of.

**Essential Reading:**
Ivanhoe, *The Daodejing of Laozi.*

**Supplementary Reading:**

**Questions to Consider:**
1. How can the yin/yang symbol (*taijitu*) help in understanding Daoism?
2. What are the similarities between Confucianism and Daoism?
3. After reading the *Daodejing*, try to compose an 82nd chapter to the text, emulating its style and perspective.
Lecture Twenty-Three
Daoist Politics and Mysticism

Scope: The Daodejing is most often read as a text prescribing spirituality for individuals, but it was most likely intended as a document offering political advice for effective governance. Its political message was directed to the ruling classes, who were encouraged to avoid self-aggrandizement at public expense and to interfere as little as possible in the lives of their subjects. But the political philosophy of Daoism was eclipsed by its mystical component, which was articulated by the philosopher Zhuangzi. In the text that bears his name, the Zhuangzi, he took the Daoist perspective into its spiritual heights. Using wonderful and often unfathomable anecdotes and parables, Zhuangzi developed not so much a systematic philosophy but an anti-philosophy, not unlike Nietzsche. In so doing, Zhuangzi made a compelling case against all claims to absoluteness and insisted on the relativity of truth.

Outline

I. The Daodejing was initially intended to offer advice on how to manage government rather than one’s personal life. However, the paths for governing a state well and living one’s life well actually coincided. Nowhere is this convergence of political and spiritual excellence seen more clearly than in the Daoist practice of *wu wei*.
   
   A. Often translated as “non-action,” *wu wei* is also “actionless action” or “acting by not acting.” It does not mean doing nothing but, rather, acting in the easiest way possible to accomplish what needs to be done. *Wu wei* has the appearance of not acting at all.
   
   B. Using *wu wei*, athletes might reach a point at which their sport becomes effortless and elegant, as if they are more like spectators than agents controlling their own actions. Similarly, writers sometimes reach moments when the words seem to flow from their hands onto the page, bypassing their conscious awareness.
   
   C. Our compulsive desire to control is the greatest obstacle to living in accord with Dao. We want to regulate the course of our lives, coerce others to do what we want them to do, and rid ourselves of unpleasant situations. The practice of *wu wei* is the relinquishment of this tendency to control.
   
   D. *Wu wei* recognizes that the world—heaven, Earth, and humanity—follows its own path and rhythms. Living in accordance with *wu wei* is what Westerners call “going with the flow.”
   
   E. Following *wu wei* as a political practice is connected with the Daoist analysis of suffering in ancient China. Misery, the Daodejing says, is the result of governments’ acting contrary to the Dao of nature, that is, being self-centered and interfering in peoples’ lives.
   
   F. *Wu wei* is the policy of non-interference; by leaving things alone, everyone benefits.
      1. The Daodejing is not exactly clear about how *wu wei* works to effect social change. Did the ruler model spiritual cultivation for the people? Did the ruler’s trust in the people inspire them to be worthy of that confidence? Or did the Daoists believe in the magical power of accumulated virtue?
      2. Unfortunately, the Daoists had no contemporary examples of virtuous leaders to support their claim, but they did believe that a ruler’s practice of *wu wei* was essential for the country’s well-being.

II. One classic follower of Daoism, Zhuangzi, shifted his interest from the political arena of the Dao to individual spirituality.
   
   A. Believed to be an actual person, Zhuangzi (369–286 B.C.E.) was a contemporary of Mengzi during the Warring States Period. But unlike virtually every other philosopher of this period, Zhuangzi had little to say about the political and social realms.
   
   B. According to legend, Zhuangzi was offered a high-ranking position in the court of a King Wei but turned it down, comparing the job to the condition of an ox that was well cared for, then dressed in embroidered cloth before being led to slaughter.
   
   C. Although he did not seem to accept the old masters’ political philosophy, Zhuangzi was inspired by the Daodejing and is principally responsible for drawing out and emphasizing the mystical components of Daoism.
D. Zhuangzi is credited with writing what are called the “Inner Chapters” of the book that bears his name, considered a masterpiece of literature. Others wrote the “Outer” and “Miscellaneous” chapters of the book. It is provocative, entertaining, and humorous, with a free-flowing, easy style that is consistent with its message.

E. Most of Zhuangzi’s ideas were anticipated in the Daodejing, but the Zhuangzi highlights these ideas and expresses them with vividness and concreteness lacking in the earlier text.

F. A fundamental part of Daoist practice was the acceptance of change without resistance. The Zhuangzi cautions against resistance and invites people to welcome the impermanence of life.

G. The prospect of change exhilarated Zhuangzi, and he especially encouraged the acceptance of death as vital to happiness in life.

H. For Zhuangzi, accepting impermanence entailed seeing all points of view and value judgments as relative and tentative. He cautioned against making absolute judgments for the simple reason that things change. What appears today as the worst of news may turn out tomorrow to be a blessing in disguise.
   1. Zhuangzi believed that our misery was caused by our conceptions, making us see the world in ways that disrupt our spontaneity in dealing with life’s situations.
   2. To overcome this tendency to rush to judgment, Zhuangzi advocated emptying the mind, or “sitting and forgetting.” The idea was largely based on the metaphor of emptiness in the Daodejing.
   3. The consistent practice of sitting and forgetting allowed one to relinquish habitual beliefs and thought patterns, enabling one to see the world afresh by ridding oneself of calculated responses.

I. Perhaps the most famous story in the Zhuangzi is the butterfly dream.
   1. A popular Western interpretation sees the parable as an argument for the relativity of views and, hence, the relativity of all claims to truth. Because we never know for certain whether we are dreaming or awake, how can we be sure of anything? Is the reality of a dreaming butterfly less real than the waking reality of a man or the dreaming reality of a man less real than the waking reality of a butterfly?
   2. In early Chinese commentaries, the story is told by an omniscient narrator who knows that Zhou is dreaming, but Zhou does not know. Thus, the story is an allegory about life and death, which are compared to waking and dreaming. Being awake and dreaming are both real phases of existence, as are life and death. In death, we may be as happy as a butterfly, unaware of a previous existence or identity.

III. Before completing our study of Daoism, let us briefly examine the so-called religious Daoism that developed in the post-Axial Age.

A. The Daoist church came into being in the 2nd century C.E., during the Han Dynasty. Confucianism had just been established as the official state religion, and Mahayana Buddhism had arrived in China. Partly in response to Buddhism, Daoism began to develop ecclesiastical structures and assume new beliefs and interests.

B. Several popular movements also predicted a second coming of Laozi and his establishment of a taiping, “great peace.” By this time, Laozi had been deified and considered the incarnation of Dao. Temples were built and sacrifices made in his honor.

C. Several Daoist devotees began to receive revelations from Laozi. One man, Zhang Daoling, received instructions about ritual, meditation practice, healing, and moral observances. These teachings became the basis for a new Daoist movement called the Celestial Masters.

D. As Daoism spread throughout China, it blended with indigenous practices of folk religions, which involved divination, ancestor reverence, and various kinds of magical practices.

E. In some areas, the Daoists encountered Chinese alchemists who experimented with the magical potential of various substances, including cinnabar, which they believed prolonged life or created immortality.

F. With these new developments in religious Daoism, the tradition became firmly embedded in the popular religious practices of ordinary Chinese. Philosophical Daoism continued in various forms, experiencing moments of prominence and patronage—such as in the T’ang Dynasty—and moments of ridicule and obscurity, usually when Confucianism was in ascendancy. Such is the way of the Dao.
Essential Reading:

Supplementary Reading:

Questions to Consider:
1. In what ways might the practice of *wu wei* improve the lives of people and the ways in which rulers govern?
2. How is the practice of “sitting and forgetting” related to the metaphor of emptiness in the Daodejing?
3. How would you interpret Zhuangzi’s butterfly dream?
Scope: By now, it will be evident that the study of Axial Age entails honing our understanding of religion and appreciating the historical development of the concepts of self and ultimate reality, the stock-in-trade of religion. The course has shown the importance of treating religions as historical phenomena, often interacting with one another and with other domains of culture. This historical approach has enabled us to see how the function of religion evolved from cosmic maintenance in pre-Axial times to personal transformation in the Axial era. As human beings began to interpret themselves as individuals ontologically separate from one another, existence is problematized and new solutions are sought and implemented. The concern for morality intensifies, and virtue and discipline are heralded as laudable goals. New, more expansive understandings of ultimate reality are put forward and advanced. The significance of these developments for human culture can hardly be overestimated.

Outline

I. As we wrap up our study of Axial Age religions, we reflect on the significance of religion as a phenomenon in human life.
   A. Not a single religion is a static entity; each has changed and developed over time. Even Jainism, which claims to propagate the same message throughout time, acknowledges that the message changes according to the current social and individual needs of the age.
   B. The founders’ messages and the way they are perceived and practiced can be two different things. But that doesn’t make the message illegitimate.
      1. All religions undergo refinement or even complete reinterpretation, as is the nature of all human institutions.
      2. Sometimes changes are quite dramatic. The Buddha, for example, emphasized that he was not a god, yet later, he was revered as divine.
   C. Religions are not self-contained entities; they are intertwined with other domains of human experience, profoundly shaped by—and profoundly shaping—human culture on many levels.
      1. Confucianism emerged in response to hard political and economic times, much later serving as the basis for training government officials.
      2. Zoroastrianism was a reform movement responding to widespread lawlessness, which later evolved into the Iranian state religion and lasted for centuries.
      3. Daoist thought was the basis for Chinese medicine, and Greek aesthetic ideals shaped the first human representations of the Buddha.
   D. Religions constantly interact with one another in both positive and negative ways.
      1. Daoism developed in dialogue with Confucianism, and Buddhism, in dialogue with Hinduism.
      2. Daoism and Buddhism adopted many ideas and practices of their counterpart traditions and reinterpreted and rejected others. And Buddhism and Daoism merged to produce Zen.
   E. Different religions function differently among cultures, and sharing ideas and practices among religions continues today.
      1. Though Buddhists relied on their own religion’s teachings, many in South Asia also prayed to Hindu gods.
      2. A Chinese bureaucrat might have practiced Confucianism at work but enjoyed home life as a Daoist.
      3. Even today, many churches in our society offer courses in yoga, taiji, and meditation, though they tend to downplay their religious connections.

II. The concept of selfhood appeared during the Axial Age, marking a significant change in the way human beings thought about being human. The “self” was now recognized as a separate individual with agency and moral responsibility.
   A. Selfhood’s importance is reflected in the way certain sages democratized spiritual attainment.
      1. The Buddha and Mahavira contended that perfection and liberation were possible for anyone, not just upper-caste men.
2. Although Confucius oriented his teachings toward the ruling class, he believed that common people played an important role in fostering harmony among family and society.

B. But the sense of self also became problematic. Human self-consciousness brought with it a feeling of greater freedom but required greater responsibility.

C. The problem of self required change, and it was incumbent upon individuals to transform themselves. Thus, every Axial sage studied in this lecture series had a solution, making the function of religion one of personal transformation.

1. For Zoroaster, the problem was the lawlessness of the drujvants, whose arrogance led them to slay others to gain the wealth of cattle and sheep. He proposed that people orient their lives to the power of good, subordinating to the will of Ahura Mazda.

2. For the Upanishadic sages, selfish desires and attachment led to negative karma. One solution was to identify with Brahman or the atman, recasting the self as eternal and one with all reality.

3. The Buddha’s solution to suffering was to eliminate the concept of selfhood altogether, which was really just an illusion anyway.

4. Confucius advocated subduing the self and its wishes to the greater human community. His practices of li were specifically tailored to instill the virtues of reverence, humility, and gratitude.

5. Daoism fostered blending into the world and giving up control. Wu wei, or non-interference with the way things are, amounted to trusting in the processes of nature.

D. Despite their different solutions, all Axial Age religions agreed that selfhood led to consequences that were unwholesome for individuals, society, and the world.

E. But selfhood was not uniformly understood by all these traditions; thus, it’s important to remember that these observations are based on limited resources and elite perspectives of these religions.

III. In addition to selfhood, the Axial Age gave rise to changes in thinking about ultimate reality.

A. For the most part, pre-Axial concepts of the divine were anthropomorphic, conceived as human-like, animal-like, or simply as indistinct spirits that might or might not take tangible form. In the Axial Age, different ideas about the divine world became more widely accepted alongside these older, finite ones.

B. One primary example of this development is the concept of Brahman, originally understood as the power of ritual. In the Axial Age, Brahman became the deepest reality of the universe, a singular reality pervading and transcending all—totally beyond the reach of the human mind.

C. The idea of the Dao functioned like Brahman, even to the extent of having both nameable and unnameable aspects.

D. For Buddhists, the ultimate reality was nibbana itself; it, too, was the reality beyond which there could be nothing greater.

E. Zoroaster’s idea of the divine did not reach the more mystical level that other religions did, but his concept of two deities—good and evil—was a movement in this direction.

F. We even see a similar development in Judaism, where the Israelite god Yahweh was depicted in the earliest biblical writings as a tribal deity. In Second Isaiah (from the mid-Axial Age), Yahweh became the one universal god who was interested in the welfare of all humanity.

G. Though some Axial Age notions of ultimate reality were more sublime than those of earlier ages, something had been lost in the transition to the Axial Age, as the function of religion shifted from cosmic maintenance to personal transformation.

1. The shift was a positive change for humans, who no longer had to appease the gods to ensure that the sun rose and crops grew.

2. The downside of relieving this burden, however, was that people lost the sense of needing to collaborate in the maintenance of the world.

3. Post-Axial humans generally believe that the world can take care of itself. But problems associated with neglecting the Earth in the last half-century have become increasingly evident.
IV. Studying Axial religions can challenge our ideas and provoke meaningful thought, perhaps providing applications for our modern-day lives.
   
   A. It is essential to study at least one other religion in detail to understand one’s own spiritual grounding. In this way, we can see things that our own views take for granted.
   
   B. Reading both the Buddha and Confucius reminds us of the importance of virtue, wisdom, and compassion and of the need to learn and practice these qualities.
   
   C. Closely related to these virtues is the concept of nobility. Both the Buddha and Confucius related nobility to one’s character, proposing that the noble one aspires to wisdom and compassion and takes the hard road to realize them.
   
   D. Such concepts as Brahman and Dao make us aware of our minds’ limitations in the face of the universe’s mystery. If we appreciate the Upanishadic and Daoist insistence on the world’s ultimate mystery, we can perhaps become more comfortable with not knowing everything about the world. In the face of mystery, as these concepts suggest, the most appropriate response may be, simply, silence.

Essential Reading:

Supplementary Reading:

Questions to Consider:
1. Jaspers claimed that in the Axial Age, “the spiritual foundations of humanity were laid simultaneously and independently... And these are the foundations upon which humanity still subsists today.” Having now studied many of the prominent individuals and traditions associated with the Axial Age, would you agree with Jaspers’s assessment? In what ways does humanity still subsist on Axial foundations?
2. How can the study of other religions enhance the understanding of one’s own religion?
3. What are the fundamental similarities among the Axial Age religions covered in this course?
4. Some observers have suggested that we have now moved into a second Axial Age. Would you agree? Why do you think they suggest this?
Biographical Notes

Confucius (c. 551–479 B.C.E.): Perhaps the most influential Chinese philosopher. Known as Kongzi, or Master Kong, he was born in the state of Lu, the son of a relatively poor family of the lower nobility. Although he aspired to serve as a political advisor to a duke or king, the most important post he held was the equivalent of a police commissioner in his home province. Confucius gathered disciples and taught throughout his later life and occasionally consulted with various kings and government officials. He maintained that human harmony lies in moral action and good government, which support the well-being of the state and the people. In the Han Dynasty, Confucianism was adopted as the state ideology, and Confucius himself was later deified and worshiped.

Gotama, Siddhattha, the Buddha (c. 490–410 B.C.E.): A nobleman in northeastern India who became a samana at age 29 when he was faced with the realities of sickness, old age, and death. After 6 years of zealous ascetic practices, he decided to pursue what he called the Middle Way. While engaged in meditation under a tree, he attained complete understanding of the dynamics of suffering and anguish and how to eradicate them. For the next 45 years, the Buddha traveled throughout the Gangetic plains of India, teaching his Dhamma and establishing a community of followers. At his death, the unburned remains of his body were housed in reliquaries at various locations significant in his life. (Tradition says he was born in 563 B.C.E.)

Laozi: Probably a fictitious character invented by the early Daoist philosophers to provide a counterpart to Confucius. Daoist tradition holds that Laozi was an older contemporary of Confucius and that the two were acquainted. One legend even suggests that Confucius was one of Laozi’s students. Daoist stories relate several encounters between Laozi and Confucius, and the former is depicted as gaining the upper hand in philosophical debate. He is reputed to have written the Dao de Jing, or the Laozi, as it is sometimes called, when asked to leave a record of his wisdom by the city gatekeeper as he departed social life to spend his old age in solitude. In later Daoism, Laozi is deified and worshiped.

Mahavira, Vardhamana (c. 599–527 or 540–468 B.C.E.): The 24th Tirthankara of Jainism. Born to King Siddhartha and Queen Trishala of the kingdom of Vaishali in northeastern India, Vardhamana became a samana at age 30, following the deaths of his parents. After 12 years of ascetic practice, he attained the state of omniscience and was recognized as a Tirthankara, one who shows the way to liberation from samsara. His efforts also earned him the title the Mahavira, or the “Great Hero,” the epithet by which he is best known. From his enlightenment until his death, he taught in northeastern India and amassed a large community of monastic and lay followers.

Mencius (c. 385–c. 312 B.C.E.): Chinese philosopher who was one of the first and most influential interpreters of Confucius. Mencius, or Mengzi, as he was known, was a student of Confucius’s grandson and later adopted the peripatetic ways of the sage and consulted with the rulers of various Chinese principalities. He was especially interested in the question of human nature and argued that human beings were fundamentally good. The evil that humans do comes from social conditioning, not from our basic natures, he believed. His teachings were compiled by his students into the Mencius.

Xunzi (c. 310–c. 219 B.C.E.): An early Confucian thinker who opposed Mencius’s position on human nature. A native of the state of Zhao in north-central China, Xunzi provided a rigorous explanation and defense of Confucian thought in the work that bears his name, the Xunzi. Unlike Mencius, Xunzi believed that human nature was not fundamentally good, and hence, human beings required thoughtful and deliberate education to become good people. Along with Confucius and Mencius, Xunzi was one of the architects of Chinese Confucianism.

Zhuangzi (c. 369–286 B.C.E.): The Daoist thinker who was most responsible for drawing out the mystical implications of the foundational Daoist principles. Unlike other philosophers of the Warring States Period, Zhuangzi was decidedly disinterested in political and social affairs. His philosophy reflects the interests of the solitary person in communion with the ultimate reality. Zhuangzi’s thought revels in the excitement of change and surrenders to its inevitability. The “Inner Chapters” of the text called the Zhuangzi, which are believed to come from Zhuangzi himself, are a collection of compelling stories, parables, and anecdotes that are intended more to question conventional wisdom and practices than to establish a systematic philosophical position.

Zoroaster: Greek transliteration of the name Zarathustra, an Iranian prophet and founder of the religion of Zoroastrianism, or Mazdaism. There is no consensus on when Zoroaster lived. Some scholarly estimates suggest that he lived as early as the 15th century B.C.E. and as late as the 6th century B.C.E. Zoroaster was a priest who felt called to urge his contemporaries to worship the Ahura Mazda exclusively. According to Zoroaster, Mazda was the
one true god of goodness who was in conflict with the god of evil and his minions. In order to attain salvation, individuals must align themselves with Mazda against the forces of evil. Zoroaster’s thought may have influenced many of the important beliefs of later Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.
Essential Reading:

Adler, Joseph A. *Chinese Religious Traditions*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2002. This is one of the best short introductions to the history of Chinese religions that I’ve seen. It is accessible to the lay reader and scholarly in its research. Charts and photographs nicely augment the exposition.

Boyce, Mary. *Zoroastrians: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices*. London and New York: Routledge, 2001. Mary Boyce was a professor of Iranian Studies and perhaps the world’s leading scholar of Zoroastrianism up until her death in 2006. *Zoroastrians: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices* was her effort to provide a comprehensive history of the religion, from the earliest times to the present, in a single volume accessible to the intelligent layperson. It is probably the best text in English for gaining a foundational understanding of Zoroastrianism.


Foltz, Richard C. *Spirituality in the Land of the Noble: How Iran Shaped the World’s Religions*. Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2004. This very readable book is helpful in understanding the characteristics of Indo-Iranian religion, the reforms of Zoroaster, and the subsequent effects of Zoroastrianism on other religions. It also explores the Buddhist presence in Iran and the changes brought by the advent of Islam to the region.

Hopkins, Thomas J. *The Hindu Religious Tradition*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing, 1971. This brief text is one of the clearest presentations of basic Hinduism in English. It is especially good for understanding the Vedic and classical periods in Hinduism. Highly recommended as a short, comprehensive study of Hinduism.

Ivanhoe, Philip J. *Confucian Moral Self Cultivation*, 2nd ed. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2000. A compact book by one of the leading contemporary scholars of classical Chinese philosophy, this text focuses on one of the salient themes of early Confucianism. It also provides useful chapters on both Mencius and Xunzi.

Jaspers, Karl. *The Origin and Goal of History*. Michael Bullock, trans. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953. This is the book that introduced the concept of the Axial Age, but it is about more than just the Axial period. It is Jaspers’s comprehensive philosophy of history, developed in a deliberate attempt to avoid the Eurocentrism that characterized earlier efforts in the sub-discipline. Unfortunately, the book is difficult to find nowadays.

Mair, Victor H., trans. *Wandering on the Way: Early Taoist Tales and Parables of Chuang Tzu*. New York: Bantam Books, 1994. Because the Zhuangzi has not been translated into English with the same frequency as the Daodejing, there are not as many versions to choose from. Among the translations of the last few decades, I prefer Mair’s. His is one of the few complete English translations of the Zhuangzi, and it is accessible to the general reader.


devoted to a particular idea, such as karma or moksha, which allows the reader to rapidly find the subject of his or her interest. The Introduction provides a helpful overview of Hindu thought, showing the relationship of Niguna Brahman and Saguna Brahman theologies.

Supplementary Reading:


———. *The Wonder That Was India.* New York: Grove Press, 1959. A classic presentation of the history of Indian culture from the earliest times through the first millennium C.E.


Bodhi, Bhikkhu, trans. *In the Buddha’s Words: An Anthology of Discourses from the Pali Canon (Teachings of the Buddha).* Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2005. This is a selection of previously published translations of Suttas in the Pali Canon. Bhikkhu Bodhi, a Theravadin monk, is a fine translator. The collection provides a representative selection of all the Sutta collections in the Pali Canon. If you are interested in reading the earliest Buddhist scriptures in English translation, this is a good place to begin.

———. *The Noble Eightfold Path: Way to the End of Suffering,* Seattle: BPS Pariyatti Editions, 1994. The casual reader may find this presentation of the Buddha’s Noble Path a bit dry, but it details about as clearly as possible the spiritual discipline leading to nibbana as it was most probably practiced by early Buddhists.


Brooks, E. Bruce, and A. Taeko Brooks. *The Original Analects: Sayings of Confucius and His Successors.* New York: Columbia University Press, 1998. One of the controversial new works in Confucian studies, which reduces Confucius’s contribution to the Analects to a part of chapter 4. The rest, the authors argue, was composed over a period of two centuries by followers with a very different philosophical outlook from the sage himself.


Eisenstadt, S. N., ed. *The Origins and Diversity of Axial Age Civilizations.* Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986. An informative collection of essays on the Axial Age transformations in ancient Judah, Greece, India, and China, mainly from sociological points of view. Eisenstadt’s introductions are especially helpful. This is one of the very few scholarly texts that exclusively treat the Axial Age.


Feuerstein, Georg, Subhash Kak, and David Frawley. *In Search of the Cradle of Civilization: New Light on Ancient India.* Wheaton, IL, and Chennai, India: Quest Books, 1995, 2001. This collaborative work challenges the Aryan “invasion theory” and advances the argument that Indus and Aryan cultures have always been one.
Fingarette, Herbert. *Confucius: The Secular as Sacred*. New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1972. Fingarette offers a thoughtful reading of Confucius that attempts to show his relevance for modern life by emphasizing the importance of rituals in daily life. This text is not one to begin a study of Confucius, but it is a provocative interpretation for those who have a basic understanding of the Chinese sage.


Fung, Yu-Lan. *A History of Chinese Philosophy. Vol. 1: The Period of the Philosophers*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1952. This work is a classic. It was first published in the 1930s, but it still ranks as an excellent introduction to philosophical thought in the late Chinese Axial Age. The book is principally written to philosophers and scholars and, thus, assumes some familiarity with the discipline.

Graham, A. C. *Disputers of the Dao: Philosophical Argument in Ancient China*. Chicago and La Salle, IL: Open Court Publishing Company, 1989. Graham’s work, like Fung’s, is also written for scholars. Many non-specialists may find the book a bit obscure and hard to read, but this is an important analysis of early Chinese philosophy.


Harrapa. Harappa.com, 1995–2006. www.harappa.com/. This well-designed Web site contains hundreds of pictures of artifacts and ruins from the ancient civilization, as well as some excellent articles explaining them. There is even an online store for purchasing coffee mugs, T-shirts, and other items featuring Indus images.

Harvey, Peter. *An Introduction to Buddhism: Teachings, History, and Practices*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990. This is one of the best comprehensive introductions to Buddhism. It begins with the life and teachings of the Buddha and traces the development of the three major forms of Buddhism, clearly delineating their characteristic features.

Hick, John. *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent*, 2nd ed. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989, 1991, 2004. In this wide-ranging theological work, John Hick, a prominent contemporary Protestant theologian, tries to show that the world’s post-Axial religions are united in their endeavor to reorient their adherents from self-centeredness to reality-centeredness. In making his case, Hick spends several chapters discussing the characteristics of Axial Age religions and distinguishing them from pre-Axial religious forms. Whether or not one agrees with Hick’s overall argument, the book is useful in the way it marshals evidence and texts from many traditions to show the change in religious function prompted by the Axial Age.


Hume, Robert Ernest, trans. *The Thirteen Principal Upanishads*, 2nd rev. ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 1971. Hume’s translation is one of the relatively early English translations of the Upanishads. After more than a century, it is still one of the best and most scholarly. The introduction and textual notes are very helpful.


Ivanhoe, Philip J., and Bryan W. Van Norden. *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy*. New York: Seven Bridges Press, 2001. This is an excellent anthology, containing excerpts from many of the important philosophical works produced during the Chinese Axial Age. Among the works it includes are selections from the *Analects*, the Mencius, the Xunzi, the Zhuangzi, and the complete Ivanhoe translation of the Daocejing. The best text of its kind.


Koller, John M. *Asian Philosophies*, 4th ed. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2002. I use this textbook in my course on Asian Philosophy. It is one of the clearest presentations of the basic philosophies of India and China in a single volume. Here, you will find not only the classical-era philosophies of Asia but also other perspectives, such as Islam, Neo-Confucianism, and modern developments in Hinduism and Buddhism. This is a good resource for getting a foundational perspective on the many Asian worldviews. Because this is a secondary source, it should be read in conjunction with the primary texts from each tradition.


Ñanamoli, Bhikkhu. *The Life of the Buddha: According to the Pali Canon*, new ed. Seattle: Pariyatti Publishing, 2001. This is the only account of the Buddha’s life (that I am aware of) that solely uses the Pali Canon as its source. The text of Bhikkhu Ñanamoli’s work is essentially long passages from the Pali Canon connected by narrative comments. For contrast, consult Robert Allen Mitchell’s *The Buddha: His Life Retold*.


Obeyesekere, Gananath. *Imagining Karma: Ethical Transformations in Amerindian, Buddhist, and Greek Rebirth*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002. Obeyesekere’s work is an impressive volume exploring the conceptualization of rebirth and karma in a variety of cultural contexts. It is useful both for its
comparative analysis and its explanation of how rebirth came to be ethicized and connected to the doctrine of karma in the South Asian Axial Age.


Olivelle, Patrick, trans. *Upaniṣads*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996. Olivelle’s translation is a superb rendering for the modern reader. It is informed by careful scholarship and provides excellent introductory material. This is the best of recent translations.


Radhakrishnan, Sarvepalli, and Charles A. Moore, eds. *A Sourcebook in Indian Philosophy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967. A fine selection of important Hindu texts, this work includes primary sources from the six orthodox schools of Hindu philosophy, as well as texts from the heterodox traditions.


Van Norden, Bryan W., ed. *Confucius and the Analects: New Essays*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2002. This is a collection of essays by a wide range of scholars—some sinologists, some philosophers—on Confucius and the principal source of information about him, the Analects. This anthology is both accessible to the educated reader and representative of fine scholarship in Confucian studies.


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Internet Resources:
Access to Insight. www.accesstoinsight.org/. This is an excellent Web site for studying the earliest texts of Buddhism. Contains English translations of texts from the Pali Canon and links to the Canon itself, study guides, and helpful information about Theravada Buddhism.
Avesta.org. www.avensta.org/. This Web site contains many useful resources for understanding Zoroastrianism, including translations of the Avesta and other Zoroastrian texts, glossaries, calendars, explanations of rituals, and many interpretive essays.
Kenoyer, Jonathan Mark. “Mohenjo-daro!” Harappa.com, 2005. www.mohenjodaro.net/. This site contains more than 100 images from Mohenjo-daro, one of two principal cities of the Indus culture. There is a slide show, an introductory essay, and links to other interesting sites.
Vipassana Fellowship. www.vipassana.com. A nice Web site focused on the Buddhist meditation practice called vipassana, or “insight.” The site contains instructions on how to meditate, as well as links to many other useful resources in Theravada Buddhism.
The World of Traditional Zoroastrianism. www.zoroastrianism.com/. This Web site is maintained by traditional Mazdayasni Zarathushtris and provides a glimpse of contemporary Zoroastrianism from within the tradition itself.