

Antiquity Comes Full Circle – Part II



The Evolution of Spirituality and Religion

The premise we've put forward so far i.e., 'a moment of conception', by its very definition may appear to diminish what went before and can also mask other important, relevant factors in the same time period. For this we can only say that this is the nature of any investigative process. By focusing on what we believe to be the salient points we are bound to omit things that others might see as relevant. However, we don't believe this diminishes the value of what we are putting forward because our aim is to simply get the reader to think in a more expansive way, to think outside the box, and not be limited by the constraints of the way history is often served up through our educational system. Having made this point we want to proceed to acknowledge other important characters and texts that played some part in the evolution of spirituality and religious tradition.

Mozi's (Mo Tzu) 470 BC – 391 BC: his contribution to the great planetary shifts of that era had some strong similarities to Confucius' but there were also clear differences. One of the core ideas was: benevolence directed to everyone. For Mo Tzu, to love everyone results in the greatest benefit to oneself and to others. He also believed in the Will of Heaven (God), a magnanimous universal force that rewarded our good actions but punished those who persisted in their unfriendly and hurtful actions. The Mohist tradition derived from Mo Tzu's work stated that one should mirror in their actions the Will of Heaven, with gratitude for its countless gifts seen as the highest endeavour. Mo Tzu criticized several Confucian ideals, and as such was considered the first great heretic of the Confucian tradition. Even though they both believed in unity and a principled society, based on the perfection of the individual, they differed as to how this perfection could be achieved. It is the philosophical tension between the Mohist tradition and Confucianism that led to its eventual demise

at the time of the Han Dynasty (206 BC – 220 BC). Mo Tzu's work would not be resurrected until the scholars of the Qing dynasty (1644 AD – 1912) sought to reconstruct the primary texts. Some western scholars were also motivated to study Mohism because of its apparent similarities to Christianity. Mo Tzu's views would go on to influence many of the subsequent philosophical and religious systems, and as such offered teachings powerful enough to rival Confucianism.

Mahāvira: (birth name Vardhamāna): there is some ambiguity about dates - it is believed he was born 540 BC and died 468 BC. There is no ambiguity though about his contribution. He came slightly after Buddha and was born in Northeast India. So, they were contemporaries and shared some of the same views. This can be seen particularly in their theories about karma, although the Jains concept of karma is more significantly developed than in either Hinduism or Buddhism. According to the *Acaranga Sūtra* (the oldest of the Jain texts, dating from the fourth or fifth century BC), Mahavira shared the view that spiritual advancement lies in the avoidance of injury to any life forms, and he is said, like Buddha, to have achieved enlightenment, what the Jains call *kevala* (perfect isolation from all harmful actions). This is a state described as 'blessed conscience', and it is how he acquired the title Mahavira (Great Hero), as he renounced 'normal family life' at the age of 30 and spent over 12 years wandering throughout the Ganges River plain, fasting, meditating, listening; like Buddha, he too pressed against the boundaries between life and death. This earned him the status of being the twenty fourth Great Teacher of the Jain tradition and the most recent to achieve the state of 'blessed omniscience'. The Jain community is now relatively small, located mainly in Gujarat and western Rajasthan but its message of non-violence endures, and has influenced many along the way, from the time of the great Indian King Ashoka - 200years before Christ - right through to Gandhi.

Bādarāyana: Known in India as the 'Teacher of teachers and the splendour of the sacred sciences'. Dates of his birth and death are unclear. All we can safely say is that he was around in the fifth century and was also part of this period which we are describing as the birth/infancy of spirituality. As the founder of the Vedantic system and the creator of systematic theology itself (several centuries before its reputed inaugurator Philo Judaeus of Alexandria 15 BC – 45 AD), he clearly greatly influenced events, especially in India. He is also the author of probably the most commented on text of Hindu Theology, the *Brahma Sutras*. It's worth noting that Indian religious thought displayed a preoccupation with 'systems' philosophy, from its beginnings in the Vedas, which – dependent on the historical clock you use – is said to go as far back as the 15th century BC. Most of this Vedic thought has been passed down in an oral tradition (known as the *Rig Veda*). It was Badarayana who produced an all-encompassing, integrated, and articulate text that enabled the vast and diverse texts of the Vedas (largely written in poetry and prose) to be formalised into a coherent system, a theology. As a result, it generally came to be agreed by Vedantins, that reality consisted of three categories: the Absolute (Brahman), the individual soul (*Jīva*) and material reality (*Joda*).

The Absolute being infinite consciousness, the soul being finite consciousness, and physical reality being unconscious. This 'tripartite pattern' was used later by systematians of other religions such as in the monumental works of Catholic systematics i.e., Aquinas (1225-74), Scotus (1265-1308) and Suárez (1548-1617). Bādarāyana's theology would go on to underpin and influence almost all philosophy and religious ideology to follow, certainly in India. His primary concepts of a Supreme Being (God) that was pure, constant, infinite, and never-changing, and a Self (soul) made from the same material, also a pure being, however also housing negative attributes, still influences very

many religious points of view today. The world of the five elements is then seen as the stage on which this drama of life is played out.

Bhagavad Gita: this is one of the great religious classics and is very relevant to this infancy and developmental period. Its author is said to be Vyāsa but dates pertaining to his birth and death are unknown. We know it was written between the 5th and 1st centuries BC. The Bhagavad Gita (The Song Sung by the Lord) is arguably the earliest attempt by man to arrive at a comprehensive view of existence. It is part of the great Indian epic, The Mahābhārata. It consists of 700 verses divided into eighteen chapters. The most important teaching of the Gita is that of altruism and benevolence. It tells the story of how man can reach his highest point by performing actions that are not motivated by the desire to obtain some personal benefit, but rather by the desire to do his duty (dharma), doing what is right for its own sake. To understand the Gita, it is necessary to place it in its religio-philosophical and cultural context. So, we'd like to offer you a little background...

The Āryans came to India in 1500 BC and although they brought their own Gods and language (Sanskrit), religious life still largely centered around the Vedas. These holy books guided the spiritual thinking and the lives of the Indian people. By 1000 BC life for many had become unsatisfactory and a pious belief in karma and reincarnation added to a growing pessimism. The notion was born that if one life could be so unsatisfactory and there was an endless chain of rebirth and re-death, then surely moksha (liberation from life and death) had to be the highest goal? The Upanishads (which are the culmination of the Vedas) developed a philosophy which considers that human suffering is conceived out of the spirit misidentifying with the body and therefore moving away from the 'truth' about the self, namely that the self is a spirit made up of the same essence as the Supreme Consciousness (the Absolute).

The Gita went further than the Upanishads. Through the dialogue that takes place between Krishna and Arjuna (the two principal characters) a wonderful story of love, devotion, courage, sacrifice, and morality is told. The concept of moksha being 'the way' to liberation is added to as Krishna explores three other ways to liberation. They are knowledge, action and devotion. At first Krishna suggests that devotion is the best of these, followed by action and then knowledge in third place. However, the Gita is a harmonising doctrine, it prefers 'both/and' to 'either/or', so Krishna ends by saying that the very best way is to combine all three. As we saw with Bādarāyana's input, where he identifies integration as the best course, here too the Gita points us in this direction!

To do justice to its contribution, the Gita would deserve a thesis all of its own, but this is not our aim. The Gita has indeed had countless commentaries written by almost all classical Indian philosophers, notably Shankara and Ramanuja and more latterly Indian thinkers Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, Gandhi and Aurobindo. Since the Gita was translated into English by Charles Wilkins in 1785, it is now available in more than thirty languages and about 1,000 individual editions. Sadly, we can see that the Gita, like so many other scriptures, treatises and philosophical texts has been interpreted in different ways to suit the argument of the day. For example, Shankara, the first great commentator on the Gita, was a firm advocate that the path of knowledge was the only way to moksha and that action, and the path of devotion were merely preparatory to knowledge. Ramanuja on the other hand sees the path of devotion as the highest path and the other two as supplementary.

The American Transcendentalist, Henry Thoreau, took another view. He saw the Gita as giving form and structure to the ideal of yogic discipline, which emphasised solitude, chastity, and austerity. Gandhi, arguably the greatest apostle of non-violence since Buddha, referred to the Gita as his

spiritual dictionary, which to many may have seemed strange since the Gita is a dialogue between Krishna and Arjuna taking place on a battlefield with Krishna urging Arjuna to fight. Gandhi saw no conflict between the primary thrust of the Gita and his own position as he interpreted the Gita allegorically. He saw the war being waged in the Gita as the war taking place in the hearts of each one of us, and so Krishna's advice meant one cannot quit the battlefield of the mind and heart. Instead, we must find refuge in discipline, controlling our senses, feelings of attachment and lust. Only then can we find liberation in life. Gandhi was clearly such a man, putting his beliefs very much into action (karma). We will come back to some of the other unique tenets of the Gita later in this series...

The story of the Greeks, Romans and the Egyptians is well told and continues to be. Our concern is with the lesser-told tale (in the developed world) of the great eastern influences, and to continue to explore this we need also to refer to three other influential doctrines that have come out of the Chinese traditions and philosophy....

The Spring and Autumn Annals of Master Lu, which are essentially concerned with political philosophy and ethics: The Annals are presumed to have been compiled by Lu Pu-Wei (291BC – 235 BC), sometime in the third century BC. The work was written by numerous scholars and is an eclectic philosophical work drawing on various teachings from the Zhou (Chou) dynasty several centuries earlier. The text contains 160 chapters, divided into 3 parts: 12 chronicles, 8 observations and 6 discussions. It is thought the Annals were Lu's attempt to write a definitive text on the art of rulership. Each of these three texts had their shortcomings but it's thought that the three as a whole offered the potential for self-mastery. Some of the areas covered include the notion that a ruler must govern with an attitude of public-spiritedness, that proper timing is of the essence, in order to achieve political order, that a ruler cannot afford to blindly follow tradition; he must respond to present circumstances creatively and with innovation, and that the teachings of traditional philosophy should be applied according to the seasons. In fact, this work implores the ruler, and therefore his subjects, to maintain a respectful and reciprocal relationship with the environment. One of the defining characteristics of Chinese political philosophy is its commitment to cosmic harmony and the Annals seek to engineer just that.

The Great Learning: This is a literary work about social philosophy and ethics. It is one of the Confucian Canon called 'The Four Books', the other three being the Analects of Confucius, the Book of Mencius (Mengzi/ Meng Tzu) and the Doctrine of Mean (Zhongyang). Originally it was one chapter in a larger Confucian work, the Book of Rites. The authorship of the Great Learning remains an unanswered question even today. Some scholars believe it was written by Confucius' disciple Zengzi (Tseng Tzu), whilst others think Confucius's grandson, Zi Si (Tzu Ssu) composed this great work. It was written in the third or second century BC. The text has been described through the ages as "a gateway to virtue" and is considered by many Chinese scholars an unrivalled philosophical work. It was deemed the most important of 'The Four Books' and its significance is such that it is believed that the subtleties and the depth of the other three works cannot be fully grasped and understood without it. Although many would say this is a text primarily for a ruler there are those who believe it offers insight and benefit to all. The subjects it covers include organising the state, bringing tranquillity to the world, establishing a harmonious household, and cultivating the self, to name a few. In addition, the Great Learning contains the Confucian educational, moral, and political

programmes. The text is primarily preoccupied with what it sees as the two inseparable goals of morality: firstly, cultivating the self, and secondly, ordering the state or society. It provides a clear map for enhancing one's own goodness and virtue and developing a culture of Ren (love) within humanity. Even today it is still considered the best introduction to Confucianism.

The Doctrine of the Mean was composed between the third and second century BC and is another one of the Confucian Canon called the 'The Four Books'. Authorship is again called into question. Confucius's grandson (Zi Si – 492-431 BC) is also thought to have composed this work. However, if it indeed was produced in the third or second century BC, then as indicated by his lifespan, it was after his time. This work is once again concerned with ethics, as almost all great Chinese works are. However, in addition to the ethical theme, its primary focus is metaphysics. This work concerns itself with the Confucian system of moral metaphysics and the philosophy of moral practice. It has helped shape Chinese civilisation for more than 2,000 years. In the process it has, to a large extent, brought together the ideas of Buddhism, Daoism and Confucianism, and so has become a bridge between the three philosophies. To further clarify the focus and emphasis of this work it is useful to understand what the word 'Mean' in Chinese translates to. The Chinese word for Mean is Zhong (chung), which literally translates to "central, unbiased and proper". The principal idea of Zhong is: "to do it just right". The whole phrase in Chinese is 'Zhang Yong'. The Yong means: "central harmony" or "the way of". So, the Mean is about the highest human conduct, to endeavour to do things in the right way, in a way that's unbiased and promotes harmony. The foundation on which this highest conduct stands is based on the Confucian metaphysical principle of cosmic unity. That is: heaven and man are inseparable. What heaven imparts to man is called nature. To follow nature is called 'the way' (DaøTao). To cultivate the way is called education. Heaven here refers to the non-personal supreme deity or spiritual reality. This is a fundamental belief not only in Confucianism, but also in Chinese Buddhism and Daoism.

All three texts believe the "Way of Heaven" resides within us all and although human beings are born with a nature invested in them from heaven, this good nature needs to be cultivated and developed for an individual to fulfil his potential. This is radically different from the western view which has nature on one hand and human beings on the other. The Chinese can't see how these two can be separated. This "Heaven-and-Human-Way" is described as Cheng (ch'eng), which translates as sincerity, reality, or truthfulness. Cheng is the Way of Heaven; it is infinite, unlimited, extensive, and deep. Cheng is the process of creativity, the 'active' force working through everything in the universe. The highest aspiration is to embrace Cheng. A person who embraces Cheng is true to his nature and so lives sincerely and truthfully in line with Heaven. He becomes a 'superior person' but does not behave in a superior way, and so is truly humble. He exemplifies the Way of the Mean: wisdom, humanity, and courage.

Patanjali: before moving on and taking a closer look at how the spiritual web has spread, influencing millions of people, over tens of hundreds of years, one more character remains, who undoubtedly influenced the infancy of spirituality and whose work continues to do so even today. His name is Patanjali. He was born in India and the dates of his birth and death remain unknown. Estimates range from 200 BC to 400 AD (birth) and 150 BC to 450 AD (death). Meditation is and remains an important aspect of religion in India. It is advocated by: Jainism, Buddhism and Brahmanical Hinduism. Patanjali composed a brief textbook drawing from different schools and traditions in

which he summarises several yogic meditation techniques. This manual has become the standard guide for both the theory and practice of meditation in India. His work is known as the Yoga Sātras. They are composed in Sanskrit and divided into four sections: Concentration (Samādhi), Practice (Sādhana), Empowerment (Vibhūtti) and Isolation (Kaivalyam). These four concepts are blended with a number of key themes. One key theme emphasises control over the mind. Another involves the cultivation of the ability to become and remain the 'seer' (one's unchanging, true self) and not become embroiled in the 'seen' (the ever-changing dance of matter). When one can master the mind and remain in the state of 'pure seeing', then one is said to have achieved isolation (Kaivalyam), to have become free from negative influence (karmateet), also known as absorption in the "Cloud of Virtue".

In the first section of the text, Patanjali lays out his metaphysical, epistemological, and logical premises. He states that thought causes one to stray into the realm of the 'seen' in a variety of ways. By practicing detachment and dispassion, thought can be restrained, thus generating the desired state of remaining in the "seer's true form (reality)". Patanjali states that the ills of the self and of the world can be cured by adopting a consciousness that distances one from attachment to the 'seen'. Patanjali goes on to explain the activities and awareness required to achieve this state of detachment from the seen. These include: faith, concentration, mindfulness, wisdom, friendliness, compassion, equanimity, happiness and devoting oneself to the significant meditational ideal. There is some overlap here with Buddhist tenets.

The Yoga Sūtras, like all metaphysical works, go on to talk about the importance of ethics. In this regard the Jain influence can clearly be seen in Patanjali's work as he emphasises non-violence, truthfulness, sexual restraint, non-attachment and refraining from greed. The philosophy of karma (the law of cause and effect), like many other eastern traditions is given a pivotal place. In fact, the primary purpose of detachment and remaining anchored as the seer is to become free of the consequences of one's negative actions, to become free of past karma and various sorrows of the world. Patanjali warned of the five afflictions which are: ego, attraction, aversion, ignorance and clinging to life. For him these were the enemy of those striving for liberation in life (Jivan-Mukta).

The Yoga Sūtras offer great insight into achieving the yogic state (a state of union) and bliss (happiness beyond the senses). Many of its principles and systems continue to be taught, such as chanting, controlling the breath, physical postures etc., all in the name of remaining in the form of the seer, which is a state of being beyond the realm of the material world and change. Unfortunately, the westernisation of some of these practices means the focus and emphasis on remaining the seer has to a large extent become lost.

The next chapter in this amazing story focuses on the next thousand years in which we will see further expansion of spiritual ideals, a unifying of moral values and ethics as well as increasing contradiction about the road to enlightenment. We will see that although the eastern contribution has many unifying principles it has not been without its conflict and disagreements – many of which remain today. That said, its overriding message of good conduct, the pursuit of peace, balance, and harmony, we believe is more relevant than ever...

500 BC – 500 AD

At the time of Buddha's death, the great Persian Empire raided and plundered Greece. A century later the Greeks came looking for revenge. As is often the case in history, war becomes the catalyst for change. On October 1st 331 BC arguably the greatest battle of antiquity was fought in the perennial battleground of Iraq; Europe met Asia. Alexander the Great came to fight the Persians and in a famous historic battle against Darius, King of the Persians, Alexander won, and Darius fled. Aristotle, who was Alexander's teacher said at the time: "The Greeks have strength and reason and it's right that they should rule the world". With the words of his teacher ringing in his ears, Alexander continued his mission to conquer. He drove through the Khyber Pass and entered India in 326 BC. Alexander was charmed by India's beauty, diversity and wealth and Greece's love affair with India was established. It was there in the Punjab that Alexander met Chandragupta Mauri – who was initially so impressed with Alexander but who in time would be the one to drive Alexander's successors out of India, thus establishing an enormous kingdom of his own.

Spirituality and religion in all their various forms were also crossing boundaries and borders on the back of conflict and migration. The closer one looks at the East, particularly in India, the more one can see a melting pot of people, cultures, arts, ideas, and languages, largely as a result of the movement of people and with that the migration of minds and ideas. This is also true of China, Japan, and Korea. Over the thousand-year period from 500 BC to 500 AD much would stay the same in the East and yet there would also be great change. It's important to note that a proper examination of the East shows us that the origins of so much of what we call civilisation are to be found in this part of the world. It seems to us that in our re-telling of history, in the developed world, we've not properly acknowledged the key contribution made by the East to all aspects of human activity: the arts, language, literature, architecture, technology, philosophy and science. And yet as we go on telling this story we hope you will see for yourself the staggering contributions the East has indeed made to the arts, sciences, and philosophy, and that those contributions are quite simply life-defining.

In India's on-going relationship with Greece, the Greek ambassadors in 300 BC were amazed by what they saw. Chandragupta reigned over a land of 118 nations and had created cities of such opulence, with communities that had become mixed over time living harmoniously. He ruled from the imperial city of Patna and was considered by many to be the first great king of India. His method of rulership would become the template for his grandson (Asoka Maurya), who would take his grandfather's model and go on to rule a vast kingdom for nearly forty years. Chandragupta, at the height of his powers, renounced his kingdom, in fact he renounced everything in pursuit of Moksha (liberation). He followed a Jain Guru and he starved to death to achieve Moksha. But his legacy of proper governance, political order and citizenship would be fulfilled by his grandson, Asoka Maurya.

Asoka's rule did not start well. He went on to conquer neighbouring communities and to expand his empire, spilling much blood and taking countless lives along the way. He later regretted his actions and the atrocities he was guilty of. He slowly began to see that war was inhumane, a hideous crime and as a result he turned to Buddhism as he felt remorse and sought atonement. His message and his rule became one of non-violence. He resolved to conquer by persuasion alone. It was he who came up with new and original edicts (the first real charter) for human and animal rights. Asoka created a new ethical way of governing, which had never before been seen. He created an 'Empire of the Spirit' in response to the 'Empire of the Sword'. In his attempt to spread peace and brotherhood he sent ambassadors to the kings of Greece, Syria, Macedonia, North Africa, Babylonia, and others, in order to build bridges and spread religious tolerance. Asoka's principles and values

would go on to be part of the Indian story of struggle for divine co-existence. This struggle continues even today. His philosophy and political ideals were built on a marriage between Buddhism and Jainism and for a while at least they tamed the raging waters of this vast and diverse nation.



China: The Other Great Giant of the East

During this period, the other great eastern civilisation, China, was going through similar contradictions. It's important to remember that China too has extensive roots that claim to go back to at least 23 centuries BC. Archaeological excavations that took place between 1929 and 1933 in the ancient Shang capital near AnYang, unearthed about 100,000 'dragon bones'. It was discovered that these bones were inscribed with ancient styles of writing. They were in fact 'oracle bones', used in ancient times for divinistic purposes. Through the decoding and deciphering undertaken by various scholars, China's long legacy was confirmed. The writings (the Oracle Runes) and other artefacts, such as the magnificent bronze urns that were discovered confirmed that the Shang dynasty had been the successors to the Hsia (or Xia) dynasty (considered to be the original dynasty emerging two thousand years before Christ and lasting over 500 years). It is now generally accepted that by 1500 BC these highly gifted people with a long history of development behind them fostered a sophisticated and distinctive culture in north China.

By the 11th century BC, the Shang dynasty was overthrown by the Chou (or Zhou) dynasty. They were a nomadic tribe from the western regions. The Chou were not innovators, but they took much of the Shang dynasty's achievements such as: working with bronze, pottery, textiles, and developing the written language and went on to consolidate them. This mirrors what was happening in India at around the same time. The Chou also reformed the political system creating a new aristocracy and

a large peasant class, which through agriculture supported the economy of the time. Their dynasty struggled over the next three hundred years to create any real political stability. This is reflected in the fact that there were about twenty-five semi-independent states all busily undermining the Chou authority. This was also a time of population expansion, significant advances in craftsmanship, the growth of a money economy and developments in military techniques. In addition, there were significant intellectual advances taking place towards the end of the Chou dynasty from which China's great philosophical traditions emerged. This was the time of Confucius, Lao Tzu and Mencius, and yet the Chou dynasty staggered to this point in history never really achieving a unified state.

By the fourth century BC the fight between the various states became more virulent and uncompromising. So, at the point we've referred to as the 'birth of spirituality' we can see that war and conflict was taking place at the point that the spiritual revolution was beginning. In fact, this period in Chinese history (403 BC to 221 BC) became known as the 'Warring States' as countless battles were fought, and smaller states were swallowed up by their increasingly large and ruthless neighbours. It was the western state of Ch'in that emerged triumphant from this period. Its statesmen rejected the moral political philosophy of Confucius with its gentle emphasis on right behaviour. Instead, they adopted the uncompromising outlook of the legalists of the time, who offered the Machiavellian advice that 'the end justified the means', acting on the principle they held that it was right that the individual should be subordinate to the state.

So, whilst India, under Asoka, was creating an 'Empire of the Spirit' to replace the sword, Ch'in rulers were going in the other direction. They systematically set about strengthening the central power of the state. Bureaucracy was introduced, irrigation works were carried out by forced labour and the population was pressed into military service. One by one the surrounding states were conquered and swallowed up. By 222 BC King Cheng had accomplished the task of creating a 'centralised' empire, the first of its kind in Chinese history. King Cheng then adopted the title Shih Huang Ti and proclaimed himself ruler of the empire (the first of the great Chinese dynasties). The Ch'in Empire brought about lasting changes that influenced the subsequent course of Chinese history. They introduced standard taxes, standard weights and measures and new laws. They were ruthless in monitoring and controlling the thoughts of the educated classes and are reputed to have burnt philosophical and political literature and books to 'mould the minds' of the citizens.

To maintain their control, they improved communications by building (largely by forced labour) an elaborate network of roads and canals. Undoubtedly their greatest achievement, which remains one of the wonders of the world, was building the Great Wall of China. This incredible architectural feat stretches for 1500 miles along the northern borders of China, from the East coast to the mountain ranges in the Chinese interior. Its purpose primarily was to protect the rich agricultural lands they had captured from the many nomads who might want to encroach on their acquisitions. Ironically, the wall that was built to exclude and protect could not stop the internal melt down of the Ch'in dynasty. The harsh laws enforced labour and continuous drive for military expansion brought a discontent and resentment from the Chinese people, which eventually led to revolt. By 210 BC Shih Huang Ti died and it wasn't long before the second of the great dynasties of ancient China was formed - the Han dynasty. Its influence went on to shape China's evolution for more than 400 years (206 BC – 220 AD). In an attempt to gain popular support, the early Han emperors repealed the ruthless Ch'in laws, they rejected the doctrines of the legalists; Confucianism was encouraged instead, both as a code of moral behaviour for the individual and as a state religion.

During this initial period, great cultural, political, and institutional developments took place. Assemblies of scholars gathered to debate constitutional matters, examine ancient writings and

texts as well as discuss the economic state of the country. However, the early promise of a less centralised system offering a greater autonomy than the Ch'in dynasty was short-lived. It was clear that governmental control would remain and the feudal privileges that had been restored at the beginning of the Han period were gradually eroded. Also new laws of inheritance divided up large estates and with that the status of the nobles was slowly reduced. In their place a competent civil service was established, based on ability not birth. A meritocracy was born in which those who studied diligently and revered knowledge, especially the Confucian Classics, were rewarded with governmental appointments.

This concept of 'just and ethical' rule spread from the capital of Chang'an (modern Sian), across North and Central China, which strengthened Han control. For balance it should be noted that this period was not free from conflict and combat. Although there was further expansion there was still internal uprising and rebellion against the Han rulers especially in the south of China. There remained from the time of the Ch'in dynasty some significant and resistant forces that continued to defy the Han rulership. In fact, they were so resistant that they remained semi-independent until the time of the T'ang dynasty (618 – 907 AD).

The greatest threat to the Han empire came from the north, from the various nomadic tribes i.e., the Hsiung-nu, Yuch-chih and Turgis. These tribes provided a constant threat to the Han dynasty's desire for internal control and continuing expansion of its borders. But Wu Ti's desire for Chinese expansion wasn't to be thwarted as he took China's influence into central Asia. 60,000 men were sent 2,000 miles across central Asia to enforce the imperial will. Although Wu Ti's expansive urge gave new dimensions and influence to the Chinese state, it has been estimated that between 129 and 90 BC China lost a quarter of a million of its fighting men, striving to fulfil his ambitions. This expansion, costly in terms of human life, had important consequences for both East and West trade and exchange of ideologies.

For centuries this route through central Asia had become a national line of communication and exchange. Countless bales of Chinese silk, the Ceres cloth so highly prized in the Roman world, travelled along this path. In return, swift Sogdian horses and Roman gold went the other way. There was also the steady spread of Persian and Indian influence, but above all, Buddhist religious belief began to spread. However, like the Ch'in dynasty before it, the Han dynasty after Wu Ti's death (87 BC), saw an increasing military struggle for control, which would continue into the third century AD, eventually leading to the 'age of the three kingdoms', one of the bloodiest periods in Chinese history. However, part of the contradiction of this period of history was that there were also significant technological advances happening such as: a non-magnetic directional compass operated by differential gears, chain pumps for irrigation of gardens and an ingenious hydraulic powered mechanical puppet theatre. These were extraordinary feats for the time.

It should be noted that amidst this conflict, migration and religious tensions continued. Spiritual values also continued to thrive. By the second century AD, Buddhism was rising up in the story of China, influencing its beliefs, culture and ideas. Daoism also continued its evolution as the baton was passed on through great philosophical works such as: Liezi – a series of Daoist teachings that speak of life and death as part of the natural cycle and encourage one not to cling to either side but to go with the cycle. These teachings also urge performing actions with the Dao (Tao) which requires selflessness and a sense of purpose, in order that endeavour and destiny may meet.

There were other philosophers during this period like Wang Chang (27 AD – 97 AD) who continued to focus the mind on higher ideals. His philosophical contribution seems to amalgamate many

strands, echoing the naturalistic leaning of the Daoists, whilst borrowing ideals from the Yingyang cosmologists of the Han dynasty. For him, natural events had natural causes. Fate was not the result of morality and human behaviour; instead, fortune and misfortune were simply the result of fate. He was a naturalist, believing all the wonders and anomalies of the world, history and legend all had a natural explanation. His 'critical scientific spirit' did not get much recognition at the time, although his work did help purge the masses of China of the 'virus of superstition' that hung over Chinese culture and minds. It is really only since the 20th century that his unique contribution as an independent thinker has been more fully acknowledged. He is now seen to be one of the front runners to the notion of sceptical reasoning, based on observation and evaluation of the evidence which resonates much more with the western scientific methods of scrutiny.

After the Han dynasty, during the fourth and fifth centuries, a succession of barbarian invasions took place in the north of China. The small kingdoms created then remained until the arrival of the Sui and Tang dynasties in the sixth and seventh centuries AD. These barbarian invasions led to many Chinese fleeing to central and southern China. As a result, new social customs emerged, drinking tea for instance. Shifts in agriculture and farming took place, such as growing rice instead of millet. Various short-lived dynasties emerged in the south too, which not only competed against one another but with their northern neighbours as well. This period was one of political fragmentation as well as a time of change; many would argue it was a time of constructive growth because of what would follow...

The spread of Mahayana (Great Vehicle) Buddhism, with its emphasis on faith, participation, mutual help, and a spirit of good will had wide appeal. It was this form of Buddhism that travelled along the central Asian trade routes into China and Japan. During the third to the sixth centuries, at the time of the barbarian invasions, Buddhism spread rapidly, largely due to the nomads in the northern kingdoms of China. Over time, Indian missionaries, such as the monks Dharmaraksa and Kumarajiva, travelled to China to explain the faith and to translate the scriptures. This was not a one-way street as Chinese pilgrims travelled along the perilous 'old silk road' to study Buddhism at its source (India). The work of these missionaries changed China's religious outlook. During the centuries of political disunity and social fragmentation there had been a widespread decline of Confucianism except amongst the educated classes. Buddhism provided an antidote to the social ailments of the time. By the sixth century, when the Sui dynasty reunited the country, Buddhism had spread amongst all classes of people.

To complete this summary of 500 BC – 500 AD, we need to return to India's story post Asoka Maurya. During Asoka's reign Buddhism prospered and reached Sri Lanka, where it has flourished ever since. The Mauryan Empire did not survive long after Asoka's death and in 187 BC, Pushyamitra Shunga overthrew the Mauryans and the more modest Shunga Empire was established in its place. The Shunga Empire was Hindu in its religion and revivalist in spirit. During this pre-Christian era there was also, alongside the Shunga's, a Greek influence (a legacy from the time of Alexander the Great). Trade and some ideological connections had remained long after he left, and this was also part of the shaping of consciousness in India.

Menander (Milinda) was one of the few Greeks who left a lasting impression. This was not due to his considerable conquests but in fact, to his alliance to Buddhism. His legend spread all over Buddhist Asia, some of his importance and relevance is chronicled in early Buddhist literature e.g. The Questions of Milinda (a dialogue with a Buddhist monk). So, for a while the Indo-Greek kingdoms that were in the Punjab uneasily co-existed with the Shungas who were in the east and with some central Asian tribes in the northwest. There are contradictory accounts of this period of Indian

history, right through to the 1st century AD, which are scappily chronicled leaving us unsure about all the various invasions and shifts in power.

Sometime in the first or second century AD, Kainishka, King of the Kushans, established an empire which straddled the mountain passes of the northwest and extended well into the heart of north India. These were people of a central Asian origin. The Kushan kings took their titles from people they had conquered or with whom they had had contact: e.g., King of Kings (Persian), Caesar (Roman), Maharaja (Indian). They were similarly eclectic in religious matters. It was thanks, in part, to their patronage and protection that Buddhism found a foothold in central Asia and then spread to China. It was during this period that two great religious movements gradually cast their shadows across the eastern landscape. There was the Mahayana (Great Vehicle) form of Buddhism, with its worship of Buddha and its emphasis on the lay person being able to achieve the highest goal. This form of Buddhism had greater appeal than the more austere, monkish religion of the old schools, called Hinayana (Little Vehicle). Over time Mahayana Buddhism prevailed in Tibet, China, Japan, and several of the countries in southeast Asia. The Hinayana remained strongest in Ceylon and Burma.

The second religious development of great significance was the Bhakti cult, a popular movement setting the loving adoration of God and his grace at the centre of the wheel of life. This spiritual tradition emerged from the Vedas and Upanishads (which we covered earlier) and has been immortalised in the Bhagavad Gita, easily the most widely read of the eastern religious classics. This Kushan period was followed by the Guptas. By 320 AD the barbarian kingdoms of the west were reduced in number or Indianised and the Gupta Empire emerged. Most of North India and some of the South were included in the expanding empire. For many, this is known as a golden age in India's rich history. By the time of Chandra Gupta II, the Saka invaders in the west of India were also ousted.

Chandra Gupta II's reign (375 AD – 414 AD) was perhaps the most brilliant ancient India was to see. An account left by a Chinese monk, Fa-hsien, who visited India at this time, described it as a very organised state, a classical civilisation, enjoying more peace, prosperity, and security than it had done for many centuries. The government was gentler and more virtuous. Poetry, literature, and drama flourished. The Sanskrit language was once again widely employed. Gupta architecture set a standard of beauty, simplicity, and restraint that many would say has never been repeated. Although they were adherents of Hinduism, they embraced Buddhism, allowing it to co-exist with Hinduism without conflict. This was truly a pluralist society.

If the Chinese were the masters of ceramics, then the Indians of the Gupta age were the masters of metal. They produced staggering iron works 500 years before the Chinese and 1500 years before the Industrial Revolution. The Gupta kings were amazing scientists too. They were the first proponents of the concept of zero, which, as discussed in "Science ...the New God of our Time?", was pivotal to the evolution of mathematics, the language on which science depends. It was 500 AD that a Gupta astronomer (Aryabhata) proved the earth went around the sun (long before Copernicus and Kepler). He also came up with the concept of pi. Amongst his mind-boggling contributions was that he was the first to work out that the circumference of the earth was 24,900 miles! Unlike the religious and political turbulence caused by Galileo's discoveries in 1609, India's own philosophy and ideologies were at complete ease with the idea of an infinite universe. This was entirely compatible with their spiritual traditions. All this was happening at the time that the barbarian invasions were taking place in the west as the Roman Empire was being overthrown. The Gupta civilisation went on to shape and dominate the north of India well into the Middle Ages.

We hope the dates, names and places documented here have not distracted too much from the more important story being told, the story of spiritual values triumphing even in the face of the ever-changing landscape of the East. This account of history doesn't seek to glorify what took place in this part of the world, it merely attempts to give it greater credence and relevance. The eastern account of history has many flaws of its own which we've made some attempt to demonstrate, and yet a spiritual code keeps trying to express itself through the countless changes and various hypocrisies. It is this spiritual code we believe that has eternal relevance and needs to be resurrected if we humans are not to launch ourselves further into oblivion. Hopefully, the timeless message echoed through the great civilisations of the past will find its way into your heart and mind...