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2.6 EASTERN RELIGIONS

Eastern religious traditions—including Buddhism, Hinduism, Confucianism, Taoism, Jainism, and many others—diverge from Western religions in ways that both shock and intrigue those who trace their faith back to Moses, Muhammad, or Christ. But both domains of religious belief are rich in philosophical thought. While the West has used reason to defend or critique its religious doctrines, the East has built philosophical systems that try to plumb the depths of physical and spiritual reality. In the expanse of Eastern religious thought, Western philosophers see both drastically different conceptions of the world and many of their own ideas in new form staring back at them.

Buddhism

In its own fashion, Buddhism typifies the ways that most Eastern traditions differ from Western ones. Buddhism posits no creator God, no all-powerful, all-knowing deity who rules the universe, takes an interest in humans, or answers prayers. It

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teaches that the Buddha himself was neither God nor the child of a god. He was instead the ultimate teacher and an example for all Buddhists to follow. In accordance with the Buddha's wishes, Buddhism has no central religious authority. There is no Buddhist pope; there are only the Buddha's teachings. An individual achieves salvation not through faith in God, but primarily through his or her own efforts, by self-discipline and self-transformation. Buddhists must work out their own salvation.

The term *Buddhism* disguises the religion's complexities. Although Buddhists everywhere may hold in common some teachings of the Buddha, these core beliefs are few, allowing a great many meandering trails within a broad doctrinal highway. Buddhism therefore has no single set of authorized practices or a common rulebook or a universal statement of the articles of faith. Instead there are many schools of thought and practice in Buddhism (some would say *Buddhisms*), Zen Buddhism and Tibetan Buddhism being only the most familiar.

During a time of wrenching social change and clashing religious viewpoints, Buddhism arose in northern India (now southern Nepal) in the sixth century BCE. The spiritual landscape was dotted by religious and philosophical worldviews of all sorts, with each one competing for recognition and the allegiance of devotees.

The practices advocated by various groups included meditation, celibacy, animal sacrifices, vegetarianism, nonviolence, worship of numerous gods, and asceticism (the denial of physical comfort or pleasures for religious ends). Some believed in rebirth and *karma* (the universal principle that our actions result in deserved pleasure or pain in this life or the next); some did not. Some accepted the notion of spiritual progress through one's own efforts; others denied it. Some thought that the actions of humans are never done freely but are fated to occur; some insisted that humans have free will. Into this chaos comes the man destined to become the Buddha (a title meaning "The Enlightened One"), born a prince in the tiny kingdom of Sakya in northern India and given the name Siddhartha Gautama (c. 563–483 BCE). After many years of reflection and searching for ultimate wisdom, he attains enlightenment—what he believes is a perfect understanding of the true nature of the universe, of life and death, and of suffering and liberation.

The teachings of the Buddha astonished many of his day who were used to the doctrines and practices of Indian religions. In contrast to the orthodoxies of the time, the Buddha rejected the caste system, extreme asceticism, the practice of animal sacrifice, the authority of the Vedas (Hindu scriptures), submission to the Brahmins (members of the Hindu priestly caste), and the existence of the soul (a permanent, unchanging identity). Contradicting the Hindu social conventions, he taught that women should not be barred from the spiritual life he proposed—they

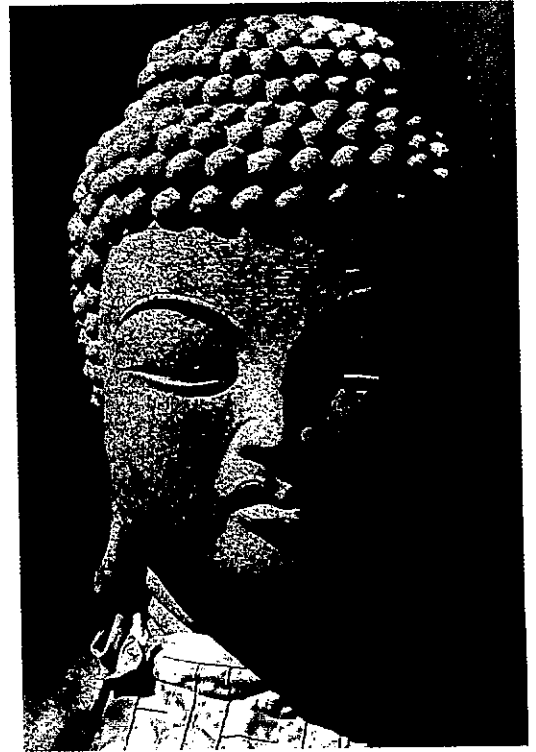


Figure 2.17 Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha (c. 563–483 BCE).

Karma is the universal principle that our actions result in deserved pleasure or pain in this life or the next.

Do not believe in anything simply because you have heard it. Do not believe in traditions simply because they have been handed down for many generations. . . . Do not believe in anything simply because it is found written in your religious books. . . . But when, after observation and analysis, you find anything that agrees with reason, and is conducive to the good and benefit of one and all, then accept it and live up to it.
—The Buddha's Kalama Sutra

The **dharma** is the Buddha's system of teachings about the true nature of reality and how to live correctly to transcend it.

You must be your own lamps, be your own refuges. Take refuge in nothing outside yourselves. Hold firm to the truth as a lamp and a refuge, and do not look for refuge to anything besides yourselves.
—The Buddha

too could attain enlightenment. Contrary to doctrines of the major Western religious traditions, he was nontheistic in the sense that he had no use for the idea of a personal creator God. He believed that gods, goddesses, and demons exist, but that they are—like all other living things—finite, vulnerable, and mortal. They are trapped in the cycle of death and rebirth just as humans are. He therefore renounced religious devotion to any deity.

On some deep questions about the nature of reality—questions that most religions try to address—the Buddha was silent. He refused to conjecture about what happens after death, whether the universe is eternal, whether it is infinite, whether body and soul are the same thing, and what constitutes the divine. He taught that such speculations are pointless, since they overlook what is truly important in existence: the fact of suffering and the path of liberation from it. A person who spends his time trying to answer these imponderable questions, he said, is like a man struck by an arrow who will not pull it out until he has determined all the mundane facts about the arrow, bow, and archer—and dies needlessly while gathering the information.

The Buddha meant his teachings to be useful—a realistic, accurate appraisal of our burdensome existence and how to rise above it. To an unusual extent, his approach was also rational and empirical. He tried to provide a reasonable explanation for the problem of existence and offer a plausible solution. He thought that people should not accept his views on faith but test them out through their own experience in everyday life.

The Buddha's system of teachings about the true nature of reality and how to live correctly to transcend it is known as the **dharma**, the heart of which is the Four Noble Truths:

1. Life is suffering.
2. Suffering is caused by desires ("craving" or "thirst").
3. To banish suffering, banish desires.
4. Banish desires and end suffering by following the Noble Eightfold Path.

The First Noble Truth is that living brings suffering, or *dukkha*. In the traditional Buddhist way of putting it, "birth is painful, old age is painful, sickness is painful, death is painful, sorrow, lamentation, dejection, and despair are painful. Contact with unpleasant things is painful, not getting what one wishes is painful."³² *Dukkha* comes in small and large doses—from mild stress and frustration to the agonies of devastating disease and the heartbreak of overwhelming loss and grief. But in any dose, suffering is inherent to living: an inescapable cost of existence. Another aspect of *dukkha* is impermanence (*anicca*)—the fact that things do not last, that whatever pleasures we enjoy soon fade, that whatever we possess we eventually lose, that whatever we do will be undone by time. The very transitory nature of life brings suffering, dissatisfaction, and pain.

Dukkha also arises because of another fact of life: *anatta*, the impermanence of the self, or not-self, or no-soul. A person—the "I" that we each refer to—is merely an ever-changing, fleeting assemblage of mental states or processes. (The Western philosopher David Hume argued for the same view of the self.) And if there is no

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permanent self, there is no way for any "I" to grope for happiness, satisfaction, pleasure, contentment, or anything else. The thought of not-self frightens people, but to most Buddhists, *anatta* is a very soothing doctrine. As one Buddhist monk says,

Ajahn Sumedho, *Buddha-Nature*

When you open the mind to the truth, then you realize there is nothing to fear. What arises passes away, what is born dies, and is not self—so that our sense of being caught in an identity with this human body fades out. We don't see ourselves as some isolated, alienated entity lost in a mysterious and frightening universe. We don't feel overwhelmed by it, trying to find a little piece of it that we can grasp and feel safe with, because we feel at peace with it. Then we have merged with the Truth.³³

This focus on *dukkha* may seem like a dreary perspective on life, but it sets the stage for the Buddha's more optimistic views on the ultimate conquest of suffering. His message is not that we are doomed to unremitting suffering, but that there is a way to escape our torment, to attain true and lasting happiness.

The Second Noble Truth is that the cause of *dukkha* is selfish desire ("craving" or "thirst")—desire for things that we can never obtain, no matter how hard we try. We desire possessions, pleasures, power, money, life, and more. We want things to be different from what they are or to remain the way they are forever. But we can never have any of these for long because everything is ephemeral, constantly changing. We have no distinct, permanent identity; the "self" is no more than a locus of shifting, flowing energy. Such an insubstantial, transient thing can never acquire anything permanent, even if permanent objects exist. We desire this or that, but our desires are continually frustrated. The result is discontent, unhappiness, and pain—*dukkha*.

The Third Noble Truth is that suffering can be extinguished if desire is extinguished. *Dukkha* will end if desire ends. To quench selfish desires and therefore to end *dukkha* is to attain *nirvana*, the ultimate aim of all Buddhist practice and the final liberation to which all the Buddha's teachings point. It is the extinguishing of the flames of attachment, delusion, and hatred; it is also the blossoming of contentment and inner peace, the "quietude of the heart." The Buddhist scholar and monk Walpola Rahula describes it like this:

Walpola Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught*

He who has realized the Truth, Nirvana, is the happiest being in the world. He is free from all 'complexes' and obsessions, the worries and troubles that torment others. His mental health is perfect. He does not repent the past, nor does he brood over the future. He lives fully in the present. Therefore he appreciates and enjoys things in the purest sense without self-projections. He is joyful, exultant, enjoying the pure life, his

Do not dwell in the past, do not dream of the future, concentrate the mind on the present moment.
—The Buddha

33 Contrast the Buddhist and Christian views of the cause of human suffering. Which seems to you more plausible?

Nirvana, or Enlightenment, is the ultimate aim of all Buddhist practice and the final liberation to which all the Buddha's teachings point.

Walpola Rahula
*What the Buddha
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faculties pleased, free from anxiety, serene and peaceful. As he is free from selfish desire, hatred, ignorance, conceit, pride, and all such 'defilements', he is pure and gentle, full of universal love, compassion, kindness, sympathy, understanding and tolerance. His service to others is of the purest, for he has no thought of self. He gains nothing, accumulates nothing, not even anything spiritual, because he is free from the illusion of Self, and the 'thirst' for becoming.³⁴

Nirvana is manifested both in life and at death. In life, it is—as Rahula suggests—a psychological and moral transformation and, ultimately, an enlightened way of living. At death, for an enlightened one, the continuing cycle, or wheel, of death and rebirth ends. *Dukkha*, the ever-recurring pain of existence, stops. And the controlling force behind the turning wheel—karma—ceases. So nirvana's quenching of "defilements" not only quenches *dukkha* in life, but it also terminates the repeating pattern of death-rebirth. Beyond this profound release, what nirvana entails at one's death is uncertain. The Buddha insisted that nirvana is beyond description and impossible to imagine, for it is neither annihilation nor survival of a soul. He said that people should devote themselves to attaining it rather than trying to plumb its depths. Buddhist sources, however, refer to nirvana with words such as *freedom, absolute truth, peace, and bliss*.

In Buddhism, one's cycle of repeated deaths and rebirths—called *samsara*, or "wandering"—is a painful process that can go on for millennia unless there is release from it through nirvana. The thing that wanders from one life to the next (what we refer to as "I") is not an eternally existing, permanent soul, self, or *atman*, but an ever-changing mix of personality fragments that recombine in each new life. The Buddha's classic illustration of this point is a flame (the "I") that is transferred from one candle to another. Only one flame is passed among multiple candles, so there is some continuity from one candle to the next. But the flame itself is also different from moment to moment.

Karma is the universal principle that governs the characteristics and quality of each rebirth, or future life. In the sense used in Buddhism, karma is not a system of justice decreed by a God; nor is it a cosmic force driven toward some purpose or goal. It is essentially a law of nature, a universal fact about the effects of a being's past actions. Karma dictates that people's deeds—their acts of will or intentions—form their present character *and* determine the general nature of their future lives. Good deeds (good karma) tend to lead to more pleasant rebirths; bad deeds (bad karma) are likely to yield less pleasant, even horrific, rebirths. Depending on karma, then, a rebirth may occur at any one of several different levels—from life in various hells to existence as an animal, ghost, human, or god. Karma can also affect the *quality* of life at each level.

In the Buddha's view of karma, through their own moral choices and acts people are free to try to change their karma and its associated results, and no one is trapped in a given level of existence

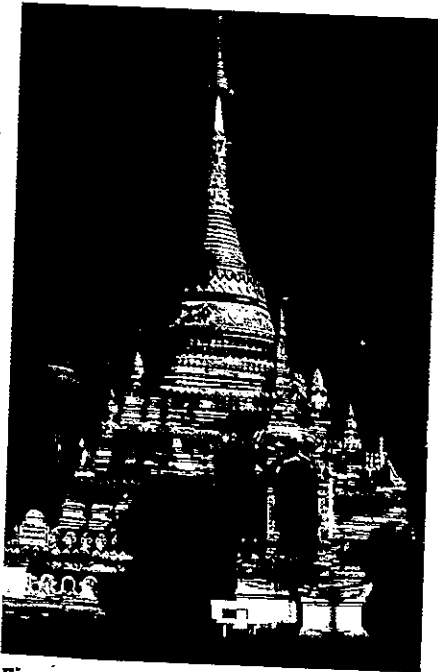


Figure 2.18 Buddhist Temple of the Dawn in Bangkok, Thailand.

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forever. There is always the hope of rising to a higher point through spiritual effort or of halting the cycle of rebirths altogether through nirvana.

The notions of rebirth and karma lead naturally to the Buddhist attitude of compassion, tolerance, and kindness for all living things. After all, every being must follow the karmic current, being reborn as many different creatures from the lowest to the highest. Each human being has an implied empathetic connection with all other beings (humans, animals, and others) because he or she is likely to have *been* such beings at one time or another and to have endured the same kind of pain and grief they have.

The Fourth Noble Truth says that the way to end *dukkha* and to attain nirvana is to follow the Noble Eightfold Path. The Path consists of eight factors, or modes of practice, whose purpose is the development, or perfection, of the three fundamental aspects of Buddhist life: *wisdom*, *moral conduct*, and *mental discipline* or focus. The eight factors have been described as “steps,” as if they should be done in order, but they are actually intended to be implemented in concert. Each one complements and enhances the others, and a complete life cultivates them all. Together they constitute a way of purposeful living that the Buddha is said to have discovered through his own experience—the “Middle Way” or “Middle Path” between the extremes of brutal asceticism and sensual self-indulgence. (Aristotle also taught that the good life is a virtuous one balanced between having too much and not having enough.) Here are the eight factors sorted into their three basic categories:

For the perfection of wisdom:

1. *Right understanding* is a deep understanding of the true nature of reality as revealed in the Four Noble Truths. This kind of wisdom refers not just to an intellectual grasp of the facts, but, more importantly, to profound insight that penetrates to how things really are in themselves, insight gleaned experientially through a trained mind free of spiritual impediments.
2. *Right thought* refers to the proper motivations underlying our thoughts and actions. Right motivations are selflessness, compassion, nonviolence, gentleness, and love. They are directed not toward a few, but toward all living things. Selfishness, hatred, violence, and malice undermine spiritual progress and impede true wisdom.

For the perfection of moral conduct:

3. *Right speech* means refraining from lying, slander, gossip, unkind or rude words, malicious or abusive talk, and idle or misleading assertions. Right speech, then, is truthful, kind, and constructive, fostering harmony, trust, and honesty.
4. *Right action* involves following the Buddha’s Five Precepts: refraining from (1) harming living beings (a principle known as *ahimsa*, “non-harm” or “nonviolence”), (2) taking what is not given (stealing), (3) engaging in misconduct regarding sexual or sensual pleasures, (4) lying or speaking falsely, and (5) impairing the mind with intoxicating substances. To the Buddhist, these precepts are not moral laws or commandments that demand strict adherence as

I’ve developed a new philosophy. . . . I only dread one day at a time.

—Charles M. Schulz

34 The Buddha assumes the doctrine of reincarnation (the transmigration of the soul at death into a new body). Is this view plausible? Why or why not?

Life must be understood backward. But it must be lived forward.

—Søren Kierkegaard

if they were laid down by divine authority. They are moral ideals to strive for, affirmations to oneself for living a more compassionate, mindful life.

5. *Right livelihood* means avoiding jobs or professions that involve harming other living beings. These include occupations that traffic in weapons of war, intoxicants, and poisons; that entail the buying and selling of human beings; that cause harm or death to animals; and that involve greed, dishonesty, or deception.

For the perfection of mental discipline:

6. *Right effort* is cultivating wholesome states of mind and eliminating or minimizing unwholesome ones. It means fostering compassion, selflessness, empathy, and understanding and banishing selfish desire, hatred, attachment, and self-delusion.
7. *Right mindfulness* refers to the development through meditation of an extraordinary awareness of the functioning of one's own body and mind. It yields clear understanding of, and keen sensitivity to, one's bodily processes, emotional states, the attitudes and tendencies of the mind, and mental concepts that may help or hinder spiritual progress.
8. *Right concentration* is the development through meditation of a sublime inner peace and profound mental tranquility. Such inner calm is thought to yield insight.

Hinduism

Hinduism can claim to be the world's oldest living religion (dating back 3,000 years) and the third largest (with about 1 billion adherents). Many observers are amazed that it boasts of no common creed, founder, text, or deity. It comprises not one mode of devotion but a confounding diversity of them. Offerings to deity images, the chanting of mantras, temple worship, sensual rites, mystical experiences, ascetic privations, animal sacrifices—such practices may be embraced by some Hindus and ignored by others, but the broad tent of Hinduism accommodates them all. The sacred texts range from hymns to instructions for conducting rituals to philosophical treatises, and these are revered or disregarded to varying degrees by thousands of discrete religious groups. A Hindu may bow to many gods (polytheism), one supreme God (monotheism), one god among a whole pantheon (henotheism), or no gods whatsoever (atheism). And Hinduism's gods are said to number over a million.

The Western traditions of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam are generally faithful to a core of more or less coherent doctrines. Hinduism is different. It's a large, unwieldy family of beliefs and practices that seem reasonable and practical to Hindus but perplexing and contradictory to outsiders. Yet in the twenty-first century this family thrives both in its mother country (India) and on foreign soil, has devotees in both the East and the West, and influences the worldviews of persons high and low. And among this cacophony of views, systems of philosophical reflection and even scriptures containing philosophical speculation have their say.

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Figure 2.19 Stone carving of one of India's more popular deities—Ganesha, the elephant-headed god.

Hinduism began in northwest India, emerging from a blend of native religions and the religious traditions of an Indo-European people who migrated there from central Asia. The indigenous populace established an advanced civilization that flourished in the Indus River region and beyond as early as 2500 BC. This Indus Valley civilization, as it is called, rivaled in many ways the Roman Empire, which was to come later. It devised a writing system, erected planned cities, and built impressive structures small and large—two-story houses, civic centers, porticos, baths, bathrooms, stairways, drainage systems, and worship halls.

Around 1500 BCE, the migrating Indo-Europeans, called Aryans, moved into northwest India, carrying their distinctive culture with them. Most importantly, they brought their speech, from which was derived the ancient language of Sanskrit, the medium of Hindu scripture. They were polytheistic, worshiping gods that were thought to embody powerful elements of nature such as the sun, moon, and fire. And they sacrificed animals (including horses) and proffered animal byproducts (such as butter and milk) as offerings to these gods.

Aryan culture was partitioned into four social classes called *varnas*. From these, the hereditary *caste system* was developed in Hindu society and still holds sway in modern India, although it has been refined into thousands of subdivisions based on social and occupational criteria. Traditionally the dominant class consisted of *brahmins*, the priests and teachers who alone could study and teach scripture. Brahmins still play a priestly role and are prevalent among India's professionals and civil servants.

For Hinduism, the most important result of the melding of the Aryan and Indus River cultures was a set of sacred compositions known as the **Vedas** ("knowledge"), regarded by almost all Hindus as eternal scripture and the essential reference point for all forms of Hinduism. They were produced by the Aryans between 1500 and 600 BCE (what has been called the Vedic era), which makes these compositions India's oldest existing literature. For thousands of years the *Vedas* were transmitted orally from brahmin to brahmin until they were finally put into writing. They are said to be *sruti* ("that which was heard")—revealed directly to Hindu seers (*rishis*) and presumed to be of neither human nor divine authorship. Later scriptures are thought to be *smriti* ("what is remembered")—of human authorship. These consist of commentaries and elaborations on the *sruti*. Hindus revere the *Vedas*, even though the majority of adherents are ignorant of their content, and their meanings are studied mostly by the educated. In fact, most Hindu devotional practices are derived not from the *Vedas*, but from the sacred texts that came later.

The *Vedas* consist of four collections, or books, of writings, each made up of four sections. The four books are the *Rig-Veda*, the *Yajur-Veda*, the *Sama-Veda*, and the *Atharva-Veda*. The sections are (1) *sambhitas*: hymns, or chants, of praise or invocation to the gods (including many Aryan deities), mostly to be uttered publicly during sacrifices; (2) *brahmanas*: treatises on, and how-to instructions for, rituals; (3) *Aranyakas*: "forest treatises" for those who seek a reclusive religious life; and (4) the *Upanishads*: philosophical and religious speculations.

The oldest book is the *Rig-Veda*, which contains a section of over 1,000 ancient hymns, each one invoking a particular god or goddess—for example, Indra (the

The great secret of true success, of true happiness, is this: the man or woman who asks for no return, the perfectly unselfish person, is the most successful.

—Swami Vivekananda

In the morning I bathe my intellect in the stupendous and cosmogonical philosophy of the *Bhagavad-Gita*, in comparison with which our modern world and its literature seems puny and trivial.

—Henry David Thoreau

35 What is the caste system? Why is its existence in modern India controversial?

The *Vedas* are early Hindu scriptures, developed between 1500 and 600 BC.

36 What is the difference between *sruti* and *smriti*? Does the difference matter much to Hindus?

The *Upanishads* are Vedic literature concerning the self, Brahman, samsara, and liberation.

ruler of heaven), Agni (the god of fire), and Varuna (the god of moral order in the universe). Most of the hymns in the other books are taken from the *Rig-Veda*.

There are 123 *Upanishads*, but only thirteen or fourteen (called the principal *Upanishads*) are revered by all Hindus. The *Upanishads* were the latest additions to the *Vedas*, composed primarily from about 900 to 400 BCE during a time of intellectual and religious unease. The ancient certainties—the authority of the brahmins, the status of the *Vedas*, the caste system, the sacrificial rites, and the nature of the deities—were being called into question. The *Upanishads* put these issues in a different light and worked out some philosophical doctrines that became fundamental to Hinduism right up to the twenty-first century.

In the early *Vedas*, there is an emphasis on improving one's lot in life through religious practice and faith in the gods. But in the *Upanishads*, the central aim is release from this world. Specifically, the goal is liberation from *samsara*, one's repeating cycle of deaths and rebirths. The essential Hindu belief is that at death, one's soul or self (*atman*) departs from the lifeless body and is reborn into a new body, residing for a time until death, then being reborn in yet another physical form—a dreary sequence that may be repeated for thousands of lifetimes. (Westerners call this the doctrine of *reincarnation*.) And with each new incarnation comes the pain of living and reliving all the miseries of mortal existence.

The force that regulates *samsara* is karma, the universal principle that governs the characteristics and quality of each rebirth, or future life. Karma is like a law of nature; it is simply the way the world works. It dictates that people's actions and intentions form their present character and determine the general nature of their future lives. Good deeds (good karma) lead to more pleasant rebirths; bad deeds (bad karma) beget less pleasant, even appalling, rebirths. Depending on karma, the *atman* may be reborn into a human, an animal, an insect, or some other lowly creature. This repeating pattern of rebirth–death–rebirth continues because humans are ignorant of the true nature of reality, of what is real and what is merely appearance. They are enslaved by illusion (*maya*) and act accordingly, with predictable results.

According to the *Upanishads*, this ignorance and its painful consequences can only be ended, and liberation (*moksha*) from *samsara* and karma can only be won, through the freeing power of an ultimate, transcendent wisdom. This wisdom comes when an *atman* realizes that the soul is not separate from the world or from other souls but is one with the impersonal, all-pervading Spirit known as **Brahman**. Brahman is the universe, yet Brahman transcends all space and time.

Brahman is eternal and thus so is the *atman*. Brahman is Absolute Reality, and the *atman* is Brahman—a fact expressed in the famous adage “You are that [Brahman],” or “You are divine.” The essential realization, then, is the oneness of Brahman and *atman*. Once an individual fully understands this ultimate unity, *moksha* occurs, *samsara* stops, and the *atman* attains full union with Brahman.

Achieving *moksha* is difficult, requiring great effort and involving many lifetimes through long expanses of time. The *Upanishads* stress that Brahman is ineffable—it cannot be described in words and must therefore be experienced directly through several means: meditation, various forms of yoga (both mental and physical disciplines), and asceticism. The aim of these practices is to look inward and discern the

Samsara is one's cycle of repeated deaths and rebirths.

Atman is one's soul or self.

I must confess to you that when doubt haunts me, when disappointments stare me in the face, and when I see not one ray of light on the horizon, I turn to the *Bhagavad Gita* and find a verse to comfort me; and I immediately begin to smile in the midst of overwhelming sorrow.
—Mahatma Gandhi

Brahman is the impersonal, all-pervading spirit that is the universe yet transcends all space and time. A **Brahmin** is a priest or teacher; a man of the priestly caste.

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true nature of *atman* and its unity with Brahman. The rituals and sacrifices of the early *Vedas* are deemed superfluous.

As noted earlier, the *sruti* scriptures of the Vedic period (written roughly 1500 to 600 BCE) are thought to be of divine origin, revealed to the *rishis*, who received them via an intuitive or mystical experience. Hindus regard the *Vedas* as authoritative, eternal, and fixed. This canon remains as it was written, without further revelations or later emendations. But after the Vedic period, the human-authored *smriti* scriptures appeared. They too are venerated yet are considered less authoritative than the *Vedas*. They are also open-ended, a sacred work in progress. Over the centuries revered figures have added to them and continue to do so. But these facts have not diminished the influence of the *smriti* scriptures, which have probably had a greater impact on Hindu life than the *Vedas* have.

In Hindu scripture, newer writings generally do not supersede the old; they are added to the ever-expanding canon. Thus many ideas and practices found in both the *Vedas* and the post-Vedic scriptures are still relevant to contemporary Hinduism. Likewise, the ancient Vedic gods and goddesses were never entirely replaced by deities that arose later in history. The pantheon was simply enlarged. Today many of the old gods are ignored or deemphasized, while some of them are still revered.

The *smriti* material is voluminous and wide-ranging. It consists mainly of (1) the epics (the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*), (2) myths and legends (the *Puranas*), and legal and moral codes (the *Laws of Manu*).

The great epics have served Indian and Hindu civilization much as Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* served the ancient Greek and Hellenistic world: the stories express the culture's virtues, heroes, philosophy, and spiritual lessons. With eighteen voluminous chapters (or books) and 100,000 verses, the *Mahabharata* is the longest poem in existence, many times more extensive than the Christian Bible. Composed between 400 BCE and 400 CE, the epic recounts the ancient conflict between two great families, both of which are descendants of the ruler of Bharata (northern India). Their struggle culminates in a fateful battle at Kurukshetra. Among the warriors who are to fight there is the war hero Arjuna, who has serious misgivings about a battle that will pit brothers against brothers and cousins against cousins. Before the fight begins, as Arjuna contemplates the bloody fratricide to come, he throws down his bow in anguish and despair. He turns to his charioteer, Krishna—who in fact is God incarnate—and asks whether it is right to fight against his own kin in such a massive bloodletting. The conversation that then takes place between Krishna and Arjuna constitutes the most famous part of the *Mahabharata*: the *Bhagavad-Gita*, the most highly venerated and influential book in Hinduism.

The seven-hundred-verse *Bhagavad-Gita* (*Song of the Lord*) is no mere war story. In dramatic fashion, it confronts the moral and philosophical questions and conflicts that arise in Hindu concepts and practice—in devotion to the gods, the caste system, obligations to family, duties in time of war, the nature of the soul, the concept of Brahman, and the correct paths toward *moksha*.

In the *Gita*, we get a new account of the nature of God. In the *Upanishads*, Brahman is the impersonal Ultimate Reality, or World-Soul, pervading and constituting the universe but aloof from humans and their concerns. But Krishna turns out to be

37 What is the difference between the main goal in life as presented in the early *Vedas* and life's central aim as discussed in the *Upanishads*?

The apparent multiplication of gods is bewildering at the first glance, but you soon discover that they are the same GOD. There is always one uttermost God who defies personification. This makes Hinduism the most tolerant religion in the world, because its one transcendent God includes all possible gods. In fact Hinduism is so elastic and so subtle that the most profound Methodist, and crudest idolater, are equally at home with it.

—George Bernard Shaw

38 What is the relationship between Brahman and *atman*? How are *moksha* and *samsara* related to Brahman?

The *Bhagavad-Gita* is the most highly venerated and influential scripture in Hinduism.

PHILOSOPHY NOW

The Caste System

Much of the social and religious landscape of modern India has been shaped by 2,000-year-old Hindu treatises on religious, legal, and moral duty (*dharmā*), the most famous being the *Laws of Manu*. (According to legend, all humans are descended from Manu, the original man.) Completed by around the first century of the Common Era, the *Laws* provided the



Figure 2.20 Sisters who belong to the Dalit caste in India.

basic outlines of India's *caste system*, laid down a code of conduct for each social class, and marked out the four stages of life for upper-class Indian men. The *Laws*, in effect, defined the ideal Hindu society, a framework that served as a reference point for modern laws and social rules in India today.

India's premodern Aryan culture was divided into four hierarchical classes called *varnas*, which became the basis of the four main castes of Hinduism. In later eras these divisions were refined into myriad subdivisions and hardened

to forbid social movement in one's lifetime from one class to another. In modern India both the four classes and the hundreds of subdivisions are referred to as *castes*; the subdivisions are also sometimes called *jatis*. These subcastes are based on occupation, kinship, geography, and even sectarian affiliation, and they are especially influential in rural areas of India. In general, caste protocol forbids members of one caste to marry members of another, and interactions with people from another caste are often restricted.

the Supreme Being incarnate, a personal deity who loves and cares for humans and who often takes human form to help them.

Throughout history, many Hindus have believed there is only one path to liberation—solely through meditation or only through asceticism, for example. But in the *Gita*, Krishna insists that several paths (*marga*) can lead to *moksha*, a view that fits well with modern Hinduism. (Since these paths amount to spiritual disciplines, they are also referred to as forms of *yoga*.) Today there is a general awareness of multiple paths to liberation, each appropriate for a particular kind of person.

The path to liberation that Krishna speaks of most often is devotion to a personal god (*bhakti-marga*), the path chosen by most Hindus. *Bhakti-marga* entails overwhelming love and adoration of one's favored manifestation of God. The candidates for adoration are many—Krishna, Vishnu, Shiva, Varuna, Indra, Ganesha, Kali,

In the great books of India, an empire spoke to us, nothing small or unworthy, but large, serene, consistent, the voice of an old intelligence, which in another age and climate had pondered and thus disposed of the questions that exercise us.

—Ralph Waldo Emerson

and many of its manifestations is supreme that is; it is images. They and pray for perhaps an Brahman is

Hindu reflection off these is to minority o

In ancient India the concepts of *dharma* and karma were central to the caste system, and the same is true today. Each caste is prescribed a *dharma*, a set of duties mandated for that caste. Theoretically no upward movement is possible during one's lifetime, but diligently performing one's *dharma* could lead to better karma and a higher-level rebirth in the next life.

Eventually the caste system was modified to include a fifth group—the “untouchables,” or *dalits* (“oppressed ones”); who are thought to be “too polluting” to be included in any of the higher castes. This group comprises those who do “polluting” work such as sweeping streets; cleaning toilets; and handling leather, human waste, or dead bodies. The term “untouchables” comes from the traditional Hindu idea that upper-class persons who touch someone from the lowest class will be polluted and must therefore perform rituals to cleanse themselves. For generations *dalits* have been subjected to violence and discrimination—and they still are even in modern India, even though the untouchable class has been officially outlawed. Mohandas Gandhi called the *dalits* the “children of God” and advocated for their rights and their equal status in society.

In recent years the caste system has drawn fire from many critics. The main complaint is that the system is inherently unfair. The plight of the *dalits* is just one example. The *Laws of Manu* mandate a lower status for the lowest class, and caste hierarchy itself implies that some people are inherently less worthy than others, or that some deserve better treatment under the law than others, or that the highest classes are privileged and therefore should get special treatment. In practice, caste rules are not as rigid, and adherence to caste rules is not as widespread, as their advocates might prefer. The influence of caste in people's daily lives is weak in urban areas and much stronger in the countryside.

What do you think the civil rights leader Martin Luther King would say about India's caste system and the treatment of the *dalits*? Do you think the caste system is morally wrong? If so, what are your reasons?

and many other deities. The Hindu view of *bhakti* is that to love one of these finite manifestations of God is to move closer to the infinite God of everything. Brahman is supreme but impersonal. It is difficult to adore the all-encompassing essence of all that is; it is easier to love one of God's incarnations represented in countless earthly images. Thus a Hindu may bring an offering of flowers to a stone image of Krishna and pray for help or healing, expecting that Krishna himself will be pleased and perhaps answer the plea. The devotee will feel that *moksha* is a little closer and that Brahman is a little nearer.

Hinduism contains complex systems, or schools (*darshana*), of philosophical reflection offered by ancient sages and commentators. To immerse oneself in one of these is to follow the path of knowledge (*jnana-marga*), a route taken by only a minority of Hindus. The schools include six major orthodox ones, some of which



Figure 2.21 Reading the Vedic texts.

India has two million gods, and worships them all. In religion all other countries are paupers; India is the only millionaire.

—Mark Twain

appeared as far back as 500 BCE: *Samkhya* (probably the oldest), *Yoga*, *Nyaya*, *Vaisesika*, *Mimamsa*, and *Vedanta*. They all differ in important ways but presuppose the authority of the *Vedas*; accept the doctrines of reincarnation (the cycle of birth and death) and *moksha* (liberation); and set forth their doctrines in discourses, or books (*sutras*).

The *Nyaya* school focuses on developing a theory of knowledge (epistemology) and a system of logical proof that can yield indubitable truths. Some early *Nyaya* scholars were atheistic (as was Gautama), but later ones added the concept of a supreme divinity. The *Vedanta* school maintains a thoroughgoing monism (nondualism, *advaita*), claiming that reality consists not of two kinds of essential stuff (as the dualistic *Samkhya* school holds), but of only one kind, and this kind is Brahman, who alone is real. Brahman is all, and the self is identical to Brahman. The most influential proponent of this view was Shankara (788–820 CE). He argued that people persist in believing they are separate from Brahman because of *maya*—illusion. Only by shattering this ignorance with knowledge of true reality can they escape the torturous cycle of death and rebirth. The *Samkhya* school, in contrast, sees the world as dualistic—that is, consisting of two kinds of stuff or essences: spirit and matter. In its earlier forms, the school was atheistic in that it rejected the notion of a personal god; theistic elements were introduced later. The central belief of this view is that myriad souls are lodged in matter, and to be dislodged is to attain blissful liberation. The *Yoga* school accepts the philosophical outlook of *Samkhya* regarding spirit, matter, and liberation but goes further in emphasizing meditative and physical techniques for binding the spirit to Brahman and thus achieving *moksha*. It also makes room for a qualified theism.

Daoism

For 2,000 years *Daoism* (or *Taoism*) has been molding Chinese culture and changing the character of religions in the East. It has both philosophical and religious sides, and each of these has many permutations. It gets its name from the impossible-to-define notion of *Dao*, which has been translated as the “Way” or the “Way of Nature.” Daoism is said to have been founded by Lao-Tzu, the supposed author of the classical Daoist text the *Tao-te ching* (*Classic of the Way and Its Power*), destined to become, along with Confucius’s *Analects*, one of the two most respected books in Chinese writings. Scholars are unsure whether Lao-Tzu is a historical figure or a product of legend, but most agree that if Lao-Tzu was real, he probably lived in the sixth century BCE and may have been a contemporary of Confucius. The second most important text in philosophical Daoism is the *Chuang Tzu*, named after its presumed author. Regardless of their authorship, these two books laid the groundwork for a Daoism philosophy that influenced Chinese thinkers and nobles and has shaped the worldviews of the Chinese right up to the present.

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The Dao (pronounced *dow*) is the mysterious first principle of the universe: it is the eternal source of all that is real and the invisible process and underpinning of the world. It is the Way—the impersonal power that gives order and stability to the cosmos. Like the force of gravity, the Dao holds everything together, gives shape and structure to what is, and determines the way that everything must go. The *Chuang Tzu* characterizes the Dao as literally everything—it is the whole of all that exists, and we are of this whole. The *Chuang Tzu* asserts:

Chuang Tzu, *All Things Are One*

In the universe, all things are one. For him who can but realize his indissoluble unity with the whole, the parts of his body mean no more than so much dust and dirt, and death and life, end and beginning, are no more to him than the succession of day and night. They are powerless to disturb his tranquility.³⁵

When it comes to the concept of the Dao, the West seems to parallel the East. The pre-Socratic Greek philosopher Heraclitus declared that there is a source of all that exists, the fount of rationality, a first principle of the cosmos that he called *logos*. And there are hints of similar cosmic forces elsewhere in Western thought—in Aristotle's Unmoved Mover, for example, and in Christianity's omnipotent God.

If the descriptions of the Dao seem obscure or perplexing, it cannot be otherwise, the Daoist would say. For the Dao is beyond words; it is "nameless" (unnamable) and thus can only be hinted at. As the *Tao-te ching* says,

Knowing others is intelligence; knowing yourself is true wisdom. Mastering others is strength; mastering yourself is true power. If you realize that you have enough, you are truly rich.
—Lao Tzu

Lao-Tzu, *Tao-te ching*

The way that cannot be spoken of
Is not the constant way;
The name that can be named
Is not the constant name.
The nameless was the beginning of heaven and earth;
The named was the mother of the myriad creatures. . . .
There is a thing confusedly formed,
Born before heaven and earth.
Silent and void
It stands alone and does not change,
Goes round and does not weary.
It is capable of being the mother of the world.
I know not its name
So I style it "the way."
I give it the makeshift name of "the great."³⁶

A fundamental notion in Daoism is that since everything and everyone is subject to the power of the Dao, since nothing can withstand its inexorable flow, the best human life is one lived in harmony with it. To live well is to go with the current of the Dao; to struggle against the stream is to invite discord, strife, and woe. The good Daoist, then, discerns the way of nature, the "grain of the universe," and lets the cosmic order guide his or her life.

Living in harmony with the Dao means realizing the virtue of *wu-wei*—active inaction, or effortless action. This paradoxical attitude does not amount to passivity or apathy. According to some scholars it suggests acting effortlessly without straining or struggling and without feverish obsession with the objects of desire. To others it implies acting naturally, spontaneously, without predetermined ideas of how things should go. Thus the Daoist does not try to take charge of a problem, for that often just makes matters worse. She instead acts instinctively and efficiently, letting the solution unfold naturally, waiting for the right moment, harnessing the flow of the Dao by using the natural momentum in the situation, letting change happen by doing nothing. The Daoist is wise like the fighter who rolls with a punch, using its force to come round and return the blow, expending almost no energy of her own. In either interpretation, the point is not to interfere with nature but to let nature follow its own path.

Daoists differ on exactly what practices *wu-wei* implies. To many it suggests a rejection of worldly pleasures or a disregard for society and its conventions and values (like those stressed in Confucianism). The *Tao-te ching* makes explicit this abhorrence of regimented life:

Lao-Tzu, *Tao-te ching*

Exterminate the sage, discard the wise,
 And the people will benefit a hundredfold;
 Exterminate benevolence, discard rectitude,
 And the people will again be filial;
 Exterminate ingenuity, discard profit,
 And there will be no more thieves and bandits.
 These three, being false adornments, are not enough
 And the people must have something to which they can attach themselves:
 Exhibit the unadorned and embrace the uncarved block,
 Have little thought of self and as few desires as possible.³⁷

To some Daoists, *wu-wei* implies the opposite: a Daoism consistent with the demands of everyday life and Confucian values.

Lao-Tzu says that even in matters of governance, struggle and strain are useless, but *wu-wei* accomplishes much:

A man with outward
 courage dares to die;
 a man with inner courage
 dares to live.

—Lao Tzu

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Lao-Tzu, *Tao-te ching*

Govern the state by being straightforward;
 Wage war by being crafty;
 But win the empire by not being meddlesome.
 How do I know that it is like that?
 By means of this.
 The more taboos there are in the empire
 The poorer the people;
 The more sharpened tools the people have
 The more benighted the state;
 The more skills the people have
 The further novelties multiply;
 The better known the laws and edicts
 The more thieves and robbers there are.
 Hence the sage says,
 I take no action and the people are transformed of themselves;
 I prefer stillness and the people are rectified of themselves;
 I am not meddlesome and the people prosper of themselves;
 I am free from desire and the people of themselves become simple like the uncarved block.³⁸

In the *Tao-te ching*, *wu-wei* seems to imply a nearly invisible, hands-off, small-scale government. The job of the wise ruler is to shield the people from excessive regulation, overbearing laws and decrees, and unsettling ideas. Such policies may bring people closer to the natural order, but they have also been criticized as a recipe for despotism.

WRITING TO UNDERSTAND:**CRITIQUING PHILOSOPHICAL VIEWS**

Section 2.6

1. The central aim of Buddhism is to quench all desire. What would be the moral implications of a life in which that goal is successfully achieved?
2. What is your opinion of the Buddhist doctrines of karma and rebirth? Do they seem plausible? What is your judgment based on—personal experience, faith, science, or philosophical or logical considerations?
3. Do you agree with some critics of Hinduism that the caste system is inherently unjust? Why or why not?
4. What is the ultimate goal in life according to Daoism?
5. What is the Buddhist view of the self? How does it differ from the Christian view? What evidence or argument can be used to support each view?

WRITING TO UNDERSTAND:**CRITIQUING PHILOSOPHICAL VIEWS**

Section 3.7

1. What are some of the main themes of existentialism? Are they an accurate depiction of the human predicament? Why or why not?
2. Can life have meaning even if there is no God? Support your answer.
3. Are we absolutely free to live our lives according to our own preferences? Are we "condemned to be free"? Explain.
4. How does the myth of Sisyphus dramatize the absurdity of the human condition? Do you agree with Camus' assessment of human existence?
5. According to Camus, how can life be lived meaningfully in a meaningless world? Can *your* life be lived meaningfully? If so, how?

3.8 CONFUCIANISM

Confucianism is a school of thought that arose out of ancient China and, along with Taoism, has been a dominant philosophical system there for hundreds of years. Its effect on Chinese and East Asian life, culture, and government has been enormous—comparable to the influence of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam in the West. Until the early twentieth century, Confucian virtues and training were required of anyone entering Chinese civil service, and even now under Communist rule China holds to its Confucian roots in everyday life. Elsewhere in the East (especially in Korea, Japan, and Vietnam), Confucian ethics and ideals have remodeled society, providing moral underpinning and guidance to social relationships at all levels.

Part of the appeal of Confucianism is that in times of ideological confusion it has offered plausible answers to essential philosophical questions: What kind of person should I be? What kind of society is best? What are my moral obligations to my family, those who rule, and the rest of humanity? In the twenty-first century, millions of people are attracted to the answers supplied by this 2,000-year-old tradition.

Many of the elements of Confucianism were part of Chinese culture long before Confucius arrived on the scene. In fact, he claimed merely to transmit the wisdom of the ancients to new generations, but what he transmitted plus what he added became the distinctive Confucian worldview. From early Chinese civilization came the Confucian emphasis on rituals and their correct performance; the veneration of ancestors; social and cosmic harmony; virtuous behavior and ideals; and the will of Heaven (or *Tian*), the ultimate power and organizing principle in the universe.

Into this mix of characteristically Eastern ideas and practices there appeared in 551 BCE the renowned thinker we call Confucius (the Westernized spelling), otherwise known as K'ung Ch'iu or as K'ung Fu-tzu (Master K'ung). According to legend and very sketchy information about his life,



Figure 3.16 Confucius (551–479 BCE).

By three methods we may learn wisdom: First, by reflection, which is noblest; second, by imitation, which is easiest; and third, by experience, which is the bitterest.

—Confucius

27 Consider the Confucian emphasis on the noble or superior person. Do you think striving to become such a person is a laudable goal? Would it decrease or increase the enjoyment of life?

Li In early Confucianism, ritual, etiquette, principle, and propriety; conscientious behavior and right action.

Ren The essential Confucian virtues, including benevolence, sympathy, kindness, generosity, respect for others, and human-heartedness.

To be wealthy and honored in an unjust society is a disgrace.

—Confucius

he was born to a poor family in the tiny Chinese state of Lu. He served briefly at age fifty in the Lu government as police commissioner, and during the next thirteen years he visited other Chinese states trying to persuade their rulers to implement his philosophy of wise government. One leader after another turned him down. He spent the rest of his life teaching his philosophy and contributing to the Confucian works known as the *Five Classics*. He died in 479 BCE without his ideas having achieved wide acceptance. Only later did his views become a major influence.

Confucianism, especially later forms of it, has always featured some religious or divine aspects. Confucius himself believed in the supreme deity Heaven, asserting that we should align ourselves with its will. But in general he veered away from the supernatural beliefs of the past, for his main interest was teaching a humanistic doctrine centered on social relationships. His aim was the creation of harmony and virtue in the world—specifically in individuals, in the way they interacted with one another, and in how they were treated by the state. He saw his teachings as a remedy for the social disorder, corruption, and inhumanity existing all around him, from the lowest levels of society to the highest.

In Confucianism, the ideal world is generated through the practice of *li* and *ren*. *Li* has several meanings, including ritual, etiquette, principle, and propriety, but its essence is conscientious behavior and right action. To follow *li* is to conduct yourself in your dealings with others according to moral and customary norms, and to act in this way is to contribute to social stability and harmony. **Ren** is about social virtues; it encompasses benevolence, sympathy, kindness, generosity, respect for others, and human-heartedness. At its core is the imperative to work for the common good and to recognize the essential worth of others regardless of their social status. The expression of these virtues is governed by the notion of reciprocity (*shu*), what has been called Confucius's (negative) golden rule: "Never do to others what you would not like them to do to you." (The Christian golden rule is stated positively: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.")

Confucius urges people not merely to try to live according to *li* and *ren* but to excel at such a life, to become a "superior person" (a *junzi*), a noble. Contrary to history and custom, Confucius's idea of nobility has nothing to do with noble blood; true nobility, he says, comes from noble virtues and wisdom, and these anyone can acquire. He refers to a man who embodies this kind of nobility as a *gentleman*. We get a glimpse of the gentleman in the *Analects*, the main Confucian text:

Confucius, *Analects*

Tzu-kung asked about the true gentleman. The Master [Confucius] said, He does not preach what he practises till he has practised what he preaches. . . .

The Master said, A gentleman can see a question from all sides without bias. The small man is biased and can see a question only from one side.

The Master said, the Ways of the true gentleman are three. I myself have met with success in none of them. For he that is really Good is never unhappy, he that is really wise is never perplexed, he that is really brave is never afraid. Tzu-kung said, That, Master, is your own Way!

Tzu-kung asked about the qualities of a true gentleman. The Master said, He cultivates in himself the capacity to be diligent in his tasks. . . . The Master said, He cultivates in himself the capacity to ease the lot of other people. . . . The Master said, He cultivates in himself the capacity to ease the lot of the whole populace.¹⁹

So living by *li* and *ren* requires self-cultivation and action—learning the moral norms, understanding the virtues, and acting to apply these to the real world. Being a superior person, then, demands knowledge and judgment as well as devotion to the noblest values and virtues.

In Confucianism, individuals are not like atoms: They are not discrete, isolated units of stuff defined only by what they're made of. Individuals are part of a complex lattice of social relationships that must be taken into account. So in Confucian ethics, *ren* tells us what virtues apply to social relationships generally, and the text called the "Five Relationships" details the most important connections and the specific duties and virtues associated with particular relationships. These relationships are between parent and child, elder brother and younger brother, husband and wife, elder and junior, and ruler and subject. Harmony will pervade society, says Confucius, when (1) parents provide for their children, and children respect and obey their parents and care for them in their old age; (2) elder brothers look after younger brothers, and the younger show deference to the elder; (3) husbands support and protect wives, and wives obey husbands and tend to children and household; (4) elders show consideration for the younger, and the younger respect and heed elders; and (5) rulers care for and protect subjects, and subjects are loyal to rulers.

The relationship on which all others are based is that of parent and child, or, as Confucius would have it, father and son. The son owes the father respect, obedience, and support—an obligation that Confucianism calls "filial piety." The central feature of this relationship is that it is hierarchical. Father and son are not equal partners; the son is subordinate. The other four relationships are also hierarchical, with the wife subordinate to the husband, the younger brother to the older, the elder to the junior, and the subject to the ruler. And as in filial piety, the subordinates have a duty of obedience and respect, and the superiors are obligated to treat the subordinates with kindness and authority, as a father would. Confucius believes that if everyone conscientiously assumes his or her proper role, harmony, happiness, and goodness will reign in the land.

At fifteen I set my heart upon learning.

At thirty, I had planted my feet firm upon the ground.

At forty, I no longer suffered from perplexities.

At fifty, I knew what were the biddings of Heaven.

At sixty, I heard them with docile ear.

At seventy, I could follow the dictates of my own heart; for what I desired no longer overstepped the boundaries of right.

—Confucius

28 Is the Confucian prescription for harmony likely to be fully implemented in Western countries? That is, could there ever be a democratic, capitalist, consumer society that was also strictly Confucian?

The noble-minded are calm and steady. Little people are forever fussing and fretting.

—Confucius

Confucius, *Analects*

On filial piety, Confucius had this to say:

Meng I Tzu asked about the treatment of parents. The Master said, Never disobey! When Ch'ih was driving his carriage for him, the Master said, Meng asked me about the treatment of parents and I said, Never disobey! Fan Ch'ih said, In what sense did you mean it? The Master said, While they are alive, serve them according to ritual. When they die, bury them according to ritual and sacrifice to them according to ritual. . . .

Confucius, *Analects*

Tzu-yu asked about the treatment of parents. The Master said, "Filial sons" nowadays are people who see to it that their parents get enough to eat. But even dogs and horses are cared for to that extent. If there is no feeling of respect, wherein lies the difference?²⁰

The virtue of filial piety is still a strong force in China today, as this scholar explains:

John B. Noss, *A History of the World's Religions*

In China, loyalty to the family has been one's first loyalty. No lad in China ever comes of age, in the Western sense. It is still true that his whole service is expected to be devoted to the family until death, and he is expected to obey his father and, when his father dies, his eldest brother, with a perfect compliance. This has meant in the past that every father has a great and grave responsibility to fulfill toward his family. He must seek to produce virtue in his sons by being himself the best example of it. The fact that the present communist government speaks of making itself "father and elder brother" and claims for itself the first loyalty of every citizen has not totally invalidated the personal virtue of filial piety in the context of family life.²¹

Today the influence of the Confucian virtue of filial piety helps to explain why there is in much of Asia a greater emphasis on meeting obligations to family, community, and state than on ensuring individual rights and personal freedom.

WRITING TO UNDERSTAND:

CRITIQUING PHILOSOPHICAL VIEWS

Section 3.8

1. What are *li* and *ren*? How would society change if everyone acted according to these two virtues?
2. If you always strived to become a superior person, would your life be better than it is now or worse?
3. Confucianism downplays individual liberty and emphasizes the importance of yielding to the group in many matters. Is this an attractive aspect of Confucianism? Why or why not?
4. Does Confucianism fit easily with a Western society that has a strong respect for individual rights? Explain.
5. Would you prefer to live in a strict Confucian culture rather than the culture you live in now? Why or why not?