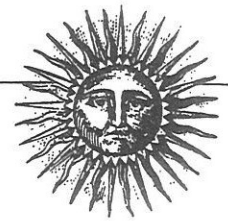

THE CREATORS

DANIEL J. BOORSTIN

And, as imagination bodies forth
The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen
Turns them to shapes, and gives to airy nothing
A local habitation and a name.

—SHAKESPEARE, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, V, 1

VINTAGE BOOKS
A DIVISION OF RANDOM HOUSE, INC.
NEW YORK

PART ONE

WORLDS WITHOUT BEGINNING

If God created the world, where was he before creation? . . .
How could God have made the world without any raw material? . . .
If he is ever perfect and complete, how could the will to create have arisen in him?

—JAIN SACRED TEXT (NINTH CENTURY)

1

The Dazzled Vision of the Hindus

THE Hindus have left an eloquent history of their efforts to answer the riddle of Creation. The Vedas, sacred hymns in archaic Sanskrit from about 1500 to 900 B.C., do not depict a benevolent Creator, but record a man's awe before the Creation as singers of the Vedas chant the radiance of this world. Their objects of worship were *devas* (cognate with Latin *deus,* god) derived from the old Sanskrit *div,* meaning brightness. Gods were the shining ones. The luminosity of their world impressed the Hindus from the beginning. Not the fitting-together-ness, not the hierarchy of beings or the order of nature, but the blinding splendor, the Light of the World. How the world once came into being or how it might end seemed irrelevant before the brightness of the visible world.

The Vedic hymns leave us a geology of names and myths and legends, untroubled by the mysteries of origin and destiny. Over all shines a radiant fire illuminating the Hindu vision. The fire-god was everywhere—how many was he? Sacrificial fire was a messenger carrying the consumed oblation upward to the gods. Benares, the pilgrim's destination, was the City of Light. The god Agni (meaning fire, related to Latin *ignis*) was said to be "the priest of the gods and the god of the priests." In the heavens he was the sun, in the atmosphere he was lightning, and on earth fire.

> O Agni, illuminator of darkness, day by day we approach you
> with holy thought bringing homage to you.
> Presiding at ritual functions, the brightly shining custodian
> of the cosmic order. . . .

The god who makes fire and light makes all seeing possible. What sanctifies the worshiper is no act of conversion, no change of spirit, but the simple act of seeing, the Hindi word *darśan.* A Hindu goes to a temple not to "worship," but rather "for *darśan,*" to see the image of the deity. Each of the cities sacred to each of the thousands of gods offers its own special *darśan*: Benares (Varanasi) for the *darśan* of Lord Visvanath, the high Himalayas for the *darśan* of Vishnu, or a nearby hilltop for the *darśan* of a local god. In the life of the sacred city of Benares the quest for seeing embodies much that is distinctive to the religions of Hindus. The Hindu is dazzled by a vision of the holy, not merely holy people but places like the Himalayan peaks where the gods live, or the Ganges which flows from Heaven to Earth, or countless inconspicuous sites where gods or goddesses

or unsung heroes showed their divine mettle. The Hindu pilgrims trek hundreds of miles just for another *darśan.*

So too the people of India attach a special value to the sight, the *darśan,* of a saintly person or a great leader. When Mahatma Gandhi crossed India by train, thousands collected along the tracks, gathering at his stopping places for an instant's glimpse of the Mahatma through a train window. They were "taking his *darśan.*" According to the Hindus, the deity or a holy spirit or place or image "gives *darśan*" and the people "take *darśan,*" for which there seems no counterpart in any Western religion.

Darśan is a two-way flow of vision. While the devotee sees the god, so too the god sees the devotee, and the two make contact through their eyes. In building a new temple, even before images of the gods are made, the gods are beseeched to turn a kindly eye on all who come to see them. And when the images of the gods are made, their eyes are the last part completed. Then when the image is consecrated its eyes are finally opened with a golden needle or the touch of a paintbrush. Sometimes large enamel eyes are inserted in the eye sockets. The bulbous or saucer eyes that make Indian paintings of gods seem bizarre to us are clues to the dominance of vision in the Hindu's relation to his gods. Many gods, like Siva and Ganesa, have a third eye in the center of their forehead. Brahma, the Thousand-Eyes, regularly has four heads, to look in all directions at once, and sometimes he has leopard-spot eyes all over his body.

For the Hindu, seeing became a form of touching. The Brahmanas, the sacred priestly texts attached to the Vedas, say "The eye is the truth. If two persons come disputing with each other . . . we should believe him who said 'I have seen it,' not him who has said 'I have heard it.' " This intimacy of visual contact explains too why Hindus forbade certain meetings of the eyes in public, not only between lovers but even between husband and wife.

While "seeing" brought sanctity and satisfaction to the Hindu, Western religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam found their way through the Word. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." "The Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us . . . full of grace and truth." Western religious traditions were wary of the seen, of the image, and the Protestant Reformation built a theology on this suspicion of all images.

Western religions begin with a notion that One—One God, One Book, One Son, One Church, One Nation under God—is better than many. The Hindu, dazzled by the wondrous variety of the creation, could not see it that way. For so multiplex a world, the *more* gods the better! How could any one god account for so varied a creation? And why not another alternative between monotheism and polytheism? The Oxford Orientalist Max Müller (1823–1900) who introduced the West to the Rig-Veda had to invent a word for the Hindu attitude. Kathenotheism, the worship of one god at a time,

described the Hindu way of being awed by the wonders of the Creation. An Olympian democracy allowed the devotee to focus his *darśan* on one particular god at each moment. But that god was not supreme over all others.

In this tolerant, ever-growing community of gods and goddesses, each divinity was willing to take a turn receiving the *darśan* of the faithful. None of the nasty envy of the Greek gods whose festering pride and jealousy motivated the Homeric epics! And how unlike the sovereign Creator-God of the Hebrews and Christians and Muslims. "For I the Lord thy God am a jealous God." But Vishnu, Siva, and Devi is each momentarily seen as creator, sustainer, and supreme power, each surrounded by a galaxy of lesser gods. The Western worshiper is baffled in his quest for a hierarchy among them. The dazzled vision sees no hierarchy but the mystery expressed in every growing thing. As the Upanishads, commentaries on the Vedas, sang (c.400 B.C.):

"Fetch me a fruit of the banyan tree."
"Here is one, sir."
"Break it."
"I have broken it, sir."
"What do you see?"
"Very tiny seeds, sir."
"Break one."
"I have broken it, sir."
"Now what do you see?"
"Nothing, sir."
"My son," the father said, "what you do not perceive is the essence, and in that essence the mighty banyan tree exists. Believe me, my son, in that essence is the self of all that is. That is the True, that is the Self. And you are that Self, Svertaketu!"

(Translated by A. L. Basham)

It is hardly surprising that the awestruck Hindus never came up with a single grand Creator-God.

Trying all sorts of answers to the riddle of Creation the Rig-Veda offered myths of beginnings. The manifold universe, one story went, was produced from a primeval sacrifice. A primeval man, Prajapati, the Lord of Beings, who existed even before the founding of the universe, was sacrificed. How he came into being, why or to whom he was sacrificed is not clear. The gods themselves appear to have been his children. The "Hymn of the Primeval Man" tells us how the universe emerged:

When they divided the Man
  into how many parts did they divide him?
What was his mouth, what were his arms,
  what were his thighs and his feet called?

The brahman was his mouth,
  of his arms was made the warrior,
His thighs became the vaiśya,
  of his feet the śudra was born.

The moon arose from his mind,
  from his eye was born the sun,
from his mouth Indra and Agni,
  from his breath the wind was born.

From his navel came the air,
  from his head there came the sky,
from his feet the earth, the four quarters from his ear,
  thus they fashioned the worlds.

With Sacrifice the gods sacrificed to Sacrifice—
  these were the first of the sacred laws.
These mighty beings reached the sky,
  where are the eternal spirits, the gods.

(Translated by A. L. Basham)

Sacrifice thus repeats the essential mystery of creation in cycles of re-creation, and priests create the world anew. Without this regular sacrifice might not the original chaos return?

While the Hindus sought and found the solace of myth in their countless communities of gods and goddesses, they never allowed themselves the comfort of dogma. How many were the gods? Who ruled among them? What did they know of their own creation and the first creation if there was one? Despite all this wondrous wealth of myth and poetry, the Brahman poets in the Rig-Veda sang courageous doubt. So went their "Hymn of Creation":

But, after all, who knows, and who can say
  whence it all came, and how creation happened?
The gods themselves are later than creation,
  so who knows truly whence it has arisen?

Whence all creation had its origin,
  he, whether he fashioned it or whether he did not,
he, who surveys it all from highest heaven,
  he knows—or maybe even he does not know.

(Translated by A. L. Basham)

And there is no deeper division between West and East than that marked by this reluctance of Hindu sages to answer the luminosity of the creation with simple dogmas and definitions. Western philosophers, after the Greeks, committed themselves to the "law of the excluded middle"—Socrates must be either mortal or not-mortal—but Hindus saw many more

possibilities. One Hindu sect, the Jains, declared there were always not only two possibilities but seven, which gave them their Doctrines of Maybe, wrapping both the darkness and the dazzling brilliance of creation in a twilight of doubt.

For the Hindu the creation was not a bringing into being of the wonder of the world. Rather it was a dismemberment, a disintegration of the original Oneness. For him the Creation seemed not the expression of a rational, benevolent Maker in wondrous new forms but a fragmenting of the unity of nature into countless limited forms. The Hindu saw the creation of our world as "the self-limitation of the transcendent." For the Hindu our very notion of creation was reversed. Instead of transforming nothing into everything, the Hindu creation broke into countless imperfect fragments what was already there. The Hindu reached back for the Oneness that was there in the beginning and he aimed to reintegrate nature. The cycles of birth and death have perpetuated that disintegrating force of creation. *Samsara,* the transmigration of the soul from one life to another, perpetuated the separateness of the individual. As the distinctions of caste survived, each generation paid the price of the misdeeds of earlier lives. The object for all was to "get off the wheel," to escape the cycle, and merge finally into the original One.

The numerous sects of Hindus found their several ways to answer the riddle of creation. The Jains, as their ninth-century poet sang, found the forces of nature good enough:

No single being had the skill to make this world—
For how can an immaterial god create that which is material?
How could God have made the world without any raw material?
If you say he made this first, and then the world, you are faced with an endless regression.
If you declare that this raw material arose naturally you fall into another fallacy,
For the whole universe might thus have been its own creator, and have arisen equally naturally.
If God created the world by an act of his own will, without any raw material,
Then it is just his will and nothing else—and who will believe this silly stuff?
If he is ever perfect and complete, how could the will to create have arisen in him?

While the aim of the Christian faithful would be "eternal Life," the aim of the Hindu was to be uncreated. Yoga, or "union," was the disciplined effort to reverse creation and return to the perfect Oneness from which the world had been fragmented.

2

The Indifference of Confucius

IN some parts of the world even the most profound thinking people have not been worried by the mystery of creation. Everyday concerns have consumed their thought and focused their philosophy. They have paid little attention to the puzzles of origin and destiny. Nor have they been troubled by the possibility of other worlds before or after this one. Are they the worse for it? Their indifference to the mysteries of creation has saved their energy for the work of this world. But it has been a symptom, too, of a suspicion of change, a reluctance to imagine the new.

"We do not yet know how to serve man," Confucius (c.551–479 B.C.) warned, "how can we know about serving the spirits?" When asked "What about death," he retorted, "We don't know yet about life, how can we know about death?" Is it any wonder that the Chinese have left us a thin stock of creation myths? The lone creation myth that has survived in Chinese lore appears to have been a late borrowing from Sumeria or the Rig-Veda.

Among the great creators, the great spokesmen of ethical ideals, none is more miraculous than Confucius himself. He claimed no divine source for his teachings, nor any inspiration not open to everyone. Unlike Moses, the Buddha, Jesus, or Mohammed, he proclaimed no Commandments. Just as Hinduism is a name for the religions of India, so Confucianism is a name for the traditional beliefs of the Chinese family. Their "religious" rituals or sacrifices were presided over not by a professional priest but by the head of the family and state sacrifices were led by the head of the state. Confucius insisted that he was only reviving ancient teachings.

Confucius was never crucified, never martyred. He never led a people out of a wilderness nor commanded forces in battle. He left little mark on the life of his time and aroused few disciples in his day. Pursuing the career of an ambitious reform-minded bureaucrat, he ended his life in frustration. It is easy to see him as an ancient Don Quixote. But his lifelong unsuccessful tilting against the evils of the chaotic Chinese states of his day somehow

scape painting is a late arrival in Western art. Ancient writers tell us of Greek murals that were landscapes, including some scenes from the *Odyssey.* Roman villas were decorated with idealized landscapes, and we can still see some in Pompeii. The frescoes (c.1338) of Ambrogio Lorenzetti (c.1300?–1348) in the Palazzo Publico in Siena are the earliest surviving Western paintings showing us a scene painted direct from nature. A series called *Good and Bad Government,* they reveal the emphasis of the West, for here it is the human figure of statesman or lover, hunter or soldier, saint or savior that dominates. Leonardo's familiar *Mona Lisa* (c.1503–1505) offers the landscape as a background. Albrecht Altdorfer (1480–1538) in the early sixteenth century begins experimenting with landscapes of the Danube. The outdoor settings for the Brueghels' paintings in the seventeenth century are not raw nature but a countryside where man plays, carouses, and hunts, and where the Blind lead the Blind. Not until the Dutch and Flemish painters of the seventeenth century—Rembrandt, Jacob van Ruisdael, Meindert Hobbema—does landscape become a subject all its own. Finally in the nineteenth century landscape becomes the painters' grand laboratory.

But in China, by the fourth century the landscape had already become an endlessly fertile subject. There nature is no mere setting for the human drama. In the earliest Western depictions of landscape, the viewer stands outside looking at the spectacle of man's work, his battles, his follies, or his worship. Man is the foreground. But the Chinese landscape was a scene of harmony and rhythmic life, where man fits inconspicuously, even obscurely.

In the Chinese landscapes we must seek out man. When we do find him he is a speck, whether a fisherman, a hermit, or a sage in contemplation. Even "empty" space is not the vacuum that the West so abhorred but an untapped resource of the universal *ch'i,* one with mountains and streams, as they said, "because there is a principle of organization connecting all things." A philosopher of the Yuan era, T'ang Hou (flourished 1320–1330), observed the incorporation of man in nature and nature in man:

> Landscape painting is the essence of the shaping powers of Nature. Thus through the vicissitudes of yin and yang—weather, time, and climate—the charm of inexhaustible transformation is unfailingly visible. If you yourself do not possess that grand wavelike vastness of mountain and valley within your heart and mind, you will be unable to capture it with ease in your painting.

3

The Silence of the Buddha

THE Buddha had no answer to the riddle of creation. Much of his appeal to millions around the world for twenty-five hundred years came from his commonsense refusal to try to answer unanswerable questions. "Is the universe eternal or not eternal, or both?" "Is the universe infinite in space or not infinite, or both or neither?" The Buddha listed these among the fourteen questions to which he allowed no reply.

"Have I ever said to you," the Buddha asked, "come, be my disciple and I will reveal to you the beginning of things?" "Sir, you have not." "Or, have you ever said to me I will become your pupil for you will reveal to me the beginning of things?" "Sir, I have not." His only object, the Buddha reminded his disciple, was "the thorough destruction of ill for the doer thereof." "If then," the Buddha went on, "it matters not to that object whether the beginning of things be revealed . . . what use would it be to have the beginning of things revealed?"

This hardheaded approach may surprise us in the West, where we commonly think of Buddhism as a mystic way of thought. But a wholesome reticence entered the mainstream of Buddhism, and came to be called the Silence of the Buddha. Confucius, too, had his own list of things "about which the master never spoke"—"weird things, physical exploits, disorders, and spirits." Inquiry for its own sake, merely to know more, philosophy on the Greek model, had no place either in the Buddhist tradition. Greek philosophers, beginning with Thales, were men of speculative temperament. What is the world made of? What are the elements and the processes by which the world is transformed? Greek philosophy and science were born together, of the passion to know.

The Buddha's aim was not to know the world or to improve it but to escape its suffering. His whole concern was salvation. It is not easy for us in the West to understand or even name this Buddhist concern. To say that the Buddhists had a "philosophy" would be misleading. Not only did the

Buddha remain silent when asked about the first creation. He despised "speculations about the creation of the land or sea" as "low conversation," which was like tales of kings, of robbers, of ministers of state, talk about women and about heroes, gossip at street corners, and ghost stories. He urged disciples to follow his example and not fritter away their energy on such trifles.

He offered an original, if slightly malicious, explanation of how the idea of a single Creator had ever got started. He said it began as only a rumor, invented by the conceit of a well-known figure inherited from the prolific Hindu mythology. The culprit was none other than Brahma, of wondrous and various genealogy. Originally associated with the primeval Prajapati, whom we have met, Brahma was said to have been born from a golden egg. Some credited him with creating the earth, others said that he had sprung from a lotus that issued from the protector-god Vishnu's navel. In the Buddha's lifetime Hindus still worshiped Brahma as a creator god.

The Lord Buddha explained how, at one stage in the endless cycles of the universe, this character had cast himself in the role of Creator:

> Now there comes a time when this world begins to evolve, and then the World of Brahma appears, but it is empty. And some being, whether because his allotted span is past or because his merit is exhausted, quits his body in the world of Radiance and is born in the empty World of Brahma, where he dwells for a long, long time. Now, because he has been so long alone he begins to feel dissatisfaction and longing, and wishes that other beings might come and live with him. And indeed soon other beings quit their bodies in the World of Radiance and come to keep him company in the World of Brahma.
>
> Then the being who was first born there thinks: "I am Brahma, the mighty Brahma, the Conqueror, the Unconquered, the All-seeing, the Lord, the Maker, the Creator, the Supreme Chief, the Disposer, the Controller, the Father of all that is or is to be. I have created all these beings, for I merely wished that they might be and they have come here!" And the other beings . . . think the same, because he was born first and they later. And the being who was born first lived longer and was more handsome and powerful than the others. . . .
>
> That is how your traditional doctrine comes about that the beginning of things was the work of the god Brahma.

Following the Buddha, the Buddhist scriptures repeatedly boasted their freedom from such silly personal conceits as belief in a Creator.

The indifference of the Buddha to the tantalizing questions of creation had a source in the experience of the Gautama Buddha himself. His career was quite the opposite of that which led Confucius to his own kind of indifference. Confucius was uninterested in the origin of the world because it had

no current bearing on the reformation of man or of government. The Buddha was interested in escaping the world and so aimed to make life on earth irrelevant. Both men were teachers. While Confucius offered maxims for the politician, the Buddha's life was raw material for legends, folklore, and fairy tales.

The obscure Confucius was frustrated in his unsuccessful search for the power to reform society. The Gautama Buddha (561?–483? B.C.) willfully abandoned power and glory. Confucius lived among sordid intrigues of bedroom and palace. The Buddha's life was overcast with sublime mysteries.

Prince Siddhartha, later to be the Gautama Buddha, was born in Kapilavastu in northeastern India on the border of present-day Nepal. A prince of the Kingdom of the Bakyas, he was raised in fabled Oriental luxury. The legend of his life reveals the archetype of the Buddha, the essence of Buddhism, which grew over the centuries after his death. But the early Buddhists, like the Hindu Brahmins, believed that religious knowledge was too sacred to be written down. For four centuries after his death, facts and legends about the Buddha, his dialogues and sayings were preserved only in the memories of monks. The surviving accounts of his life are the accumulated product of disciples over generations.

This composite character is revealed in the very name of the Buddha. For *buddha* (past participle of Sanskrit *buddh,* to awaken or to know) is not a personal name but a term of praise, like messiah or christ (the anointed one). The proper name of the founder was Gautama. In his time he was known as Sakyamuni, the Sage from the tribe of the Sakyas. Unlike the founder of Christianity or of Islam, the Gautama Buddha was not thought to be unique. He represented a kind of person who recurred, but only rarely, over the aeons. The Gautama Buddha was not the first nor would he be the last. He was another in an endless series of Enlightened Ones. For us the historical Sakyamuni is lost in the historic Buddha.

He had not appeared on earth first as Gautama. For his perfect enlightenment could not have been attained in only one life. It must have been the result of his repeated earlier efforts in numerous incarnations. Only then had he become a Bodhisattva, a Bodhi-being in the person of the Prince Siddhartha. The explanation in the Buddhist scriptures of how this came about directs us to the Buddhist view of history. And their endless cycles of time also help us understand why the mystery of creation did not trouble them.

> Someone is called a Bodhisattva if he is certain to become a Buddha, a "Buddha" being a man who has first enlightened himself and will thereafter enlighten others. . . . This change from an ordinary being to a Bodhi-being takes place when

his mind has reached the stage when it can no longer turn back on enlightenment. Also he has by then gained five advantages; he is no more reborn in the states of woe, but always among gods and man; he is never again born in poor or low-class families; he is always male, and never a woman; he is always well-built, and free from physical defects; he can remember his past lives, and no more forgets them again.

(Translated by Edward Conze)

This full enlightenment was reached gradually, during three "incalculable aeons." "In the first incalculable aeon he does not yet know whether he will become a Buddha or not; in the second he knows he will be a Buddha, but does not dare to say so openly; in the third he knows for certain that one day he will be a Buddha, and fearlessly proclaims that fact to the world." With charming inconsistency, the same Buddhists who admired the Lord Buddha for his commonsense refusal to answer the fourteen unanswerable questions could not resist a temptation to calculate the "incalculable." Some figured it as a vast number increased by multiples, others by squares. One of the more precise scholars offered a number designated by 1 followed by 352 septillions of kilometers of zeros, allowing that one zero occupies a length of 0.001 meter.

In the endless cycles of the World, in each Great Period, or Kalpa, there were four Ages, comparable to the four ages of the Greeks and the Hindus. Each Great Period began with an Age of Destruction by fire, wind, and water, followed by a gradual re-formation and re-population of the world. In none of these did a Creator appear nor were His works required. The Great Periods were not all the same. In some no Buddha would appear and these are called "void." In others one or many Buddhas might appear. In each cycle of recovery the primordial water slowly receded and a solid world of dry land emerged. Where the sacred tree of the Buddha would be, a lotus appeared. There were as many lotuses as there would be Buddhas in the Period.

During each Great Period, life carried on by transmigration (*samsara*) of souls from one creature to another. Schools of Buddhism disagreed on points of doctrine, but they agreed that there was no beginning to the process of transmigrations. And there would surely be no end. Since there were an infinite number of souls, how could there ever be a time when they all would have attained Nirvana?

Attaining Nirvana was, of course, everyone's hope. For the transmigrations of a soul finally dissolved the self, and so ended the suffering that came with all existence. The arrival of the Gautama Buddha on earth as Prince Siddhartha about 561 B.C. was just another stage in the countless processes of his reincarnation. And his previous lives provided some of the most

appealing passages in the Buddhist scriptures. They chronicle how his soul had stored up merit toward his reward of ever-higher incarnations and final fulfillment in Buddhahood and Nirvana.

The tale of the hungry tigress told how Gautama, in an earlier incarnation as Prince Mahasattva, had gone walking in the jungle. There he encountered a weary tigress who a few days before had been delivered of seven cubs. Since she could find no meat or warm blood to feed them, they were all about to die of hunger. Mahasattva thought, "Now the time has come for me to sacrifice myself! For a long time I have served this putrid body and given it bed and clothes, food and drink, and conveyances of all kinds. . . . How much better to leave this ungrateful body of one's own accord and in good time! It cannot subsist for ever, because it is like urine which must come out. To-day I will use it for a sublime deed. Then it will act for me as a boat which helps me to cross the ocean of birth and death." With those words the prince threw himself down in front of the tigress. But she was too weak to move. Mahasattva, being "a merciful man," had carried no sword. So he cut his throat with a sharp piece of bamboo and fell near the tigress, who soon ate all his flesh and blood, leaving only bones. "It was I," the Buddha explained to his disciple, "who at that time and on that occasion was that Prince Mahasattva."

Finally, as Prince Siddhartha, he had been born again into a life of luxury. For the young prince the King provided three palaces, one for winter, one for summer, and one for the rainy season. During the rainy season the prince was entertained by beautiful dancing girl–musicians, as his father did not want him to be tempted to leave the palace. Shuddhodana had reason to take special measures to keep his son Gautama at his princely station. For Gautama's birth, Buddhist scriptures reported, had been most unusual. When the birth approached, Queen Maya accompanied the King to Lumbini, "a delightful grove, with trees of every kind, like the grove of Citraratha in Indra's Paradise."

He came out of his mother's side, without causing her pain or injury. His birth was as miraculous as that of . . . heroes of old who were born respectively from the thigh, from the hand, the head, or the armpit. . . . He did not enter the world in the usual manner, and he appeared like one descending from the sky. . . . With the bearing of a lion he surveyed the four quarters, and spoke these words full of meaning for the future: "For enlightenment I was born, for the good of all that lives. This is the last time that I have been born into this world of becoming."

(Translated by Edward Conze)

Seven Brahmin priests predicted that if the boy stayed at home he would eventually become a universal monarch, but if he left home he would become a Buddha.

He was married off at the age of sixteen to his cousin Yashodhara, "chaste and outstanding for her beauty, modesty, and good breeding, a true Goddess of Fortune in the shape of a woman." And in due time Yashodhara bore him a son. "It must be remembered that all the Bodhisattvas, those beings of quite incomparable spirit, must first of all know the taste of the pleasures which the senses can give. Only then, after a son has been born to them, do they depart to the forest."

On his pleasure excursions the young Gautama was awakened to human suffering. The gods dismayed him by images of old age and of disease. Finally they showed him a corpse. And at the sight of death his heart was again filled with dismay. "This is the end," he exclaimed, "which has been fixed for all, and yet the world forgets its fears and takes no heed! . . . Turn back the chariot! This is no time or place for pleasure excursions. How could an intelligent person pay no heed at a time of disaster, when he knows of his impending destruction."

Now, at the age of twenty-nine, Prince Siddhartha (not yet a Buddha) began his experimental search for truth, which meant a way out of the sufferings of the world. For himself and all mankind he sought escape from Creation. When, why, and how suffering had first been brought into being was not his concern. Would it not be enough to show the way out of the suffering that plagued mankind every day?

After the vision of the corpse, the gods sent a vision of a religious mendicant to remind Gautama of his mission to deliver mankind. In the long past this apparition had seen other Buddhas. Now he exhorted Gautama to follow in their path. "O Bull among men, I am a recluse who, terrified by birth and death, have adopted a homeless life to win salvation! Since all that lives is to extinction doomed, salvation from this world is what I wish and so I search for that most blessed state in which extinction is unknown." With these words the being rose like a bird into the sky. Gautama, amazed and elated, was now fully convinced of his mission of salvation. "Then and there," Buddhist scriptures report, "he intuitively perceived the Dharma [the ultimate reality; The Way], and made plans to leave his palace for the homeless life."

In the middle of the night, before setting out "to win the deathless state," Gautama took a parting look at his beautiful wife and his infant son asleep in their palace bedchamber. He did not awaken them for fear they might dissuade him from his flight. Gautama's next years of relentless search for Enlightenment and Salvation rivaled the range of William James's *Varieties of Religious Experience.* Baffling episodes of mysticism and satanism were interrupted by blinding flashes of common sense.

For a while he sat at the feet of renowned sages, learning their systems for escaping selfhood by entering "the sphere of neither-perception-nor-non-perception" through the ecstasy of mystic trances. They still did not lead him to Enlightenment.

Then he turned to a monkish life of self-denial. He starved himself until his buttocks were like a buffalo's hoof, his ribs like the rafters of a dilapidated shed, the pupils of his eyes sunk deep in their sockets "as water appears shining at the bottom of a deep well," and the skin of his belly cleaved to his backbone. We see the emaciated Gautama in the unforgettable Greco-Gandhara sculpture of the second century. "This is not the Dharma which leads to dispassion, to enlightenment, to emancipation," he concluded, ". . . Inward calm cannot be maintained unless physical strength is constantly and intelligently replenished."

When his five companion ascetics abandoned him, he returned to a normal diet, his body became fully rounded again and "he gained the strength to win enlightenment." When he walked toward the roots of a sacred fig tree (now called the *bodhi* tree, *Ficus religiosa*) intent on his high purpose, Kala, "a high-ranking serpent, who was as strong as a King elephant," was awakened by "the incomparable sound of his footsteps" and saluted Gautama, who seated himself cross-legged in the most immovable of postures and said he would not arise until he had received Enlightenment. "Then the denizens of the heavens felt exceedingly joyous, the herd of beasts, as well as the birds, made no noise at all, and even the trees ceased to rustle when struck by the wind."

Now he suffered his final trial, the siege of the satanic Mara, Lord of Passions. Mara's demonic army, including his three sons (Flurry, Gaiety, and Sullen Pride) and three daughters (Discontent, Delight, and Thirst), attacked the impassive Gautama. He speedily dispersed Mara's hordes, who fled in panic. The great seer, "free from the dust of passion, victorious over darkness' gloom," using his skill at meditation entered a deep trance. In the first watch of the night (6:00 P.M. to 10:00 P.M.) he recalled all his own former lives, the thousands of births he had been through. "Surely," he concluded, "this world is unprotected and helpless, and like a wheel it turns round and round." He saw that the world of samsara, of birth and death, was "as unsubstantial as the pith of a plantain tree." In the second watch (10:00 P.M. to 2:00 A.M.) he attained "the perfectly pure heavenly eye" and saw that the rebirth of beings depended on the merit of their deeds, but "he found nothing substantial in the world of becoming, just as no core of heartwood is found in a plantain tree when its layers are peeled off one by one." In the third watch (2:00 A.M. to 6:00 A.M.) he saw the real nature of the world, how greed, delusion, and ignorance produced evil and prevented getting off the wheel of rebirth.

The climax of his trance was Enlightenment, the state of all-knowledge. "From the summit of the world downwards he could detect no self any-

where. Like the fire, when its fuel is burnt up, he became tranquil." "The earth swayed like a woman drunken with wine . . . and the mighty drums of thunder resounded through the air. Pleasant breezes blew softly, rain fell from a cloudless sky, flowers and fruits dropped from the trees out of season—in an effort to show reverence for him."

Gautama now at the age of thirty-five had become a Buddha. He arose and found the five ascetic monks who had abandoned him. To them he preached the middle way to Enlightenment, which became the essential doctrine of Buddhism: the Holy Eightfold Path—right views, right intentions, right speech, right conduct, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration, and the Four Holy Truths. These Truths were: first, that all existence—birth, decay, sickness, and death—is suffering; second, that all suffering and rebirth are caused by man's selfish craving; third, that Nirvana, freedom from suffering, comes from the cessation of all craving; and fourth, that the stopping of all ill and craving comes only from following the Holy Eightfold Path. These steps to the extinction of self were the way of the Buddha, the way of Enlightenment.

Is it any wonder that the Buddha dismissed those who asked when and how the world was created? That he aimed at them "the unbearable repartee" of silence? What soul en route to Buddhahood would waste energy on the mystery of creation? The Buddha aimed at Un-Creation. The Creator, if there was one, was plainly not beneficent. The Buddha charitably had not conjured up such a Master Maker of Suffering, who had imposed a life sentence on all creatures. If there was a Creator, it was he who had created the need for the extinction of the self, the need to escape rebirth, the need to struggle toward Nirvana. The Lord of the Buddhists was the Master of Extinction. And no model for man the creator.

4

The Homeric Scriptures of the Greeks

THE Greeks' spirit of inquiry grew with the centuries. But their sacred epic had little to say about Beginnings. Instead it was a saga of human adventure and human gods. Homer's two testaments, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey,* remain the first and greatest epics of Western civilization. Still, who Homer

was, how Homer worked, and how the stories were perpetuated have baffled scholarly detectives for three thousand years. And the making of the Homeric saga remains a parable of the mystery of creation.

Plato (427?–347 B.C.), a mythmaker of proven talent, complained that while Homer was "the greatest of poets and the first of tragedy writers" it was unfortunate that he had become "the educator of Hellas" and the guide "for the ordering of human things." He was troubled that the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* offered no set of moral commandments or divine ordinances but only epics of a long-past heroic age. Homer sang in the *Iliad* of four days in the ten-year war of the Greeks against the Trojans and in the *Odyssey* recalled the adventures of one Greek on his way home. From about 1200 B.C. and for seven hundred years until Plato's time these two epics were the basis of Greek religion and morals, the chief source of history, and even of practical information on geography, metallurgy, navigation, and shipbuilding. Still more remarkable, for two and a half millennia after Plato, the Homeric epics as primordial works of the imagination reigned over the Western world of letters. The core of humanistic scholarship, the songs of Homer resound without interruption above the changing dogmas of politics, religion, and science. The prophetic Greeks called him "the poet."

Homer's survival is a stark contrast to the fate of the Greeks' other creations. The Acropolis lies in ruins, and there is probably not one complete freestanding statue surviving from the Great Age. We cannot hear Greek music. Their literary legacy, which has dominated Western culture, survives only in fragments. While we know the names of at least 150 ancient Greek writers of tragedy, what remain for us are mere samples. Of all the 92 plays of Euripides whose names survive we have only a fifth (18 or 19), of the 82 of Aeschylus less than a tenth (7), and of Sophocles' 122, a fifteenth (7). Would the power of the ancient Greeks have been greater or less if the bulk of their work had come to us? Of the works of Agathon, the most eminent follower of the three famous tragedians at whose house Plato set his *Symposium,* we have only fragments. Yet Agathon was reputed to be the great innovator, the first to write a tragedy on his own imaginary subject and the first to divide a play into acts. For us he is hardly more than a literary rumor.

In the lottery of time, Homer's two great epics managed to survive. Why? How? Homer's chances of survival were multiplied by his perennial popularity in all sorts of climates. His works were copied again and again, somehow undimmed by centuries of changing styles. There were some happy coincidences, such as the dry climate of Egypt that happened to provide natural museum conditions for preserving fragile manuscripts. And Alexander the Great's conquest of Egypt (332 B.C.) set the scene for Greek rulers to found the greatest of all ancient libraries at Alexandria. In the