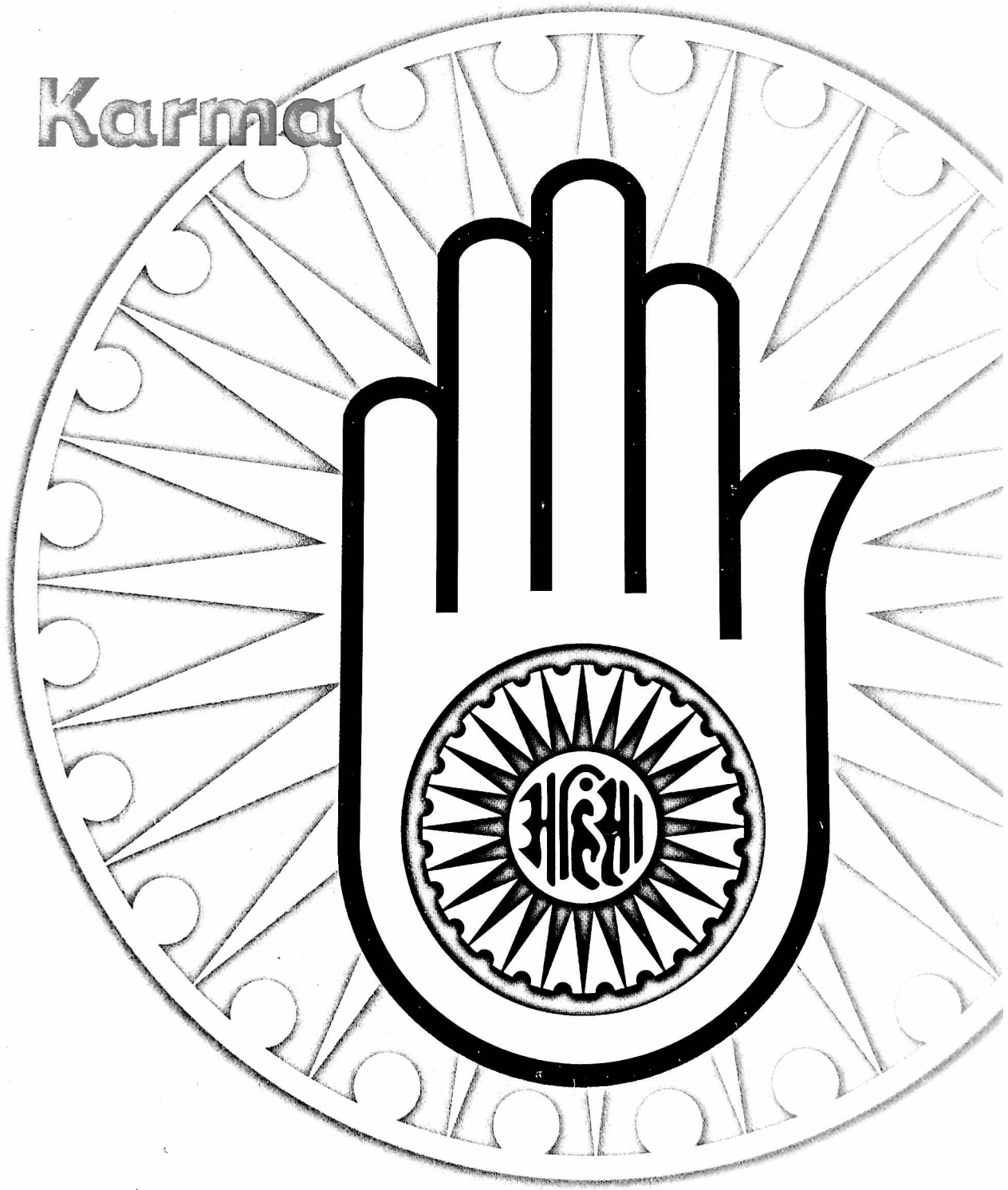
DIMENSIONS OF ASIAN SPIRITUALITY

Karma



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DIMENSIONS OF ASIAN SPIRITUALITY
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Introduction

Webster's Third New International Dictionary of the English Language has the following to say about karma:

> 1. the force generated by a person's actions that is held in Hinduism and Buddhism to be the motive power for the round of rebirths and deaths endured by him until he has achieved spiritual liberation and freed himself from the effects of such force;
>
> 2. the sum total of the ethical consequences of a person's good or bad actions comprising thoughts, words, and deeds that is held in Hinduism and Buddhism to determine his specific destiny in his next existence;
>
> 3. a subtle form of matter held in Jainism to develop in the soul and vitiate its purity, to lengthen the course of individual transmigration, and to postpone the possibility of final salvation.

This dictionary entry, inevitably, concerns the word *karma* as it is used in the English language. By and large this corresponds to the way—more precisely: one of the ways—in which the word is used in Sanskrit and other Indian languages.

In Sanskrit, the word can be used in many other ways as well. Apte's *Practical Sanskrit-English Dictionary,* for example, gives the following fifteen meanings: (1) Action, works, deed. (2) Execution, performance. (3) Business, office, duty. (4) A religious rite. (5) A specific action, moral duty. (6a) Performance of religious rites as opposed to speculative religion or knowledge of Brahman. (6b) Labour, work. (7) Product, result. (8) A natural or active property (as support of the earth). (9) Fate, the certain consequence of acts done in a former life. (10) (In grammar) The object of an action. (11) (In philosophy) Motion considered as one of the seven categories of things. (12) Organ of sense. (13) Organ of action. (14) (In Astronomy) The tenth lunar mansion. (15) Practice, training.

This multiplicity of meanings is hardly exceptional in Sanskrit, where many words have a sometimes impressive number of unre-

lated or barely related meanings. In the case of *karma,* however, it has led some scholars to the mistaken assumption that the *karma* that is connected with the belief in rebirth (Apte's no. 9) is historically a development out of *karma* in the sense of "religious rite" (Apte's no. 4). In reality the two are quite independent of each other and originated in altogether different milieus.

As in Webster's dictionary entry, then, the Indian word *karma* can be used in connection with the belief in rebirth. This is the use of the word that interests us in this book. In order to make clear that two different notions are involved, it will be useful to speak of "rebirth and karmic retribution," using the adjective *karmic,* which, by the way, is not present in Webster's dictionary (but has found a place in the *Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary*). The belief in rebirth in one form or another is widespread in religions around the world, but in most of them karmic retribution plays no, or no important role. Belief in rebirth can therefore very well exist without the notion of karmic retribution. This is an important point, for scholarly research into the origin of karmic retribution in India has sometimes mistakenly drawn conclusions from the observation that the belief in rebirth is (weakly) present in the oldest surviving literature of India, the Veda (see the boxed text titled "The Veda" in Chapter 3). Indeed, the prior (but incorrect) conviction that the origin of karmic retribution must be looked for in the Veda has led certain scholars to postulate, without supporting evidence, that this notion must be related to the religious rites, also sometimes called *karma,* that are the central concern of Vedic literature.

It is clear from Webster's dictionary entry that karma is something that concerns individuals: a person will be reborn in accordance with his or her actions. This is indeed the kind of karma that is most often written and thought about in the surviving literature of India; we will call it *orthodox karma.* It is this orthodox karma that will be discussed in the first part of this book. The notion will be presented here in its historical development, a development that concerns the major religions of ancient and classical India, most notably Jainism, Buddhism, and Brahmanism, and involved intensive interaction between these and other religious currents. The presentation will require a certain amount of jumping forward and backward between these movements, and also some jumping forward and backward in time, but I will try to reduce this to a minimum.

Once the historical presentation is in place, the remainder of the first part will discuss some of the ways in which different currents of thought tried to come to terms with this belief: how does karma work, and why? It will become clear that karma came to exert a profound influence on Indian philosophy in several ways.

The orthodox karma of authors and scholars did not always coincide with more popular notions related to but yet different from this literary and philosophical concept. To do justice to these alternative notions, the second part of this book will deal with *variants of karma.* These include the belief in the possibility of transfer of merit and in devotion to God as a means to circumvent karmic retribution.

The concluding reflections will briefly consider some developments outside the Indian subcontinent, and I will then propose some thoughts regarding how to make sense of the belief in rebirth and karmic retribution.

CHAPTER 1

Origins and Religious Use

Vedic literature is not the place to look for the origins of the belief in karmic retribution (see below). Unfortunately there is no other literature to help us in this respect. The notion of karmic retribution pops up, so to say, in the literature of a region distinct from the homeland of Vedic literature: the earliest literature of Jainism and Buddhism. And it does not present itself, in that other literature, as a new notion, but as an old one, one that had become oppressive.

The belief that death is not the end, that there will be new lives afterward, perhaps in this same world, perhaps in decidedly more agreeable circumstances, should not necessarily be a source of pessimism. The further belief that one can influence the quality of one's future lives by what one does in the present might rather give rise to optimism. It is likely that many of those who believed in rebirth and karmic retribution were indeed attracted by the prospect of a better life afterwards and treated this belief as a source of hope. This attitude does not, however, find expression in the earliest surviving literature. The surviving literature usually takes an altogether different position. It deals with continued existence in future lives as a source of distress, as an endless repetition of suffering and unhappiness. The concern of those whose ideas find expression in that literature was not to assure an agreeable rebirth, but rather to put an end to rebirths altogether. Their aim was liberation from the endless cycle of rebirths. This much they agreed upon. They did not all agree on the way in which such a liberation can be attained.

There is, then, very little that can be said about the origin of the

belief in rebirth and karmic retribution in India. By the time this belief manifests itself in the surviving literature, it is well established. Our literary sources present us not with the origin of this belief, but with ways to deal with its consequences. Liberation from rebirth and karmic retribution is the aim. Note that this is primarily a negative aim. The aim is not, or not primarily, a state of bliss or well-being in or after this life, but rather the definitive and irreversible termination of the sequence of lives one is otherwise condemned to live.

The particular context in which our early textual sources deal with the belief in rebirth and karmic retribution, and the reason why they do so, are to be kept in mind. As stated above, these sources are particularly interested in liberation from the endless cycle of rebirths. This, however, is a goal that does not fit in easily with the belief. Belief in rebirth and karmic retribution implies, primarily, that one will reap the rewards of the seeds one sows in this life, normally in a next life. Good deeds will give rise to agreeable forms of rebirth, bad deeds to disagreeable ones. Virtue is rewarded; vice is punished. This belief has an undeniable moral aspect: it implies that the universe has an in-built moral dimension. This is, of course, fine, or even reassuring, for those who wish to live an upright yet agreeable life and hope to continue doing so in a future existence but poses a problem for those who are fed up with it. For these last there is no obvious way out. Living a virtuous life is no solution; its consequence will be a more agreeable life, a life in which more of one's desires are fulfilled and therefore a life in which it will be even harder to separate oneself from its temptations. And a life of vice will be responsible for a future existence of misery and reduced mental capacities, which exclude the very possibility of intelligent action.

These reflections will make clear that a discussion of karma—that is, of the belief in rebirth and karmic retribution—cannot be limited to an exposition of this belief in its various manifestations. It is true that the belief has taken different shapes during its known history in the Indian subcontinent of some two and a half millennia. It is also true that there were different evaluations of what are good and what are bad deeds, depending on what particular religious current one belonged to. However, these issues cannot be discussed without taking into consideration the question that our textual

sources very frequently discuss along with them, the question as to how individuals can free themselves from the karmic consequences of their deeds. We will see that this question is not only inseparable from the belief in rebirth and karmic retribution, it also has an effect on the shape this belief takes in different religious movements. A historical presentation of a number of early religious movements in northern India will make this clear. It is with such a presentation that we therefore begin.

God and Gods in Indian Religions

In studying the indigenous religious history of South Asia, it is important to keep in mind that we are faced with a variety of religious movements that do not always have much in common with each other. One feature, however, applies to many of them: religion in the Indian situation is not always identical with the worship of one or more gods. Notions like "belief" and "faith"—so common in the Abrahamic religions—are only rarely applicable in the Indian situation, and where they are, they cover something different altogether. The existence of gods is not denied in Buddhism, Jainism, and Brahmanism, but—at any rate during the early period—they are not central to the religious efforts of the followers of these religions. These religions accept the existence of gods and of many other invisible, supernatural beings, but all these beings play a relatively marginal role even in the minds of the most religiously motivated people.

Brahmanical priestly speculation had a tendency to be impersonal (the gods in late-Vedic literature are a mere shadow of the temperamental beings whose praise was sung in early Vedic hymns), and it is not therefore surprising that Brahmanical speculation came to concern itself with an impersonal highest entity, Brahma, that did little beyond encompassing the universe. Knowledge of this impersonal entity became highly prized, as was the realization that one's inner self is identical with it. Beside this impersonal Brahma (the word is here used in the neuter gender), there was also a personal god called

Brahma (used in the masculine), often thought of as the creator god. However, this god inspired no one to worship him.

Subsequent centuries saw the rise to prominence within the Brahmanical tradition of two gods in particular, Shiva and Vishnu. Worshipers tended to look upon one or the other as the supreme God (the use of a capital *G* now seems appropriate), so much so that most Hindus would look upon themselves as followers of one or the other. Both these Gods are surrounded by elaborate mythologies, which provide them with wives, enemies, and much else. The mythology of Vishnu is of particular interest in that it provides him with a number of incarnations *(avatara):* Vishnu was (and is) believed to have been born on earth in the form of a number of quasi-historical figures in order to restore order. The most famous of these *avataras* are Rama and Krishna. Rama is the hero of the Sanskrit epic called *Ramayana;* Krishna figures prominently in the other Sanskrit epic, the *Mahabharata,* and in other texts. Both Rama and Krishna became the object of personal devotion and continue to play a central role in *bhakti* (see below).

Occasionally the three gods Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva are looked upon as constituting a trinity *(trimurti),* responsible for the creation, preservation, and destruction of the world respectively. Unlike Vishnu and Shiva, the creator god Brahma did not become the object of separate worship.

CHAPTER 2

Karma in and after Greater Magadha

The region east of the Vedic homeland, that is, east of the confluence of the Ganges and the Jumna, in the eastern Ganges plane, may conveniently be called Greater Magadha. It saw the appearance of a number of religious currents during the centuries around the middle of the first millennium B.C.E. We will consider—after some introductory remarks about Greater Magadha—Jainism, Ajivikism, those who saw in knowledge of the self the key to the highest goal, and Buddhism.

Magadha was the name of a kingdom in the eastern Ganges valley. In the fourth century B.C.E. it became the center of an empire that at its height unified most of the Indian subcontinent, but Magadha and its surrounding regions—jointly to be referred to as Greater Magadha—was characterized by its own culture even before the creation of this empire and for some time after its collapse. It was in this area that urbanization took off again from approximately 500 B.C.E. onward (after the disappearance of the so-called Indus civilization more than a thousand years earlier).

The culture of Greater Magadha was in many respects different from Vedic culture, whose heartland was situated to its west. The two cultures could not but come in close contact, especially when the rulers of Magadha expanded their kingdom and included the Vedic heartland and much else into their empire (which reached its greatest extent under the Maurya emperor Ashoka). The resulting confrontation and sometimes assimilation of the two cultures constitutes the background against which much of the subsequent history of Indian culture has to be understood.

One of the most distinctive features of the culture of Greater Magadha was the belief in rebirth and karmic retribution. This explains why the religious movements that were based on this belief originated here. The best known of these religious movements are Jainism, Buddhism, and Ajivikism. The way in which this belief came to be adopted in Brahmanism, in spite of resistance that took many centuries to dissipate, will be explained in a later chapter. Note here that this belief came to be thought of in the Brahmanical tradition (and in modern scholarship until recently) as an inherent and inseparable part of it.

The cyclic vision of time—in which creations and destructions of the universe succeed each other in a beginningless and endless sequence—is another notion that originally belonged to Greater Magadha, only to be subsequently adopted and claimed as its own by Brahmanism. This vision is to be distinguished from the belief in a beginningless and endless sequence of births and deaths of sentient beings, but the parallelism between the two is easy to see.

Funerary practices, too, opposed the culture of Greater Magadha to Vedic culture. The inhabitants of Greater Magadha built round funerary tombs for their dead; it is possible that dead bodies were placed in those tombs, without prior incineration, but this is not certain. The custom survives in the stupas of the Buddhists and Jainas, and in the so-called *samadhi*s (funerary constructions) built for certain Hindu saints until today. Brahmanism absorbed in due time the belief in rebirth and karmic retribution (see below) but never accepted the funerary practices of its eastern neighbors, except in the exceptional case of certain Hindu saints.

There are good reasons to assume that Ayurveda, the classical form of Indian medicine, had its roots in the culture of Greater Magadha. Unlike the Vedic medical tradition, which heavily relied on sorcery, spells, and amulets, the medical tradition prevalent in Greater Magadha prepared and used drugs, often in ointments and plasters. What is more, the idea of restoring the balance of bodily fluids, central to classical Ayurveda, also appears to derive from the culture of Greater Magadha. As in the case of other cultural features (think of rebirth and karmic retribution), the medical tradition of Greater Magadha found its way into Brahmanical medicine and lived

on as part of Ayurveda, whose very name (note the part *-veda*) bears testimony to the unjustified Brahmanical claim that this tradition was originally theirs.

The influence of Greater Magadha on the subsequent cultural and religious history of South Asia is hard to overestimate and may include many more features than the ones here enumerated. Unfortunately this culture left us virtually no textual sources apart from the Buddhist and Jaina canons so that it is extremely hard to find out more about it. Its major historical position was overshadowed in later centuries by the unprecedentedly successful spread of Brahmanism, to be discussed below. Here as elsewhere, Brahmanism reinterpreted past events, and even spread the idea that the creation of the Maurya empire (which had been a disaster for Brahmanism) was due to a Brahmanical advisor to its first emperor.

Jainism

One of the religious currents to appear in Greater Magadha in the middle of the first millennium B.C.E. was Jainism, and it is the one most apt to enlighten us on the problem of rebirth and karmic retribution. The reason is that it offered a solution that fits the problem like a glove. By studying its solution, we find out how exactly the problem was thought of.

The solution offered in the earliest Jaina texts (and confirmed in other early sources) is asceticism. Not just any kind of asceticism. Liberation was thought to be the end result of a long period of ascetic exertions, which culminated in the total immobilization of the ascetic. This immobilization concerned the body but also the mind. This immobilization went as far as it could possibly go, eventually including the suppression of activities such as breathing, and inevitably resulted in physical death. Indeed, liberation was thought to occur at the moment of death, provided that all other conditions had been fulfilled.

We will return to those other conditions in a minute but will first consider what link there could possibly be between immobility asceticism and the belief in rebirth and karmic retribution. This link can easily be discerned. Karmic retribution means that *my* future is determined by what *I* do. Deeds are central to this belief, and the San-

skrit word *karma* does indeed primarily mean *deed, activity.* If deeds lead to rebirth, and I don't want to be reborn, the obvious remedy is to abstain from all activity. This is what the early Jainas did.

Probably the earliest surviving detailed description of the road leading to liberation in the Jaina texts occurs in the so-called *Acaranga Sutra.* I will not present it here, for it is long and difficult. The main points are, however, clear. The ascetic who decides that he is ready for it takes up a position—lying, sitting, or standing—abstains from all food, and faces death with complete indifference. He starves to death in a state of total restraint with regard to all activity and movement. It is the culmination of a life of training and preparation.

Jainism and Its Canon

The founder of Jainism as we know it, Mahavira, was a contemporary of the Buddha and must have lived, like the latter, in the fifth century B.C.E. Buddhist sources indicate that he died before the Buddha. It appears that the two teachers were aware of each other's existence but never met.

Jaina tradition is no doubt correct in its claim that Jainism split up at an early date. The consequences of this split are visible today: Jainism survives in two divisions that disagree with each other on a number of points of theory and practice. One of these differences concerns the dress requirements of monks. This difference has given the two divisions their names: The monks of the Shvetambaras (dressed in white) wear white clothes; those of the Digambaras (dressed in space) wear no clothes whatsoever.

A further difference concerns the survival of the earliest texts, believed to include (among other things) Mahavira's words. According to the Digambaras, these earliest texts have not survived; according to the Shvetambaras, they have, though incompletely. But even the Shvetambaras admit that these early texts, or what remained of them, were not committed to writing until the fifth century C.E. Until that time they had presumably been preserved orally.

Theoretically the Shvetambara canon consists of three parts: (1) The Purvas (old texts), (2) The Angas (limbs), and (3) The Angabahya (subsidiary canon). The Shvetambaras themselves consider part 1 to be entirely lost and that the same is true of portions of part 2. Linguistic and other criteria justify the belief that some of the surviving texts in the canon (among them the *Acaranga* and the *Uttaradhyayana*) are considerably older than others.

For the modern scholar it is clear that many of the texts included in the Shvetambara canon belong to a period not far removed from the date at which these texts were written down. Only some of these texts (such as the *Acaranga* and the *Uttaradhyayana*) may go back to a period closer to the time of Mahavira. Other texts, most notably the *Thananga* and the *Samavayanga,* present topics in numerical sequence; they are based on, and give expression to, lists of topics that were considered important and that had been arranged in accordance with the number of items they contained. This is an interesting feature of the Jaina canon, for the Buddhist canon contains similar texts, which came to exert a profound influence on the development of Buddhist thought (see "The Buddhist Canon" below).

The unreliability of a large part of the Jaina canon (at least as far as information about the earliest period is concerned) is no doubt due to the lack of a strictly organized mnemonic tradition. In this respect Jainism differed a lot from Brahmanism, where the mnemonic tradition was strong and implied intensive training from a young age onward. Buddhism, too, with the institution of a well-regulated monastic tradition, succeeded much better in preserving its ancient texts.

The emphasis on restraint of activity and movement is not surprising. We read repeatedly in the *Acaranga* that suffering is the result of activity: "He knows that all this suffering is born from activity"; "No action is found in him who has abandoned activity, the condition for rebirth originates on account of activity."

The most obvious remedy against such a situation is abstention

from activity: "Free from activity he knows and sees, he does not long for anything because of his insight"; "He is wise and awakened who has ceased from activity.... Looking at those among the mortals in this world who are free from activity, having seen the result connected with activity, he who really knows turns away from activity"; and so forth.

All this gives us a clear and intelligible picture of the way to liberation in early Jainism. Activity being the source of all unhappiness, the monk tries to stop it in a most radical manner. The monk abstains from food and prepares for death in a position that is as motionless as possible.

The picture presented so far contains a serious flaw, and the early Jainas were aware of it. Given their beliefs, it cannot be denied that the abstention from all activity does not produce karmic consequences. However, before abstaining from all deeds, even the most committed Jaina ascetic has been active in the world, in his present life and even more so in the innumerable lives that he has lived before. All those earlier deeds will be clamoring for retribution, and the short time that our ascetic spends motionlessly will not change this. As a result, even the most extreme form of asceticism cannot lead to the desired end. The crucial question the Jaina practitioners were confronted with is how to disencumber themselves from the traces of their earlier deeds.

They had an answer. Immobility asceticism is not agreeable. Remaining in a standing position for days on end, preferably in the heat of the sun, abstaining from food and drink, not protecting one's body from stinging insects and other vermin that will prey upon the ascetic—all this creates great suffering. The Jainas looked upon this suffering not as an inevitable byproduct of the chosen method, but as an essential part of it. This suffering, they claimed, destroys the traces of earlier deeds.

Already the *Uttaradhyayana*, another early Jaina text, gives expression to this double role of asceticism. We read here, for example: "What does the soul produce by renouncing activity? By renouncing activity it produces a state without activity. By being without activity the soul does not bind new karma and destroys the karma that was bound before."

Note that this passage, along with many others, explicitly attributes a double function to immobility asceticism. On the one hand, the ascetic, for the very reason that he (or, more exceptionally, she) does not do anything, does nothing that could bring about karmic retribution. On the other, he burns the traces of earlier deeds. Asceticism, if judiciously practiced, may in this way culminate in a moment (the moment of bodily death of the ascetic) in which no karmic traces are left that might be the occasion for a new life. The ascetic, in this case, will not be reborn.

Interestingly, the early Buddhist texts, where they criticize the Jainas, attribute to them this same conviction of the double function of asceticism. The following passage, which presents the Buddha as being in conversation with a person named Mahanama, is of particular interest:

> At one time, Mahanama, I resided... on the mountain Gijjhakuta. At that time there were many Jainas on the black rock on the slope of the mountain Isigili, standing erect, refusing to sit down, and they experienced painful, sharp, severe sensations that were due to self-inflicted torture. Then, Mahanama, having arisen in the evening from my retirement, I went to... where those Jainas were; having gone there I said to those Jainas: "Why, dear Jainas, are you standing erect, refusing to sit down, and do you experience painful, sharp, severe sensations that are due to self-inflicted torture?" When this was said, Mahanama, those Jainas said to me: "Friend, the Jaina Nathaputta, who knows all and sees all, claims complete knowledge and insight saying: 'Always and continuously knowledge and insight are present to me, whether I walk, stand still, sleep or be awake.' He [i.e., Nathaputta] says: 'Formerly, Jainas, you performed sinful activities; you must exhaust that sinful activity by means of this severe and difficult practice. Being here and now restrained in body, speech, and mind amounts to not performing sinful activity in the future. Thus, as a result of the annihilation of former actions by asceticism and of the nonperforming of new actions, there is no further effect in the future; as a result of no further effect in the future there is destruction of actions; as a result of the destruction of actions there is destruction of suffer-

ing; as a result of the destruction of suffering there is destruction of sensation; as a result of the destruction of sensation all suffering will be exhausted.' And this word of Nathaputta pleases us and is approved of by us, and therefore we are delighted.... Happiness, dear Gotama, should not be reached through happiness; happiness should be reached through hardship."

The person called Nathaputta in this passage is the same as Mahavira, held to be the last omniscient saint of the Jainas. The Jainas, we learn from this passage, were "standing erect, refusing to sit down," and we are given to understand that they did so for the purpose of "the nonperforming of new actions" and "the annihilation of former actions by asceticism."

It will now be clear that serious Jaina ascetics should take care not to die too soon. If they died before they had experienced the required amount of suffering, traces of earlier deeds would remain, and they would be reborn. This explains why all conditions must be fulfilled before Jaina ascetics can decide that they are now ready for liberation, by means of a self-inflicted death induced by lack of food and exhaustion.

This, then, is the method proposed in the early Jaina sources. What does it teach us about the notion of rebirth and karmic retribution?

The answer is straightforward: The Jaina method is based upon the assumption that all activity—including involuntary activity, such as breathing—has karmic consequences and binds a person to the cycle of rebirths. All activity, it may be recalled, includes good deeds. Good deeds may secure a good rebirth. They get us no closer to the highest aim: liberation from rebirth. Morality has no role to play on the highest steps of the ladder to liberation in early Jainism.

The activity from which committed Jaina ascetics try to free themselves was not only bodily activity. Breathing, a bodily activity that is particularly difficult to stop, is part of it. But mental activity, too, should be stopped. The accomplished Jaina ascetic does not only physically resemble some kind of statue in the landscape. The mind, too, has come to a complete standstill. It has to be like this, for also thoughts and feelings have karmic consequences.

Ajivikism

Ajivikism is a vanished Indian religion, in the sense that it has no followers any longer. It arose roughly at the time of Jainism and Buddhism, in the same region, and survived for some two thousand years before it disappeared without leaving any literature of its own. There are reasons to think that it was quite popular in its early days (the great emperor Ashoka gave the Ajivikas a cave with an inscription to that effect in the third century B.C.E.). A close inspection of the sources of information about this religion that have survived confirm that it was indeed close to Jainism. Its ideas about rebirth and karmic retribution, in particular, differ only in one important respect from those of the early Jainas.

Remember that advanced Jaina practitioners pursued a double goal: (1) abstaining from all bodily and mental activity by means of immobilization asceticism; (2) destroying the traces of deeds performed in the past by means of the suffering brought about by that same immobility asceticism. Asceticism played in this manner a double role.

The Ajivikas agreed with the Jainas on all essential points but one. They, too, were of the opinion that all deeds, whether physical or mental, had consequences, usually in a future life. They also drew the conclusion that the only means not to create now the seeds for future lives was the abstention from all activity. They did not, however, accept that the suffering that necessarily accompanies such a radical immobilization destroys the traces of deeds performed in the past.

Their dilemma is manifest. How could they liberate themselves from the cycle of rebirths and karmic retribution if there was no way to destroy the traces of earlier deeds? The answer is simple: they could not. Liberation could not be forced. Traces of earlier deeds could not be suppressed. They would only go away once they had brought about their natural, karmic, consequences. But by the time they had done so, new acts would have been committed, which would leave traces of their own that would not go away until they too had brought about their karmic consequences. And so it would go on, birth after birth over endless periods of time.

The one, and relatively small, theoretical difference between Jain-

ism and Ajivikism resulted thus in a major difference in practice. Jainism taught that there was a way to put an end to the cycle of rebirths, Ajivikism had to concede that there was not. For Ajivikism every individual would go on being born and reborn according to a fixed pattern from which there was no escape. The belief of the ordinary Ajivikas therefore amounted to a strict determinism or even fatalism, which left them no way to reach the highest goal: freedom from rebirth.

Our information about the Ajivikas is admittedly lacunary, primarily because no Ajivika texts have been preserved. There is, however, an enigmatic passage about Ajivika doctrine preserved in the Buddhist canon and confirmed in its essentials by information contained in the Jaina canon. This passage reads as follows in the paraphrase of A. L. Basham:

> There is neither cause nor basis for the sins of living beings; they become sinful without cause or basis. Neither is there cause or basis for the purity of living beings; they become pure without cause or basis. There is no deed performed either by oneself or by others, no human action, no strength, no courage, no human endurance or human prowess. All beings, all that have breath, all that are born, all that have life, are without power, strength, or virtue, but are developed by destiny, chance, and nature, and experience joy and sorrow in the six classes of existence. There are 1,400,000 chief uterine births... and 8,400,000 great world periods [*kalpa*] through which fool and wise alike will take their course, and make an end of sorrow. There is no question of bringing unripe karma to fruition, nor of exhausting karma already ripened, by virtuous conduct, by vows, by penance, or by chastity. That cannot be done. The cycle of rebirths [*samsara*] is measured as with a bushel, with its joy and sorrow and its appointed end. It can neither be lessened nor increased, nor is there any excess or deficiency of it. Just as a ball of thread will, when thrown, unwind to its full length, so fool and wise alike will take their course, and make an end of sorrow.

The passage contains parts that are difficult to understand, some of which have been omitted here. However, the central point of Ajivikism is clearly expressed: there is no such thing as discarding past karma by any other means than experiencing its consequences.

However, even the dark clouds of Ajivikism had a silver lining. The cycle of rebirths, the Ajivikas believed, was not endless. It covered a long time, to be sure; 8,400,000 kalpas is a long time indeed. Given that each kalpa covers many millions of years, it is easy to see that the full number of years in a complete "life cycle" is astronomical. (A duration of 4,320 million years is sometimes advanced for a kalpa; 8,400,000 kalpas will in that case correspond to more than thirty five quadrillion [35×10^{15}] years, far longer than the modern astronomical estimate of the age of the universe with its "mere" 13.7 billion [13.7×10^{9}] years.) But yet, there is going to be an end. Those who have come to the end, how will they behave? The answer, which we have learned from Jainism, is clear. Such people will practice immobility asceticism. They do so, in this case, not in order to reach liberation, but *because* they are about to attain liberation. The distinction is subtle but not unknown in other religions: Calvinists claimed that they lived virtuous lives not in order to be saved, but because they had been predestined to be saved.

Ajivikism was preached by people who lived ascetic lives because they were sure that they had come to the end of their time. They succeeded in converting people to their views, but most of those converts, naturally, did not become ascetics themselves, but limited themselves to accepting a strictly deterministic world view. It is possible that such a world view suited them well in a world that increasingly emphasized the fixed position that each individual occupied, and had to occupy, in society, as we will see below. We do not know for sure, and we never will, as no texts belonging to this religion have survived. We will see, however, that other sources (including the *Mahabharata*, a famous Sanskrit epic dating from the last centuries preceding the Common Era) are acquainted with forms of fatalism, which they do not, however, associate with the name Ajivikism.

Before we leave Ajivikism, it will be useful to have a closer look at the fatalism it preaches. For the doctrine to make sense, it must be assumed that previous deeds determine the present completely or almost completely. Most in particular, previous deeds determine our present deeds, which in their turn determine our fate in a next life.

There is no possibility of escape because we are in no position to resist our karmic pressure from the past. Only in this way can it be maintained that the full series of births and rebirths is determined from the beginning and that the number and nature of life forms everyone has to pass through is fixed.

There is no logical necessity to the belief that earlier deeds determine every last detail of subsequent lives even if we accept that they do play a major role in this process. It is easy to imagine a situation in which a person, though under great karmic pressure, decides to resist this pressure and act in accordance with his or her own judgment. Many religious thinkers of India did indeed take this position, leaving to individuals at least some freedom to act in ways that were not completely predetermined by their earlier deeds. However, the deterministic current remained strong, too, and finds expression variously in the early texts. We will come across an example in our discussion of the *Bhagavadgita* below.

Knowledge of the Self

The clear and straightforward understanding of the nature of karma that we find in early Jainism was not confined to that religion. Exactly the same notion, and therefore the same problem, was associated with a different solution. To understand this other solution, we have to think, here too, of karmic retribution as concerning all forms of activity, bodily as well as mental. And in the case of this other solution, too, moral considerations play no central role.

Consider the following disagreement someone might have with the early Jainas: You, Jainas, have correctly understood that your deeds—all deeds, whatever their nature—are responsible for your future lives. To avoid rebirth, you have decided to desist from all forms of activity. But what you do is forcing your body and your mind to stop acting. In so doing, you identify with your body and your mind. You appear to think that what your body and your mind do is what *you* do. But how can you be so sure that you are your body and your mind?

The critic who formulated these questions did, as a matter of fact, have ideas of his own as to his real nature. Far from looking upon himself as being identical with his body and his mind, he was convinced that his real self was different from both. This real self, aside

from being different from body and mind, never acts. And being inactive by its very nature, it is not affected by the deeds carried out by body and mind. These deeds of body and mind continue the cycle of rebirth and karmic retribution, to be sure. But that is because the person concerned is ignorant about his true nature. Knowledge of the inherently inactive nature of the real self, once acquired, changes the situation. Once fully realized, it frees the person from the consequences of deeds that he has in reality never carried out.

It should be noted that the entity here referred to as "self" is altogether different from what this word may refer to in different cultures. Indeed, one of the Indian terms used to designate it (though not the only one) is *atman*. Like *self* in English, *atman* is (or can be used as) a reflexive pronoun, as in "He gave himself a holiday." This is the reason for the choice of "self" in this context, even though the English "self" is probably never thought of as an inactive entity. Some translators prefer other words, such as "soul," but this seems to me even more prone to misunderstandings. Whatever the translation chosen, it is vital to remember that it refers to a notion altogether different from any notion current in the modern Western world. (Something remotely similar was found in Christian Gnosticism; see Concluding Comments at the end of this book.)

Knowledge of the true nature of the self becomes an oft-recurring theme in Indian religious thought. This self was thought of in various ways: some thought it was pure consciousness, others added bliss, others again took both away and stated that the true self was as unconscious as a stone. But all agreed on one thing: the true self never acts. And this was crucial because this feature of the self turned knowledge of the self into a prerequisite for liberation from the cycle of rebirth and karmic retribution.

Are we entitled to suspect that this particular concept of the self was invented to suit the purposes of those who wished to escape from the effects of karma but were not ready to engage in the extreme forms of asceticism practiced by the Jainas? It is true that we find this concept of the self in India almost exclusively in connection with the belief in rebirth and karmic retribution. However, very similar concepts of the self occur in religions elsewhere in the world, in contexts where the belief in rebirth and karmic retribution is not found. This

is not the place for a survey of those comparable concepts in other religions. Their very existence should warn us against drawing too rapid, and too glib, conclusions. It seems highly unlikely that the notion of an inactive self was invented by spiritual seekers who wanted to avoid the hardships of immobility asceticism. The opposite view—that the belief in rebirth and karmic retribution was invented by people who thought that their real self was inactive by nature—is not justified either. Beliefs like these are not "invented" by clever schemers who calculate their advantage. In spite of this, a case could be made that the different notions involved—karmic retribution, an inactive self, immobilization as spiritual practice—belong together and have always belonged together. This does not help us much in finding out how the notion of karma with all that implies came about in India, but it does arm us against simplistic theories that treat beliefs like this as isolated elements that could be transferred from one culture to another the way commercial objects can be traded. (Further reflections about the coexistence of these notions will be found at the very end of this book.)

The notion of an inactive self became extremely popular in India. Most of the Brahmanical philosophies adopted it, and their ontologies may be looked upon as theoretical constructs built around this notion. More will be said about this in a later chapter. Here we must first turn to another religious current that originated in the region in which Jainism arose and see how it came to terms with the belief in rebirth and karmic retribution.

Buddhism

Ajivikism could only be understood against the background of Jainism. In order to understand Buddhism, we need to know about both Jainism and the currents that emphasized the role of knowledge of the self for gaining liberation.

Early Buddhism rejected both. It rejected immobility asceticism as a method to attain liberation, and it rejected knowledge of the true nature of the self as such a means. It could reject both because it accepted a different notion of karma, that is, of karmic retribution.

In early Buddhism, the cause of rebirth is not deeds, but desire;

indeed, the word *karma* and its cognates are not prominently used in its texts in this particular sense. Buddhist teaching is often presented in a nutshell in the form of the Four Noble Truths: the noble truth of suffering, the noble truth of the origin of suffering, the noble truth of the cessation of suffering, and the noble truth of the path that leads to the cessation of suffering. These Four Noble Truths are explained as follows:

> This is the noble truth of *suffering:* Birth is suffering, old age is suffering, sickness is suffering, death is suffering, to be united with the unloved is suffering, to be separated from the loved is suffering, not to obtain what one desires is suffering; in short the fivefold clinging to the earthly is suffering.
>
> This is the noble truth of the *origin of suffering:* it is the thirst for being that leads from birth to birth, together with lust and desire, which finds gratification here and there: the thirst for pleasures, the thirst for being, the thirst for nonexistence.
>
> This is the noble truth of the *cessation of suffering:* the cessation of this thirst by the complete annihilation of desire, letting it go, expelling it, separating oneself from it, giving it no room.
>
> This is the noble truth of the *path that leads to the cessation of suffering:* it is this Noble Eightfold Path: to wit, Right Faith, Right Resolve, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Living, Right Effort, Right Thought, Right Concentration.

It is clear from this passage that Buddhism psychologized the notion of karmic retribution. Indeed, the *Dhammapada* (1.1–2), an early Buddhist text, puts it like this:

> All things are led by thought, are controlled by thought, are made up by thought. If one speaks or acts with malevolent thought, then suffering follows one, just as the wheel follows the foot of an ox.
>
> All things are led by thought, are controlled by thought, are made up by thought. If one speaks or acts with benevolent thought, then happiness follows one, just as a shadow does not leave.

Occasionally karma is also identified with intention.

The Buddhist Canon

Apart from Vedic literature, the Buddhist canon has preserved some of the earliest texts of South Asia. The Buddhist tradition ascribes many of these texts, though not all of them, to the Buddha himself, but this claim has to be treated with caution, for it is clear that the Buddhist canon had grown for a long time before it reached the more or less fixed character in which we now know it.

The Buddhist canon is known by the name Tripitaka because it consists of three *(tri)* baskets *(pitaka)*. One of these three baskets, the *Vinaya-pitaka*, deals with monastic discipline *(vinaya)* and is supposed to contain the rules pronounced by the Buddha. The second basket, the *Sutra-pitaka*, contains the discourses *(sutra)* believed to have been uttered by the Buddha or occasionally one of his disciples. The third basket, finally, is called *Abhidharma-pitaka* because it deals with Abhidharma, a form of Buddhist scholasticism that belongs to a more recent period. Only the second basket, the *Sutra-pitaka*, provides us with material regarding the teachings of early Buddhism.

Already the *Sutra-pitaka* manifests—in its internal arrangement and in the contents of certain sutras—the tendency to create lists of items that were considered important in Buddhist teaching. These lists subsequently became the basis for the scholastic developments that find expression in the *Abhidharma-pitaka*, and for the creation of Buddhist systematic philosophy (see the boxed text titled "Buddhist Scholasticism and the Beginning of Indian Philosophy" below).

The dates when the Buddha lived are not precisely known, but much recent research justifies the conclusion that he may have died around 400 B.C.E., give or take a few decades. The Buddhist canon, in contrast, did not reach its final form until many centuries later, and additions and modification may still have been made during the early centuries C.E. A first written version was produced in Sri Lanka during the first century B.C.E.

The early Buddhists preserved their texts, orally, in the languages of the regions in which they lived. Buddhists in different parts of the subcontinents therefore preserved their texts in different languages. The Buddhists of Sri Lanka, for example, preserved their texts in a language that in recent centuries came to be known as Pali, but which they thought was Magadhi, the language of Magadha, the region where the Buddha had preached. Scholars have been able to show that Pali was really a language of western India (and therefore not from Magadha, which lies in the east), no doubt because Sri Lanka received Buddhism from western India. The Tripitaka in Pali has been preserved in its entirety.

The Buddhists of the subcontinent adopted, from the first or second century C.E. onward, the Sanskrit language and translated their sacred texts into this language. This explains that bits and pieces of the early Buddhist texts have also survived in Sanskrit. Since Buddhism disappeared from the Indian subcontinent soon after the year 1000 C.E., very few of its scriptures have survived there. However, the spread of Buddhism into China from the early centuries C.E. on had the consequence that numerous early Buddhist texts were translated into Chinese. Texts belonging to the properly Indian schools of Buddhism have therefore survived in that language.

The Buddhists, then, believed that rebirth could be prevented not by the destruction of all deeds, but by the destruction of the roots of all desire. Destroying the roots of desire is different from stopping activity. The Buddhist method was therefore altogether different from the Jaina one. Rather than practicing immobility asceticism, Buddhists in search of liberation would try to bring about psychological changes in themselves by means of exercises designed to help them in this endeavor.

Given this different notion of karmic retribution, knowledge of the true nature of the self as inactive does not help much either. Passages in the ancient discourses express themselves to that extent.

Their formulation is unfortunately such that many later Buddhists, as well as a number of modern scholars, have misunderstood them, thinking that these passages deny the existence of the self rather than its role in gaining liberation.

In an important and frequently recurring passage, the Buddha is presented as contrasting the constituent part of a human person as conceived of by him with the notion of a self. These constituent parts are the five aggregates: (1) the body *(rupa)*, (2) the sensations *(vedana)*, (3) the ideations *(sanjna)*, (4) the conditioned factors *(samskara)*, and (5) consciousness *(vijnana)*. The Buddha said the following about them:

> "The body [*rupa*] is not the self. For if the body were the self, the body would not give rise to affliction, and one should be able to say: 'Let my body be thus and so; let my body not be thus and so.' But because the body is not the self, the body gives rise to affliction, and one cannot say: 'Let my body be thus and so; let my body not be thus and so.'
>
> The sensations [*vedana*] are not the self.... Ideations [*sanjna*] are not the self.... The conditioned factors [*samskara*] are not the self.... Consciousness [*vijnana*] is not the self. For if consciousness were the self, consciousness would not give rise to affliction, and one should be able to say: 'Let consciousness be thus and so, let consciousness not be thus and so.' But because consciousness is not the self, consciousness gives rise to affliction, and one cannot say: 'Let consciousness be thus and so, let consciousness not be thus and so.'"
>
> "What do you think, monks, is the body permanent or impermanent?"
>
> "Impermanent, sir."
>
> "Is that which is impermanent suffering or happiness?"
>
> "Suffering, sir."
>
> "Is that which is impermanent, suffering, and subject to change fit to be regarded thus: 'This is mine, this is I, this is my self?'"
>
> "No, sir."
>
> "Are sensations permanent or impermanent?... Are ideations permanent or impermanent?... Are the conditioned factors permanent or impermanent?... Is consciousness permanent or impermanent?"
>
> "Impermanent, sir."
>
> "Is that which is impermanent suffering or happiness?"
>
> "Suffering, sir."
>
> "Is that which is impermanent, suffering, and subject to change fit to be regarded thus: 'This is mine, this is I, this is my self?'"
>
> "No, sir."
>
> "Therefore, monks, the body, the sensations, the ideations, the conditioned factors, consciousness should be seen for what they really are: 'This is not mine, this is not I, this is not my self.'"

This passage reveals a clear notion of the self: it is permanent, bliss, not subject to change. This notion shares the features of permanence and unchangeability with the self conceived of by those who think that knowledge of that self is crucial for attaining liberation. (Indeed, some add bliss to this list of characteristics of the self.) The Buddhist texts know the notion but do not consider knowledge of such a self important. The above passage does not state that a self of that nature does or does not exist, and the same is true of other canonical passages. The existence of such a self is passed over in silence, but the soteriological significance of knowing such a self is rejected.

If, then, Buddhism rejected both immobility asceticism and knowledge of the true (immobile) nature of the self as means to gain freedom from rebirth and karmic retribution, did it think that liberation was possible at all? Ajivikism had no method and had no better advice for its spiritual seekers than that they had to wait, perhaps for an inconceivably long period of time. Like Ajivikism, Buddhism rejected the two methods that we have considered so far. Did it have a method of its own, or did it tell its followers to give up all hope?

Buddhism did have a method of its own. Given the way it conceived of karmic retribution, it is even possible to predict what kind of method this was. Since desire is the cause of rebirth, liberation of rebirth can be attained through the destruction of desire. Desire, however, is a psychological phenomenon. The destruction of desire is not to be identified with the restraint of desire. Restraint characterized the asceticism of the Jainas. Buddhism proposed to dig deeper,

at least where desire is concerned. It taught a path leading to the annihilation of desire, or at any rate it claimed to do so.

How does one destroy one's desires? The question is a lot more difficult to answer (at least theoretically) than the question how one stops activity. Stopping activity is straightforward, even if infinitely difficult in practice. But even in mere theory it is not obvious how one could destroy one's desires. Destroying desire is yet a centerpiece of Buddhist teaching. It is hardly surprising that an important part of the ancient Buddhist canon consists of descriptions of various psychological practices that ultimately are supposed to lead to that end.

Clearly the path taught by the Buddha is a psychological path. Those who follow the path engage in a number of psychological practices of different kinds. Some parts of the ancient canon concentrate on some chosen practices, more or less in isolation from the other ones, which makes it at first sight difficult to get an overview of the path in its entirety. Fortunately there is one relatively long passage that occurs numerous times in the ancient texts and that presents a complete sketch—from beginning to end, so to say—of the path. It describes the steps taken by someone who hears the teachings of the Buddha, is convinced by them, and decides to follow them to the letter. He leaves society and avoids all forms of interaction with others that might divert his attention, cultivating peace and contentment. This is, however, only the beginning of what follows. Once this man (note that the passage concerned only speaks of men and that it is indeed uncertain whether the Buddha accepted nuns during his lifetime) has developed peace and contentment and discarded causes of friction, he turns to practicing awareness of all he does. This practice, known as *smriti* in Sanskrit, *sati* in Pali, henceforth accompanies all (that means every single thing) our adept does. It is, as a matter of fact, the background and condition for what follows. What follows is what is called meditation (*dhyana* in Sanskrit, *jhana* in Pali). This meditation is presented as consisting of four stages, beginning with a complete disengagement from the world and characterized by complete equanimity and an ever deeper state of absorption. Meditation itself does not by itself lead to the goal. The destruction of desire, or rather of the "taints" that are the roots of desire, takes place in the deepest state of absorption. It is hard to extract from the texts what

exactly the meditator does in this deepest stage of absorption, but it is clear that he directs his concentrated mind in a way that results in the removal of those "taints." Once this is done, the meditator knows that he has succeeded, that he is liberated, that he has arrived at the end of suffering.

One might reasonably ask how and why the practice of meditation should lead to the end of rebirth and karmic retribution. Unlike the link between, say, immobility asceticism and liberation from rebirth, the link between meditative practices and liberation is far from self-evident. The connecting factor is desire. A link between meditative practices and the destruction of desire, whether real or imagined, makes sense: if one wishes to change one's psychological constitution, a psychological method seems appropriate. Liberation from rebirth follows from the destruction of desire because desire is the force that brings about karmic retribution.

In spite of these considerations, the belief that desire rather than activity is responsible for karmic retribution is not evident. Its remedy in the form of a psychological operation, too, does not share the simplicity and straightforwardness of its competitor, stopping all activity. Buddhism therefore had some explaining to do to make clear why desire should lead to karmic retribution. What is more, it seems likely that among the early converts there were many who, though willing to accept the preeminence of the Buddha, were loath to abandon their conviction that activity, and the control of activity, were key players in the process that leads to karmic retribution and to its cessation respectively.

These two factors were responsible for certain important developments. One of these is the following. Buddhism reveals itself from an early date onward highly susceptible to influences from outside, primarily from the milieu to which Jainism belonged. This leads to the peculiar situation that the same ascetic practices are sometimes criticized and sometimes prescribed in the early Buddhist texts. Also the cultivation of mental states whose main purpose is the cessation of all mental activity is sometimes rejected, sometimes recommended. Buddhism, in brief, comes to unite elements that originally belonged to altogether different currents of thought. Let us look at this more closely.

We know that early Buddhism distinguished itself from the other religious movement of Greater Magadha in various respects, most notably in its different conception of karma, and as a result in the different path it taught to attain liberation. The Buddhist path was, if not harder to practice, more difficult to understand. Indeed, why should complicated mental practices be all that is required to put an end to rebirth? If rebirth results from karma, one would expect that the end of rebirth will result from the suppression of karma, of deeds, whether literally through the suppression of all bodily and mental activity, or through the realization that the core of one's being, one's self, never acts and is incapable of acting. Early Buddhism taught neither of these two, and we can be sure that more than one early listener to the Buddhist message felt confused and failed to understand the connection between the problem and its presumed remedy.

The Buddhist canon has left ample traces of this confusion. It contains as a matter of fact a disturbing number of different precepts that are all attributed to the Buddha. These precepts are regularly in conflict with each other, so much so that it is necessary in a number of cases to conclude that teachings altogether different from those of the Buddha somehow found their way into the ancient canon. And more than once it is possible to identify those nonauthentic precepts as belonging to those religious currents of Greater Magadha in which suppression of all activity or identification of the core of one's being as inactive played a central role.

Consider the non-Buddhist notion that knowledge of the inactive nature of one's true self is an essential (perhaps even sufficient) condition for liberation from the effects of one's deeds. Buddhism rejects this notion in the famous passage studied above, which shows that none of the five main constituents of the person are such a self. However, another passage turns all this on its head by emphasizing that knowledge of the fact that all constituents of the (active) person are not the self is a condition for liberation. The liberating knowledge of the self of the non-Buddhists has in this way become a liberating knowledge of the not-self for the same reason: one disidentifies with the active parts of the person. Here we find a rejected non-Buddhist doctrine that has found its way, in a slightly modified form, into the Buddhist tradition.

Also the non-Buddhist notion that cessation of activity was a prerequisite for liberation exerted a strong attraction on certain Buddhists. This is clear from the fact that practices of that nature have found their way into the Buddhist canon. Most of these practices concern the immobilization of the mind and of the senses. Beside passages in which the Buddha ridicules the immobilization of the senses by stating that if that is the aim, the blind and deaf will be performing these practices, there are others in which he boasts not to have noticed a thing even though he found himself in the middle of a thunderstorm that killed, through lightning, several people and animals close to him.

Examples of such contradictions can easily be multiplied. They help us to identify nonauthentic elements in the Buddhist canon. Recall, for example, that the Jaina method of asceticism could be characterized as "the nonperforming of new actions" and "the annihilation of former actions by asceticism." The Buddha is regularly depicted as criticizing this path, and on one occasion he even makes fun of it, saying: "If the pleasure and pain that beings feel are caused by what was done in the past, then the Jainas surely must have done bad deeds in the past, since they now feel such painful, racking, piercing feelings." Elsewhere in the canon, however, he is presented as saying the opposite, recommending his listeners to carry out no fresh action and to wear out their former actions. Here the Jaina method is described not in order to criticize it, but as the method taught by the Buddha. Clearly this nonauthentic practice was introduced into the Buddhist canon, perhaps by followers who had never fully grasped the difference between the Buddhist and the Jaina methods.

Probably the most important among these nonauthentic elements are certain meditational states that are sometimes rejected but elsewhere presented as essential elements on the path to enlightenment. Most of the canonical passages (presumably the authentic ones) mention four meditational states, called *dhyana* in Sanskrit, *jhana* in Pali. Other texts add a number of further states that are never called *dhyana/jhana* but carry altogether different names. Among these additional states, often five in number, we find the "realm of nothingness" and the "realm of neither ideation nor nonideation." The series culminates in the "cessation of ideation and feeling." These names

reveal that the emphasis in these additional states, unlike the states called *dhyana/jhana,* is on the suppression of thoughts and other mental activities. This aim—the suppression of all mental activities—has its place in the more general aim to suppress all activities whatsoever, an aim that we have come to associate with the Jainas and perhaps other non-Buddhist ascetic movement of Greater Magadha. Unlike the *dhyanas/jhanas*, they do not lead to a higher goal (such as the destruction of the taints), and we may be sure that these meditational states, too, found their way into the Buddhist canon from outside and cannot be looked upon as authentic teachings of the Buddha. With only one exception known to me, they are indeed never mentioned in accounts of the Buddha's enlightenment. Yet they have found a place in the story of the Buddha's death: the Buddha is supposed to have passed through the four *dhyanas* and the five additional states before he finally expired in the fourth *dhyana.*

Another question that Buddhism had to answer is the following. Buddhism had to provide a theoretical justification for why desire has karmic consequences. A list of twelve elements illustrating "dependent origination" is usually assumed to fulfill this task. The list is, however, obscure (already a canonical text states that it is extremely difficult to understand). Later theoreticians are faced with the challenge to throw further light on it, which they do with a limited amount of success. It is possible to speculate that the tendency to theorize that accompanies Buddhism in subsequent centuries owes at least some of its impetus to this challenge that lies at the basis of the Buddhist attempts at understanding karmic retribution.

If we now turn to the practical role the belief in rebirth and karmic retribution played in the life of ordinary Buddhists, we may assume that Buddhism followed Jainism and Ajivikism in holding karma responsible for many of the differences that distinguish people from each other, including differences in social status. The following passage from the *Majjhima Nikaya* (3, pp. 202–203) illustrates this:

> "Master Gotama, what is the cause and condition why human beings are seen to be inferior and superior? For people are seen to be short-lived and long-lived, sickly and healthy, ugly and beautiful, uninfluential and influential, poor and wealthy, low-born and high-born, stupid and wise. What is the cause and condition, Master Gotama, why human beings are seen to be inferior and superior?"
>
> "Student, beings are owners of their actions, heirs of their actions; they originate from their actions, are bound to their actions, have their actions as their refuge. It is action that distinguishes beings as inferior and superior."

Note that this passage does not mention the Brahmanical division of society into four classes: Brahmins, Kshatriyas (warriors), Vaishyas, and Shudras. As a matter of fact, the early Buddhist texts do not normally speak about this Brahmanical division of society because they feel critical toward it. However, occasionally they do mention it in connection with karmic retribution, as in the following passage from the *Samyutta Nikaya* (1, pp. 93–94):

> There are these four kinds of persons found existing in the world. What four? The one heading from darkness to darkness, the one heading from darkness to light, the one heading from light to darkness, the one heading from light to light.
>
> And how is a person one heading from darkness to darkness? Here some person has been reborn in a low family—a family of untouchables, bamboo workers, hunters, cartwrights, or flower scavengers—a poor family in which there is little food and drink and which subsists with difficulty, one where food and clothing are obtained with difficulty; and he is ugly, unsightly, deformed, chronically ill—purblind or cripple-handed or lame or paralyzed. He is not one who gains food, drink, clothing, and vehicles; garlands, scents, and unguents; bedding, housing, and lighting. He engages in misconduct of body, speech, and mind. Having done so, with the breakup of the body, after death, he is reborn in the plane of misery, in a bad destination, in the nether world, in hell....
>
> And how is a person one heading from darkness to light? Here some person has been reborn in a low family...one where food and clothing are obtained with difficulty; and he is ugly...or paralyzed. He is not one who gains food...and lighting. He engages in good conduct of body, speech, and mind. Having done so, with

the breakup of the body, after death, he is reborn in a good destination, in a heavenly world....

And how is a person one heading from light to darkness? Here some person has been reborn in a high family—an affluent warrior family, an affluent Brahmin family, or an affluent householder family—one that is rich, with great wealth and property, with abundant gold and silver, abundant treasures and commodities, abundant wealth and grain; and he is handsome, attractive, graceful, possessing supreme beauty of complexion. He is one who gains food, drink, clothing, and vehicles; garlands, scents, and unguents; bedding, housing, and lighting. He engages in misconduct of body, speech, and mind. Having done so, with the breakup of the body, after death, he is reborn in the plane of misery, in a bad destination, in the nether world, in hell....

And how is a person one heading from light to light? Here some person has been reborn in a high family...with abundant wealth and grain; and he is handsome, attractive, graceful, possessing supreme beauty of complexion. He is one who gains food...and lighting. He engages in good conduct of body, speech, and mind. Having done so, with the breakup of the body, after death, he is reborn in a good destination, in a heavenly world.

Brahmins and warriors *(kshatriya),* two of the four regular Brahmanical classes of society, are explicitly mentioned in this passage, as are outcasts *(candala),* another Brahmanical designation. Interestingly, none of these are presented as the outcome of earlier deeds. It is as if the author of this passage was loath to use the doctrine of karma as a justification for a division of society about which the Buddhists felt very critical.

CHAPTER 3

Karma in Brahmanism

During the period in which Jainism, Buddhism, and Ajivikism arose, Brahmanism belonged primarily to a geographically limited area, with its heartland in the middle and western parts of the Ganges plain. It was in this region that Brahmanism had been the culture of a largely hereditary class of priests, the Brahmins, who derived their livelihood and special position in society from their close association with the local rulers. These same Brahmins memorized and preserved the Veda, a large corpus of literature concerned primarily with their sacrificial activities (see the boxed text below).

This situation changed with the political unification of northern India, begun by the Nandas and continued by the Mauryas (fourth to second centuries B.C.E.). Both the Nandas and the Mauryas had their home base in Magadha (to the east of the Brahmanical heartland) and had no particular interest in Brahmins and their sacrificial tradition. As a result Brahmanism as an institution was under threat; it had to either face disappearance or reinvent itself. It did the latter. Brahmanism underwent a transformation that enabled it to survive and ultimately flourish in changed circumstances.

Brahmanism had been a priestly religion with heavy emphasis on elaborate sacrifices. The transformed Brahmanism that in due time succeeded in spreading all over the Indian subcontinent and into Southeast Asia was primarily (though not exclusively) a sociopolitical ideology. Brahmanism had clear ideas about the correct hierarchical order of society (with the Brahmins at the top) and the correct manner of running a state. Brahmanism had not abandoned