

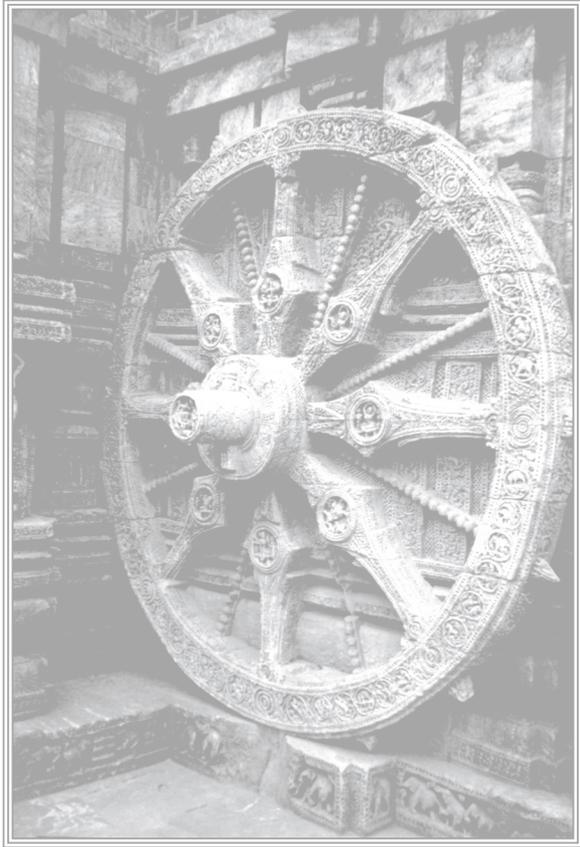
YOGA MORALITY

Ancient Teachings at a Time of Global Crisis



GEORG FEUERSTEIN

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*Ancient Teachings
At a Time of Global Crisis*

Georg Feuerstein

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This book is dedicated to Brenda, my wife,
for challenging, encouraging, and joining me in my environmental forays,
and for sharing my passion for Sanskrit, India's spiritual traditions,
and particularly the difficult path of inner growth and illumination,
and for doing so with a love that warms my heart and feeds my soul.

CONTENTS

Acknowledgments	viii
Author's Preface	xi
Chapter 1: Spirituality and Morality	1
Chapter 2: Moral Law and Cosmic Law	17
Chapter 3: Interconnectedness and the Web of Life	39
Chapter 4: The Ideal of Sacrifice	55
Chapter 5: Universal Morality and Personal Virtues	75
Chapter 6: Nonharming	96
Chapter 7: Truthfulness	124
Chapter 8: Nonstealing	145
Chapter 9: Chastity	157
Chapter 10: Greedlessness	177
Chapter 11: Compassion	191
Chapter 12: Love	206
Chapter 13: Generosity	217
Chapter 14: Miscellaneous Yogic Virtues	232
Chapter 15: Death, Freedom, and Moral Spontaneity.....	253
Epilogue	267
Bibliography	271
Index.....	281
About the Author.....	298

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AUTHOR'S PREFACE

Since its inauguration in 1972, the Union of International Associations has identified over 30,000 global “issues” (read: problems), which between them have more than 150,000 connections. These challenges characterize what many now refer to as our present-day “global crisis”—from the pollution of earth, water, and air to the depletion of nonrenewable resources like oil and arable soil, to widespread deforestation and desertification, to rapidly melting glaciers and rising sea levels, to overpopulation and world hunger, to the displacement of large populations because of the Greenhouse Effect, collapsing ecology, or ethnic and political persecution, to the return of diseases once thought to have been eliminated and the appearance of elusive viruses, to the mass extinction of animal species on a scale comparable to the disappearance of the dinosaurs 65 million years ago, to the proliferation of nuclear arms and uncontrolled arms trade, to increasingly lethal terrorism and the return of fascism (which treats the state as God), and on and on.

Most people are as yet dangerously unaware that humanity is at this very moment facing an unprecedented challenge in its long history. Many are uninformed, but many more simply don't want to see, because either they are indifferent or they can't face reality. It is my understanding, however, that in the years to come we will all be forced to acknowledge that our species is in dire straits, because those difficulties will have become very personal. Many experts fear it is already too late to prevent the worst from happening.

Anyone thinking that environmentalists have prophesied doom and gloom for many decades now and that after all we are still here, should think again. Nor is it only staunch environmentalists who are ringing the alarm bell these days and, moreover, the number of warning voices has greatly multiplied. Until now the media have avoided reporting on the single most important news—the *magnitude* of the crisis we are facing not only environmentally but also socially and geopolitically. By feeding the reader only fragments (“sound bytes”) of the total picture, they effectively trivialize the actualities and thus render them innocuous. Still, there are plenty of publications chronicling the state of affairs and, before long, even the media will finally have to tackle this unpopular topic and assume responsibility for conscientious reporting of the unsavory truths. Among other things, we may expect them to talk about existing governmental emergency programs to control the population when the panic starts.

When the American government declared war on terrorism after the tragedy on September 11, 2001, it essentially redefined world politics and the nation’s understanding of human liberty. In 1979, President Jimmy Carter created the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) granting it a wide range of executive powers in case of emergencies and a multi-billion dollar secret budget—an organization that has sometimes been called the “secret U.S. government.” In 2003, President George W. Bush, Jr., incorporated FEMA along with twenty-two other government offices into the newly launched Department of Homeland Security (DHS). Under the pretext of preventing future terrorist attacks, the U.S. government endowed DHS with unprecedented powers and a budget of well over 30 billion dollars a large chunk of which is unaccountable to the public. Other nations have their own versions of this kind of emergency organization, which are not designed purely for disaster relief but also clearly involve political machinations that revolve around

controlling the population at the cost of personal liberty. These are just the beginnings of many more changes that will inevitably encroach more and more on our personal lives, whatever our nationality may be.

Of course, there are countless things we can and must do to prepare ourselves for the inevitable at a personal level and also at the collective level. Morris Berman, for one, thinks that the best we can do is to live authentically, bearing the big crisis in mind. As he articulates in his thought-provoking book *The Twilight of American Culture*, today's critical developments are most likely to lead to the collapse of the American empire and its dependent states.¹ Another orientation is present in books like Richard Heinberg's *Power Down* and *The Party's Over* or Donella Meadows, Dennis Meadows, and Jørgen Randers' *Beyond the Limits*, Andres R. Edwards's *The Sustainability Revolution*, and not least Charles Dobson's *The Troublemaker's Teaparty: A Manual for Effective Citizen Action*.² These works clearly spell out our practical options. There are also many organizations that champion various causes and practical solutions.

The present volume, however, has a slightly different purpose. I want to look at the present situation primarily from the viewpoint of a spiritually committed person, especially but not exclusively a practitioner of Yoga. To be precise, I am interested in answering—from the perspective of a Yoga scholar and practitioner—the question of how we may live consciously, responsibly, authentically, and without fear in the midst of mounting turmoil.

Although *spirit* and *spiritual* are admittedly old-fashioned and possibly quite outdated and somewhat problematic terms, I continue to avail myself of them, because I surmise that most of my readers will know roughly what I mean by them. I appreciate, however, that some people have a problem with these words, and so I would like to proffer the following clarifying comments: For

me, *spirit* is short-hand for ultimate Reality, that is, Reality as it is beyond all conceptualization. The word *spiritual*, again, denotes anything that relates to that Ultimate, in particular the act or attitude of voluntary and consistent self-transcendence, which is the fulcrum of Yoga and other similar traditions.

In my view, the distinction between *spiritual* and *religious* is one of degree. *Spirituality* emphasizes the systematic and sustained practice of radical self-transcendence with the view of fully realizing ultimate Reality, which in agreement with mysticism is understood to be the very core of our human nature. *Religion* also encourages self-transcendence but is more conventional in its approach, emphasizing sound moral behavior and obedience to the will of the ultimate Reality pictured as a person (i.e., God/Goddess).

How, then, should we conceive the relationship between spirituality and mysticism? *Spirituality*, in principle, requires no doctrines for its fulfillment, whereas *mysticism* is shod through with religious notions. I hasten to add that Yoga extends over a wide spectrum of orientations, some of which should be considered to be more religious, others more mystical. For instance, Bhakti-Yoga (the devotional path) is clearly a heavily religious branch of yogic spirituality, while Karma-Yoga (the path of self-transcending action) focuses on moral behavior and involves few typically religious notions. Then again, Jñāna-Yoga (the path of wisdom) or the Buddhist Dzogchen/Mahāmudrā approach, which all engage the self-transcending process as a training in awareness, or mindfulness, are neither religious nor mystical and thus perhaps best expresses what I mean by radical spirituality. Since Bhakti-Yoga and Karma-Yoga, however, also have perfect transcendence of the human condition as their final goal, they too must be considered spiritual. An example of a mystical spirituality would be Kundalinī-Yoga (the path of mental and bodily transformation via the activation of psychospiritual energy, or *shakti*).³ But, strictly,

all such labels are only approximations and need to be used with appropriate flexibility.

In defending my use of the word *spirituality*, I am not unaware of the unfortunate fact that since the 1970s this term has been ruthlessly exploited by merchants of “religious” consumer goods. This point is well argued from a political perspective by Jeremy Carrette and Richard King in their sharp-edged book *Selling Spirituality*.⁴ The authors expose the cultural destructiveness of neoliberalism with its attendant commodification and homogenization of life. I happen to agree with them that we “should be rightly suspicious of calls for a return to the religious traditions of the past.”⁵ At the same time, we ought not to blithely discard those traditions, even if this were possible, for they constitute an amazing resource of collective human wisdom.

In writing the present book, I have set myself two related tasks. My first objective is to introduce the yogic moral teachings in their cultural context, freely crisscrossing between Hindu, Buddhist, and Jaina Yoga—the three major *forms* of the Indic Yoga tradition. My second objective is to show the relevance of Yoga’s moral teachings for contemporary humanity, particularly in light of today’s global crisis. *Morality*, I know, is not a fashionable term, but, like *spirituality*, it remains useful, and therefore I have availed myself of it without hesitation and apology. Perhaps it is precisely the conspicuous absence of a moral perspective from our contemporary Western society that makes some people intolerant toward the word itself. It is a word, however, that is perfectly appropriate in the present context.

Let me begin by saying that Yoga is not to be measured by the glamour of its spectacular physical postures or fabulous states of meditation, which hold so much fascination for us moderns. Yoga, which lies at the heart of India’s great cultures of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism, is as indicated above a spiritual tradition. As such it is concerned with personal growth and the ultimate

goal of complete self-transcendence to the point of perfect inner freedom. The core process of Yoga, which conducts the yogic practitioner from a state of inauthentic existence to authentic being, is unglamorous and proceeds through the gradual, quiet transformation of one's body-mind and everyday life. Thus the foundation of all genuine Yoga practice, like any other spiritual discipline in the world, lies in the realm of moral behavior. It is impossible to be a good yogin or yoginī without also being a morally mature individual. This book is dedicated to exploring what this means.

I have long contemplated writing in more detail about the moral dimension of Yoga, which I see missing from much of contemporary Yoga teaching and practice. I did address moral issues in quite a few of my published works on Yoga—how could I not, considering that the yogic masters fully acknowledged that spiritual growth and moral growth go hand in hand? As well-loved Swami Sivananda of Rishikesh put it:

Ethics is the foundation of Yoga. . . . Ethics is the gateway to God-realisation.

Without ethical perfection, no spiritual progress or realisation is possible. A Yogic student or aspirant must be strictly ethical. He must be truthful and pure in thought, word and deed. He must possess excellent conduct. He must not injure any living being in thought, word and deed. He must practise rigidly right thought, right speech and right action.⁶

Again, “Mahatma” Gandhi—perhaps the best-known modern practitioner of Karma-Yoga (the path of self-transcending activity)—wrote in his celebrated autobiography that the “conviction that morality is the basis of things” took deep root in him, while

the insight that “truth is the substance of all morality” became his sole occupation.⁷ And Albert Einstein, a thoroughly Western voice, noted:

The most important human endeavor is the striving for morality in our actions. Our inner balance and even our very existence depend on it. Only morality in our actions can give beauty and dignity to life.⁸

So long as we are alive, we must act. Even choosing to remain inactive is a kind of action, a stance that—like any action—has both wanted and unwanted consequences. By not voting in an election, for instance, we are not merely inactive but indirectly contribute to the political outcome. Or, to furnish another example, by not taking a stand on ecological issues and implementing an eco-wise way of life, we inevitably contribute to the ongoing decline of our environment. Therefore, as Krishna pointed out in the *Bhagavad-Gītā* (“Lord’s Song”) long ago, it behooves us to understand action and its consequences.⁹ It is my hope that this book will help thoughtful readers in making proper sense of the nature of their activities in light of the great enduring principles of spirituality and morality.

Who would deny that our lives have become incredibly complex? Our contemporary civilization is a formidably multifaceted enterprise, and more than ever we are in need to shape our lives consciously based on the best wisdom available. Such wisdom, I propose, can be found in the spiritual traditions of India. Even though these traditions were created millennia ago, their insights into the human condition are as valid and vital today as they were then. After all, only external circumstances have changed over the course of history, while our psychological reality has largely remained the same: As a species, we are still afflicted with fear, anger, hatred, envy, jealousy, greed, pride, competitiveness, and

ethnocentrism. We still ask “ultimate” questions, if only tentatively and mostly privately and then only in crisis situations: Who am I? Whence did I come? Whither do I go? What shall I do? Even those who have decided that posing these existential questions is pointless still face their own demise with apprehension or affected indifference. We still fight wars, and they generally are more destructive than they have ever been, even holding the dread prospect of global annihilation. Our species still knows poverty, hunger, disease, exploitation of people, animals, and Earth’s environment, as well as torture and tyranny—perhaps more so than ever.

According to traditional Hindu and Buddhist reckoning, humanity finds itself in the midst of a dark cycle, the so-called *kali-yuga*, which is marked by a progressive diminution of our physical and mental capacities, as well as moral and spiritual decline. Whether or not the age-old model of world epochs is correct, it certainly fits the bill.¹⁰

Clearly, as a species we have not found answers to these seemingly perennial problems, or rather we have ignored the answers furnished by our spiritually and morally most mature individuals. Nor have our modern technological “solutions” brought us any closer to peace, harmony, and contentment. If anything, modern technology has put large boulders in our way, and for the first time in known history, our species is confronting the growing possibility of global destruction. The medical establishment and social planners are slowly acknowledging the remarkable fact that the so-called advances made by our contemporary “post-modern” society have had a hidden cost: We are in poor mental health, with a large number of people suffering from obsessions, phobias, and generic anxiety, as well as a great deal of despair, unhappiness, and not least self-involvement.¹¹

Our leadership is far from being exempted from this adverse condition, which explains the dangerously pathological

manifestations in national and international politics. Addressing 3,000 neurologists at the World Congress of Neurology held in London in 2001, psychiatrist James Tool, president of the World Federation of Neurology, argued strongly in favor of regularly testing world leaders over the age of sixty for signs of mental instability. Many would want to see such testing done before a candidate actually enters the political arena.

This book, then, is an attempt to outline the moral teachings of Yoga as an integral aspect of Yoga's program of spiritual self-transformation. I have opted for a panoramic approach. When better informed Westerners discuss Yoga, they often only pay attention to Patanjali's classical eightfold path with its five moral disciplines.¹² But these disciplines constitute the ethical ground of *all* yogic teachings. Many scriptures other than Patanjali's *Yoga-Sūtra* contain valuable and even more comprehensive discussions of the moral dimension of the yogic path.

There are inspiring writings particularly in the Buddhist Yoga tradition, such as the literature on the *bodhisattva* path. And who would not be impressed by the careful cataloguing of moral practices found in Jainism, which has developed its own unique yogic teachings? In addition to the classical Hindu philosophies, as well as Buddhist and Jaina literatures, I have also used relevant materials from the Vedic era some 5000 years ago up to the time of the Gnostic tracts of the *Upanishads*.¹³ Going forward in time, I have availed myself of the writings of modern Indian thinkers and sages, notably "Mahatma" Gandhi and Sri Aurobindo. Their teachings will give the reader an appreciation of the fact that there is a marvelous continuity of insights on the core issues of existence in the *philosophia perennis*. Whenever it seemed useful to do so, I have also resorted to Western understanding, particularly in the hard and soft sciences to illustrate a point, and, as mentioned at the beginning of this preface, this kind of book would make little sense if I did not also make the materials relevant to the present global crisis.

This book seeks to fill a yawning gap in the existing literature on Yoga and counterbalance the unfortunate trend witnessed today toward overpopularizing the yogic heritage. Often Yoga's modern votaries are no longer even aware of the spiritual and moral aspects of the age-old tradition they presume to practice. This state of affairs has long saddened me, because when stripped of its spiritual and moral teachings, Yoga cannot lead to inner freedom, peace, and happiness, as it was designed to do.

I have absolutely nothing against the physical exercises promoted today under the wrong rubric of Hatha-Yoga. On the contrary, I have intermittently practiced some of them in order to remedy physical challenges. I confess, though, that personally I much prefer an hour's walk in Nature to indoor exercising. The postures of Hatha-Yoga can indeed help a person restore or maintain his or her bodily wellbeing, but let us recall that their original purpose was to transmute the body as part of an extensive program of self-transcendence and self-transformation. Authentic Yoga—including genuine Hatha-Yoga—has always had its focus on the high ideals of mental health and spiritual realization.¹⁴ The contemporary shift away from these two time-honored and inter-related goals not only distorts the yogic heritage but also short-changes those who have adopted some of the yogic practices into their quest for physical health and fitness.

We ought never to be discouraged by our failures to live up to our own highest ideals, but learn from our stumbling, raise ourselves up, and try again. Inner growth is not linear and cannot be explained or guided by rigid formulas. Nor should we let the run-of-the-mill morality of others deter us from listening to our own conscience, so long as we are committed to self-honesty and the ideal of nonharming. We must, as the *Bhagavad-Gītā* insists, follow our own inner law even at the risk of committing a blunder. With truth and integrity as our guiding ideals, we will not fail in the long run.

It should not require much imagination to appreciate that a person can be superbly fit but mentally lethargic, emotionally insensitive, morally corrupt, and spiritually bankrupt. After all, we have the historical example of the Third Reich, which placed a premium on physical fitness and health to guarantee its military success and long-term survival. It is certainly desirable to have a fit and healthy body, but we would profit more from a stable and perceptive mind combined with a loving, caring heart. Yoga is primarily about the latter ideals, which have been pursued and realized for millennia by the great masters of the various branches of Yoga. It makes implicit sense to listen to their wisdom teachings and imbibe especially their ideas about morally sound action that stops the vicious cycle of harmful behavior and leads to greater happiness for all.

In writing this book, I have naturally had to scrutinize my own moral history and acknowledge flaws and failures. We cannot grow without properly understanding and acknowledging the many karmic tracks our intentions, verbal behavior, and physical actions leave behind. Each of us has an arm-long record of moral misjudgments and slipups extending, as the Yoga masters assure us, across countless lifetimes. “Who,” Jesus of Nazareth is said to have asked, “will cast the first stone?” So, let us not look at the moral flaws of others but focus on our own shortcomings, and more importantly, concentrate on transforming our character to prevent moral failings in the future. The wonderful part about being human is that we can learn from our mistakes and catapult ourselves out of the karmic orbit created by the sum-total of our past motivations. To put it in religious terms, the only valid kind of repentance is acting differently, that is, striving to become morally sound, or virtuous. To speak of *virtue* or *virtuous* is not popular in our time and, in some circles, is even deemed ridiculous. But that is so only because we have largely lost sight of the things that really matter in life. Hypnotized by

the ideology of consumerism, sold so efficiently by the corporate world and governments alike, we see only what is directly in front of us, and even then we see things only through distorting ego-tinted lenses.

I am not known for being politically correct. Hence, as with my other books, the present work does not pander to the contemporary cynics, nihilists, and religious fundamentalists. It unabashedly advocates the reclamation of our common spiritual and moral heritage, as shaped and fulfilled by the great masters of the past. Even where we beg to differ from them philosophically, we can and must learn from the example of their moral and spiritual practice. If we fail to do so, I believe, the present-day moral and spiritual bankruptcy, combined with the growing ecological and sociopolitical disaster, will prove hugely self-destructive.

I dedicate this volume to all those—whether or not they call themselves Yoga practitioners—who pursue the spiritual path with vigor, dignity, and skillful action in the world.

Georg Feuerstein
Traditional Yoga Studies
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ENDNOTES, AUTHOR'S PREFACE

- 1 See Morris Berman, *The Twilight of America* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2000) and Derrick Jensen, *The Collapse of Civilization and the Rebirth of Community: Volume 1* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2005).
- 2 See the Bibliography for details.
- 3 See Shamdasani, Sonu, ed. *The Psychology of Kundalini Yoga: Notes of the Seminar Given in 1932 by C.G. Jung* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996).
- 4 See Jeremy Carrette and Richard King, *Selling Spirituality: The Silent Takeover of Religion* (London: Routledge, 2005). See also Susan Bridle, "The Man With the Golden Tongue," *What Is Enlightenment? The Modern Spiritual Predicament: An Inquiry Into the Popularization of East-Meets-West Spirituality*, no. 12 (March 2001); Wade Clarke Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1999). The preceding publications should be read along with Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectation* (New York: W. W. Norton, repr. 1991).
- 5 Carrette and King, *Selling Spirituality*, p. 181.
- 6 Swami Sivananda, *All About Hinduism* (Shivanandanagar, India: Divine Life Society), 1947. Online version (www.dlshq.org/download/hinduismbk.htm) dated 1999. "Ethics" here is of course not so much the theory of moral conduct, but practical morality itself.
- 7 M. K. Gandhi, *The Official Mahatma Gandhi eArchive & Reference Library* at www.mahatma.org.in/quotes/
- 8 Mark Winokur, *Einstein: A Portrait* (Corte Madera, Calif.: Pomegranate Artbooks, 1984), p. 102.
- 9 See Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, *The Bhagavadgītā* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1960).
- 10 The *kali-yuga*, or unfortunate age, is traditionally supposed to have started with the God-man Krishna's death in 3002 B.C. at the end of the devastating Bharata war (an unlikely date for the war and Krishna) and to last for 360,000 years—a span of time that, given humanity's record thus far, will most likely exceed our species' life expectancy.
- 11 According to the World Health Organization, one out of four individuals in both developed and developing countries will suffer from mental health problems sometime in his or her life. Well over 100 million people are suffering from clinical depression at this very moment.
- 12 See Georg Feuerstein, *The Yoga-Sūtra of Patañjali: A New Translation and Commentary* (Rochester, Vt.: Inner Traditions, repr. 1989).
- 13 See Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, *The Principal Upanisads* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1953).
- 14 See Mikel Burley, *Hatha-Yoga* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2000).

CHAPTER 1

SPIRITUALITY AND MORALITY

When people think of Yoga, they most likely think of physical fitness and twisted postures. Those who are better informed know that Yoga is India's age-old tradition of spiritual realization aiming at inner freedom and the overcoming of suffering through the transcendence of the ego, or "I-maker." Thus Yoga is primarily spiritual practice, or spirituality.

Curiously, quite a few Western Yoga practitioners, including some very popular teachers, have sought to strip Yoga of its spiritual orientation by denying that it has anything to do with spirituality, mental discipline, or inner development. They have even argued that Yoga is devoid of moral teachings, implying that everyone can live as they please. Nothing could be farther from the truth! From earliest times, Yoga has been intimately connected with humanity's spiritual aspiration to penetrate the veil covering the ordinary mind and to see Reality as it is, beyond dogma, doctrine, presumption, and conjecture. Yoga, in other words, has always primarily been a discipline of enlightenment, of personal growth to the point of complete inner freedom and unclouded perception of Truth.

The spiritual and moral poverty of many schools of modern Yoga ought not to blind us to the real nature of Yoga, which is overwhelmingly obvious from its long history and also its

present-day traditional forms. At this point, I should clearly distinguish between religion and spirituality. Often both terms are used interchangeably, but it might be useful to demarcate religion from spirituality. I understand the former to refer to a person's values, beliefs, attitudes, and practices in regard to a supreme Person called "God" or "the Divine," which typically are shared by a community of believers. Also typically, religion in this sense involves a founder and an élite of priestly specialists who are charged with upholding the religious tradition. The emphasis is on "doing the right thing"—morally sound behavior—in order to receive God's grace and have the community's approval and thus support. Also, the religious concept of God is that of a supreme authority, a Superperson (usually of the male gender) who somehow exists outside of oneself and with whom interaction is possible but only as creature versus Creator. The characteristic form of interaction with this personal God is devotion and prayer.

Spirituality, by contrast, can be understood as a more individualized striving for *direct* knowledge of, or union with, the supreme Reality, which is most often conceived as impersonal and which is the very core of one's being (one's "Self" or "Buddha Nature"). Hence the knowledge of, or union with, the supreme Reality is also frequently called "Self-realization."¹ Other terms for this event are "enlightenment," "realization," and "liberation." Since the supreme Reality is not only the Ground of all existence but also the ultimate Core of our inner being, it is not an *external* force or agency to which we can address our petitionary prayers. Strictly speaking, we cannot even unite with it, as it already is our true nature. Some spiritual traditions, however, employ the language of merging or uniting as a concession to the conventional (duality-oriented) mind. What all spiritual approaches have in common is that the person seeking to realize the supreme Reality must submit to a course of intense self-discipline, self-transformation, or self-transcendence, which goes

beyond prescribed moral rules but nevertheless involves sound moral behavior.

The transformation expected of a religious practitioner, by comparison with a spiritual practitioner, is rather lenient. Spiritual practice ultimately always aims at a radical transmutation of the practitioner. The superlative ideal of spirituality is not religious conformism but utter ego-transcendence to the point of enlightenment.² From a spiritual perspective, religion could be called a beginning stage in the process of self-transformation. In this sense, then, Yoga is spirituality rather than religion, though some yogic schools clearly have a more religious flavor than others.

Yoga, which is a creation of the genius of Indic humanity, exists in three major forms, which arose in the context of Hinduism, Jainism, and Buddhism—the three great cultural complexes of India.³ These forms of Yoga—Hindu, Jaina, and Buddhist—and their various branches all universally agree that human existence is shot through with suffering. The cause of this suffering is not any outside agency but the artificial psychological construct we call the “I,” or ego. The ego is our ongoing misidentification with a particular body-mind, whereas in truth we forever transcend all physical, emotional, and mental realities. In Hindu Yoga, this Spirit is widely called *ātman* or *purusha*. In Jaina Yoga, it is known as “Perfect Self” (*siddha-ātman*), while the Buddhists often speak of it as “Buddha Nature” (*dharmatā*) or “Reality Body” (*dharmakāya*).

The word *ātman* means literally “self.” As a personal pronoun it can mean “oneself, himself, herself, itself.” In philosophical contexts, it typically stands for the transcendental Self, or eternal Spirit. The word *purusha*, which is equally old and can be found already in the ancient *Rig-Veda*, means literally “person” and is used in this prosaic sense in conventional speech. In philosophical contexts, however, it refers to the transcendental part of the human being—the supreme Being, or Spirit.

Our spiritual Identity/Self is by definition infinite, eternal, and immutable. By contrast, the ego-personality is finite, mortal, and highly changeable. The relationship between the transcendental Self and the “lower” self, or ego, is explained differently in the various schools of Yoga. The nondualist schools of Yoga acknowledge the existence of only a singular Self, whereas the schools of qualified nondualism and dualism speak of many transcendental Spirits. The latter appears to be also the position of Patanjali’s Classical Yoga, as we can infer from his *Yoga-Sūtra* (c. 200 A.D.).⁴

Some traditions, such as Kashmiri Shaivism, describe the ego in terms of “self-contraction” (*ātma-samkoca*): The infinite Self curiously contracts in on itself, creating the artificial sense of individuated existence in opposition to other individuated existences (or ego-selves).⁵ Thus the ego is the main culprit behind our universal human experience of suffering—be it as an inner sense of incompleteness, inadequacy, unfulfillment, fragmentation, unease, unhappiness, anguish, or physical discomfort and pain.

But in most Yoga traditions, the ego-self is not regarded as the root-cause of suffering. The Yoga authorities point to spiritual ignorance as the source of all evil. This ignorance is said to precede the formation of the ego-self: We are born in ignorance of our true nature as Spirit. This leads us to develop an increasingly stronger sense of limited self (expressed in “I,” “me,” and “mine”). This psychological process is complete with the individuation of the adult human individual. From a conventional perspective, this is considered a desirable accomplishment. From a yogic perspective, it is merely a process of estrangement from our true identity, the Spirit. In his *Yoga-Sūtra* (2.3ff.), Patanjali addresses this self-alienation in his teaching on the five causes of affliction: ignorance, “I-am-ness,” attachment, aversion, and the survival instinct.

In this schema, “I-am-ness” (*asmitā*) corresponds to the “I-maker” (*ahamkāra*) of other schools. It arises out of the seed-bed of spiritual nescience and, in turn, gives rise to the kind of

basic reactivity that characterizes ordinary life: Attachment to what we experience as pleasant and aversion to what we experience as unpleasant. Once we feel we are a *someone*—an embodied individual with a particular mind and personality—we also behave accordingly, constantly affirming our separateness from all other individuated beings. When the ego-sense has become firmly entrenched, we also seek to protect and perpetuate it endlessly, which is in fact the survival instinct.

Yoga is an all-out endeavor to deconstruct the ego-construct—our “artificial” self-sense—and uncover our true nature, the transcendental Spirit/Self or Witness.⁶ As such, Yoga is intensely personal, because it seeks to dissolve our individuated inner world. Yet, at the same time, it is highly impersonal, because its avowed goal is the transcendence of all aspects of our human personality, which is a product of space-time coincidences. A third dimension of Yoga lies between the personal and the impersonal, which is the whole area of moral behavior.

It is in its practical morality that Yoga seeks to overcome the ingrained obsession with the ego-self by connecting the ego-personality with other ego-personalities through the common ground of virtue. Yoga morality is based on the insight that all beings are vitally interconnected and that for all of them to function optimally (and thus to survive as individuated beings), they must accept a common ground at the level of social interaction. If everyone were to behave totally egocentric and, out of self-interest, even behave immorally, no human society would be possible. Violence, lying, stealing, and so on undermine the very fabric of social life.

Thus Yoga—like other religio-spiritual traditions—maintains the notion that virtues like nonharming, truthfulness, nonstealing, chastity, and greedlessness are universally valid, as they promote the inevitable interconnectedness that exists between beings. These universal virtues are thought to make possible not only peaceful coexistence but also the pursuit of inner freedom,

as envisioned by the liberation teachings of India. It is self-evident that in a society that is full of deceit, aggression, ideological control, and vice, it is almost impossible to succeed in spiritual life. Hence the Yoga scriptures recommend that an aspirant should find a peaceful country with friendly people.

Whether or not a Yoga practitioner lives in community with others, he or she has to uphold the five universal moral virtues mentioned by Patanjali and a good many more. The reason for this is that these virtues are powers that are effective even purely at the level of the mind. Hence they must be observed in body, speech, and mind. What this implies is that our interconnectedness with other beings occurs not merely in the shared physical environment but also—and for the yogin or yoginī possibly even primarily—in the vastness of our shared noetic space. Hostile thoughts are just as harmful as hostile physical actions or hostile speech. They harm others and ourselves, and thus they throttle life rather than cause it to flourish.

The ego-personality, which, in the language of Kashmir's Shaivism, is itself a "constriction" (*samkoca*), tends to be delimiting and confining.⁷ When, through intensive spiritual practice, we become able to loosen this egoic constriction in our own case, we will enter into a mood of "expansion" (*vikāsa*) that corresponds more to our true nature, which is infinite and unlimited. This expansion, of course, is not an expansion of the ego, which would be equivalent to ego inflation. Rather, it is an expansion in the sense of an opening in consciousness where rigid walls are broken down, so that our true identity can shine forth. The Yoga tradition speaks of "knots" at the heart that must be loosened in order to reveal our innermost free core.

Inner freedom and Yoga's universal morality are thus not at all contradictory, though the conventional mind may experience them as such. We often confuse inner freedom with an attitude of "anything goes," which means that the ego-personality is at

liberty to wallow in its karmic patterns of desire. But true freedom is precisely freedom from the compulsion of the ego and its conditioning. Who we are when we are truly free remains to be seen in each case. So long as there is a physical body along with a specifically endowed mind, we can expect uniqueness in form and content. That is to say, even when a Yoga adept has attained complete inner freedom, he or she continues to look a certain way and, to some extent, display the signs of animating a certain personality. Typically, though, the personality of a liberated being is rather flexible and not easily stereotyped. Some personality patterns obviously are predictable, because much of our mental makeup is DNA-driven. Thus a liberated adept may have a modal personality but still display a wide range of responses to life situations, which are not easily predictable. Even though enlightenment is mind transcending, this does not mean that the mind ceases to exist, just as the body continues to exist until it naturally disintegrates upon death. The mind transcendence of the enlightened being consists in the cessation of his or her identification with a particular body-mind.

Historically, however, the behavior of a liberated adept—or even an adept close to the ultimate realization of freedom—shows a basic grounding in the universal moral virtues. It would seem that inner freedom and goodness go together and that a liberated master who is evil simply is an impossibility. Of course, prior to full liberation or enlightenment, adepts can manifest character traits that we would normally classify as highly undesirable or even psychopathological. Therein lies the danger of entrusting one's spiritual life to a teacher who may have all kinds of extraordinary realizations and capacities, which may even seem to us as supernatural, but who has not yet transcended the ego-illusion himself or herself.⁸

Yoga connects virtue with the cosmic order itself. The universe is not arbitrary but an ordered whole, even though its order

may not always be obvious to us or even fit into the expectations of conventional logic. Interestingly, the word *dharmā*—which has a wide range of meanings, including “morality”—stems from the root *dhri* meaning to “hold” or “maintain.” Virtue or morality is the glue that holds (*dhri*) human life together, just as the cosmic law (*rita*) holds together the macrocosmic structures and processes.

Of course, the Yoga practitioner does not aspire to virtue for its own sake. Goodness in itself is an abstract ideal that does not stir the yogin or yoginī. Rather, virtuous behavior is meant to free up energy and attention for the spiritual process of liberation. It is an essential part of the Yoga practitioner’s extensive program of self-purification in which all the dross created by the false ego-identity is eliminated until the ego-identity itself can be replaced by the transcendental Self/Spirit. Moral behavior, then, has a cathartic effect that, if engaged with the requisite understanding, ends in the removal of the artifice called “ego.”

On the way to inner freedom, morality is a sound facilitator. After attaining inner freedom, morality is the natural expression of an ego-free being. We must, however, not confuse the universal morality or radical spirituality with the conditional morality of the average ego-based individual. The latter is largely self-serving and not conducive to Self-realization. Yogic morality is founded in the wisdom of the great adepts, who have realized their true nature. It is geared toward self-transcendence and inner freedom. Moreover, it is a wisdom that each of us can replicate within ourselves if we care to follow the guidelines of the sages. As we grow spiritually, we become less and less dependent on external rules and discover more and more the kind of spontaneous morality that springs from real understanding, authentic wisdom.

Here we must remember that Yoga is thoroughly experiential. We can verify its fundamental tenets, which themselves are the product of intensive experimentation. No belief is required to succeed in Yoga, although at least provisional acceptance of a

few of its central ideas—notably the existence of a transcendental Spirit—can facilitate our inner growth.

For the yogic adept, morality *is* spirituality, and vice versa. Hence we should not be surprised to see Yoga masters pay so much attention to the moral precepts, which are guidelines for wise living, having been distilled from extensive and intensive spiritual practice. That we find the same universal virtues in religious traditions is simply an indication of the former's intrinsic merit. The difference between a spiritually based morality and a religion-based morality is not one of essence but merely one of attitude.

As mentioned before, it seems useful to distinguish spirituality from religion. Both are concerned with the ultimate Reality (Divine, Godhead, Deity, God, Goddess, Self, Spirit). Religion, as the word suggests, seeks to “reconnect” or “re-link” (*religere*) an individual with the ultimate Reality, which is generally considered to be the Creator of all things. This reconnection is supposed to happen through belief in the articles of faith (whatever they may be) and obedience to the moral laws (e.g., the Ten Commandments) provided by the founder of each religious tradition. Thus the “path” of religion is based on submission to an external authority that dictates to the believer what is right and wrong, allowing little room for personal insight and an unmediated encounter with the Divine. The image of God is typically that of a superauthority (“Heavenly Father”), who blesses or condemns and punishes—an archetypal image that historically has instilled a fair measure of fear and guilt in religious believers (the “children” of God).⁹

In the case of spirituality, the reconnection with the ultimate Reality is of a radical kind. First of all, the Supreme is not viewed as a father or mother figure but as the ultimate spiritual essence of our being and of all existence. Some schools of Yoga speak of the “Inner Ruler,” the God within. The spiritual path is not mere obedience to an external authority (be it a priesthood or sacred

scripture) but consists in “remembering” our identity with the ultimate Reality. This remembering calls for a healthy dose of self-initiative and self-reliance. Most of all, however, it demands our steady practice of voluntary self-transcendence from moment to moment. On the spiritual path, we do not behave morally or practice the teachings in order to please God and win his favor but because it ripens (or purifies) our personality to the point of enlightenment (or “awakening”).

Religion wants to create a “God-fearing” individual, who lives a morally sound life. Spirituality encourages us to find the Divine within ourselves and in all things, which is the essence of enlightenment. Religion aims at creating a “good” person but leaves the ego contraction intact; spirituality insists on transcending the ego itself, thereby creating a being who lives spontaneously out of the infinite wisdom of the ultimate Reality.

Manifestly, religion and spirituality occupy positions on the same spectrum of responsiveness to the ultimate Reality, and the boundary between them is quite fluid. There are religious orientations that are more spiritual, just as there are spiritual approaches (such as Bhakti-Yoga) that have a more religious flavor. As is demonstrated by the mystics of the world’s religious traditions, when religion is taken seriously, it evolves into spirituality. We can see this in the example of Thomas Merton, a Trappist monk who in his later years explored Eastern teachings. Despite the shackles put on this intrepid spiritual explorer by the Christian Church, he found his way to the recognition that “Contemplation is the highest and most paradoxical form of self realization, attained by apparent self-annihilation.”¹⁰ The leap into radical or deep self-transcendence is the decisive step from mere religion to deep spirituality.

Spirituality is more or less synonymous with the discipline of radical self-transcendence—the kind of transcendence that cuts to the root (*radix*) of *the* existential problem, which is the ego. Every act of deep self-transcendence, as I will discuss in Chapter 4,

symbolically recapitulates the primordial self-sacrifice of Macranthropos (or *mahā-purusha* in Sanskrit). One of the facets of self-transcendence is an altruistic concern for others. Most people regard altruism as a desirable virtue, even though they themselves would admit to falling short of the ideal. Since the Enlightenment, however, some philosophers have protested against this consensus opinion. Instead, they have argued in favor of selfishness of one kind or another as a legitimate source of moral action.

One of the most outspoken modern critics of this ilk was the “objectivist” philosopher-novelist Ayn Rand, who commanded a large following during her lifetime and whose works are still widely read. Rand vigorously argued that every person is basically selfish, though some mask this fact by a show of pretended altruism. She made selfishness the central virtue of her rationalist ethical-philosophical system. In her book *The Virtue of Selfishness*, she defines virtue as any action by which one secures and protects one’s life and happiness.¹¹ She obviously understands “selfishness” in a way that is quite distinct from popular usage of the term, which ordinarily signifies indifference to others and the pursuit of one’s personal whims. Rand’s “selfish” person is no mere brute but, in the interest of his or her own welfare and happiness, firmly commits to cultivating benevolence, justice, and other virtues respected by any rational individual. She rejects altruism because it does not acknowledge the individual’s need for self-respect and independence in supporting his or her own life. Rand’s ideal person—as illustrated in the person of Howard Roark, the central hero of her novel *The Fountainhead*—neither sacrifices himself for anyone else nor expects others to sacrifice themselves for him. In her subsequent novel *Atlas Shrugged*, the main character, John Galt, is still more stripped of personality and turned into a mouthpiece of Rand’s philosophy. Her cartoon-like superrational heroes are uniformly fearless, forthright, and independent.

We may agree with Rand’s impression that the human being is “self made,” but not quite in the sense she intended. Also, from an Indian Gnostic perspective (which accepts the validity of multiple lives), her insistence that we all are born without sin—as a *tabula rasa*—is highly questionable. We only need to ask a mother, and she will confirm that her children were all different even as newborns. None of us comes into the world as a blank slate. Rather, as the Indian sages would contend, we have inscribed in the deepest layers of our mind the secrets of our karmic destiny (“sin”), just as our body carries the DNA encryption of our parents. The rationalist dream of independence to which Rand subscribed is just this: a dream, fantasy, or hope. We are by definition interdependent beings, and when we deny this and affirm independence too forcefully, we get ourselves and others, as well as our biotic environment into trouble. Witness the present global crisis!

As with every philosophy, Rand’s system contains a kernel of truth, perhaps even a good many valuable insights. The kind of altruism that received her consistent criticism and scorn is indeed imbalanced. Since we ourselves are sentient beings too, we must also take care of our own needs—our welfare, health, and happiness. Only when we are whole ourselves can we in fact serve others appropriately. Any other attitude is probably neurotic.

Rand rightly highlighted the selfishness in what most people call “friendship” and “love,” though she did find these to be acceptable behaviors. She vehemently rejected, however, any program that put strangers before our own personal welfare and happiness, other than in exceptional circumstances of emergency. According to her philosophy, we are under no obligation to assist a poverty-stricken neighbor, though we may do so for our own reasons. Many of the noble actions of the Buddhist bodhisattvas would have been quite incomprehensible to her.

Rand's self-centered ethics, like that of Baruch (Benedict) Spinoza before her, is significant in that it reminds and even obliges us to look at the extremes of egocentrism and altruism respectively.¹² As the Italian economist-sociologist Vilfredo Pareto noted, most ethical theories represent attempts to make sense of altruism vs. egoism and establish some sort of compromise between them.¹³ Spinoza, by the way, is remembered as a kind, compassionate individual. Born in 1634 in Holland into a family of Sephardic Jews, he earned his living as a lens-maker but by vocation was a rationalist philosopher. His book on ethics—*Ethica Ordine Geometrico Demonstrata*—approaches its subject with mathematical-geometrical precision. Though condemned, cursed, and vilified by his contemporaries for his rejection of Deism and scriptural truth, Spinoza remained calm throughout these tribulations and is said to have died without fear in his heart.

From what we know about his all-too short life, he was utterly dedicated to the pursuit of truth, and no threat could make him deviate from the philosophical path. His moral integrity, considerateness, kindness, and exemplary patience were such that his few friends and admirers, as well as subsequent rediscoverers of his work deemed him a saintly individual. Bertrand Russell, in his *History of Western Philosophy*, called Spinoza “the noblest and most lovable of the great philosophers.”¹⁴ It is unfortunate that for a whole century after his death, it was considered unacceptable to talk nicely about Spinoza and his intellectual legacy, and that even now his contribution to philosophy is so little known and appreciated.¹⁵

For Spinoza, the highest virtue was to know God, which for him was ultimate Being or Reality. This superlative virtue, like any other, he saw anchored in the inmost nature of the human being. Hence, he felt, it was perfectly legitimate and even necessary to preserve oneself; he saw suicide, for instance, as the act of a confused and weak-willed person. Because virtue is an integral part

of who we are in our innermost nature, he taught that we should desire virtue for its own sake. As Heidi Morrison Ravven, a professor of religious studies at Hamilton College in Clinton, New York, has shown, there is good neuroscientific evidence in support of Spinoza's position that moral life is natural.¹⁶ Notably, neuroscientific research on emotions and socialization has led researchers to conclude that all experiences have an emotional-evaluative flavor. Virtue seems hardwired into the brain and has survival value. This finding is important for the model espoused in the present volume, which is known as "virtue ethics": the proposition that ethical theory is best built on the notion of innate virtues rather than utilitarian principles or duties. I will explain this position, which is the position of all traditional systems of spiritual growth, in the next chapter.

ENDNOTES, CHAPTER 1

1 The Hindu Yoga tradition knows the term *âtma-jnâna* or “Self-knowledge,” but the realization for which it stands must not be confused with a cognitive state. It is gnosis only in the loose sense that the *fruit* of this realization implies a radical shift in understanding: The ego is no longer the focal point of experiences, but post-enlightenment life is now lived with the *âtman* or transcendental Self as the true center. See the excellent book by Herbert Fingarette, *The Self in Transformation: Psychoanalysis, Philosophy and the Life of the Spirit* (New York: HarperCollins, 1977). This work remains one of the finest exploration of the connection between psychoanalysis, existentialism, and India’s wisdom traditions. It includes a helpful discussion of the notion of karma from a psychoanalytic perspective.

2 Some people insist on distinguishing between enlightenment (as an accomplishment while being embodied) and liberation (as a realization that occurs once the body-mind has been jettisoned. But this distinction is not entirely convincing, and therefore I have not adopted it here. An enlightened being, in my view, is liberated whether he or she is embodied or disembodied. Thus the Buddha’s *nirvâna* was the same prior to his body’s demise as it was thereafter, even though the latter condition is indicated by the term *parinirvâna*, simply to suggest that the entity called Gautama the Buddha had ceased as an embodied being.

3 See Georg Feuerstein, *The Yoga Tradition: Its History, Literature, Philosophy and Practice* (Prescott, Ariz.: Hohm Press, 2d rev. ed. 2001). This tome serves as the principal textbook for an 800-hour distance-learning course designed by me and also is used in a number of Yoga teacher training programs in the United States and elsewhere.

4 For a discussion of the metaphysics of Patanjali’s Classical Yoga, see Georg Feuerstein, *The Philosophy of Classical Yoga* (Rochester, Vt.: Inner Traditions International, repr. ed. 1996). See also my distance-learning course on this school of Yoga, which is offered by Traditional Yoga Studies.

5 One of the most user-friendly introductions to the intriguing metaphysical system of Kashmiri Shaivism and its associated practices is Swami Chetananda, *Dynamic Stillness—Part One: The Practice of Trika Yoga* and *Dynamic Stillness—Part Two: The Fulfillment of Trika Yoga* (Portland, Or.: Rudra Press, 2001).

6 On the witnessing function, see Arthur J. Deikman, *The Observing Self: Mysticism and Psychotherapy* (Boston, Mass.: Beacon Press, 1982).

7 On the metaphysics and psychology of Kashmiri Shaivism, see Jaidev Singh, *Śiva Sūtras: The Yoga of Supreme Identity* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1979) and *Spanda-Kārikās: The Divine Creative Pulsation* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, rev. ed. 1980).

8 I have addressed this issue in connection with the phenomenon of crazy wisdom. See my book *Holy Madness: Spirituality, Crazy-Wise Teachers, and Enlightenment* (Prescott, Ariz.: Hohm Press, 2d ed. 2006).

9 On the paternalistic image of God, see Stewart Elliott Guthrie, *Faces in the Clouds: A New Theory of Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993) and Richard Dayringer and David Oler, eds., *The Image of God and the Psychology of Religion* (Binghamton, N.Y.: Haworth Pastoral Press, 2004). It is this mental icon of God that the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche dismissed when he defiantly announced the death of God.

10 See T. Merton, *The New Man* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Cudahy, 1961), p. 19.

11 See A. Rand, *The Virtue of Selfishness: A New Concept of Egoism* (New York: Signet Books, reissue ed. 1989).

12 See Don Garrett, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Spinoza* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) and Genevieve Lloyd, *Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Spinoza and the Ethics* (London: Routledge, 1996).

13 See Vilfredo Pareto, *Cours d'économie politique professé à l'université de Lausanne* (1896–1897). This two-volume work was reissued in 1962 as a single tome, the first of 31 volumes in Pareto's Collected Works by Librairie Droz in Geneva.

14 B. Russell, *The History of Western Philosophy* (New York: Touchstone Books, 1972), p. 569.

15 In the context of the present discussion of virtue, it may be permissible to mention that Ayn Rand's own life had a contrasting flavor. She enjoyed enormous success, even adulation, as a writer and thinker during her lifetime. Like Spinoza, she was forthright but apparently less considerate. Where we see calm reasonableness in Spinoza, we witness fiery conviction in Rand. Her personal life was stormy, because she sought to exact from her friends and close followers rational standards that, as a private individual, she herself was unable to demonstrate consistently. See the controversial Ayn Rand biography by Barbara Branden, *The Passion of Ayn Rand* (New York: Doubleday, 1986).

16 See Heidi Morrison Ravven, "Did Spinoza get ethics right? Some insights from recent neuroscience," in J. Thomas Cook and Lee Rice, eds., *Spinoza on Mind and Body* (Würzburg, Germany: Königshausen & Neumann, 2004), pp. 56–91. This is vol. 14 in the *Studia Spinozana* series.

CHAPTER 2

THE CONCEPT OF MORAL LAW

As stressed in Chapter 1, Yoga is a *spiritual* discipline, which aims at enlightenment, or liberation. All forms of spirituality share a strong interest in tapping into our highest human potential, which is the ability to transcend the human condition itself. That is to say, all authentic Yoga seeks to go beyond the conventional levels of human activity—the all-pervasive worry over food, shelter, companionship, procreation, material means (especially money), emotional contentment, creativity, power, and general self-expression and self-esteem. Whenever the impulse for self-transcendence is absent, we do not have genuine Yoga before us. (What does this say about contemporary Yoga?)

In its goal of radical self-transcendence, Yoga even intends to reach beyond the level of normative behavior, or learned morality. In order to live authentically, the sages insist, we must transcend the human-made categories of “good” and “evil,” which vary from culture to culture, even sometimes from group to group. For instance, in one culture it might be considered completely moral to punish a thief by lopping off his hand. In another culture, such eye-for-an-eye legalism would be regarded as barbaric. Or, yet another culture might reject the electric chair as inappropriate but wholeheartedly accept beheading as a valid alternative punishment. Many more examples of such cultural variation in the

moral domain could be cited. Moreover, in our own contemporary Western society, which is no longer held together by the glue of a single religious tradition or a shared lifestyle, moral relativism is abundantly evident.¹ Confronting multiple lifestyles and moral standards, Westerners tend to be quite confused about morality, to say the least.

In previous centuries, Christianity supplied a unifying morality for the Occident, but with the waning of ecclesiastical authority in the eighteenth century and a growing disinclination to participate in Christian religious life, more and more Westerners have come to face a scary void. In some ways, the scientific world-view has largely replaced the preceding religious world-view. It has done so, however, as a limiting and often destructive ideology—or what has been called “scientific materialism”—which is built on an exaggerated version of the ideal of objectivity. Science, which is primarily or, as some would argue, exclusively concerned with *how* things work, is not qualified to answer metaphysical questions, which deal with *why* things are the way they are. Contrary to popular belief, for science to remain human it must be based on sound philosophical footings and, indeed, sound moral principles. An amoral science or technology, I believe, is prone to quickly become an immoral and hence harmful pursuit.

Today we can witness the widespread negative effects of just such a stance. Secular humanism, which subscribes to amoral science as gospel truth, has done considerable damage.² Its reductionistic ideology, which itself has become a *de facto* religion, dismisses religion, myth, metaphysics, and paranormal science—all so-called supernatural and authoritarian beliefs—and in the process has chucked out much that is of intrinsic value in human life. Its quasi-religious texts are the *Humanist Manifesto I* (1933) and the *Humanist Manifesto II* (1973). Its high priest is the American philosopher Paul Kurtz, the chairman of the Council for Secular Humanism and author of over forty books. Of course, not all the

tenets of secular humanism are without merit. On the contrary, many are valid and to the point, but as a socio-cultural movement and substitute religion, secular humanism has proven a failure.

Yet, when we turn for moral guidance to philosophy, which in bygone ages included metaphysics, we find that contemporary philosophers are for the most part no longer interested in metaphysical questions or practical moral issues. Even many theologians—our next obvious choice for moral advice—are also not particularly eager to tackle moral problems. They might refer us to the moral counsel of a priest, parson, or rabbi. Unless they happen to be fundamentalists who have pat answers for everything, however, these good people in turn are frequently as perplexed as we are ourselves.

The problem with fundamentalism of any kind is that the “gospel truth” it preaches springs from a narrow literal interpretation that distorts rather than illuminates. In the case of religious fundamentalism, the great insights and inspirations of the founders of religions become transmogrified into inflexible dogmas and rigid rules of behavior. This does not mean that all fundamentalist beliefs are necessarily wrong, but rather it suggests that we must scrutinize them with special vigilance.

Manifestly, all religious traditions include moral teachings that highlight certain universal values. Those values are universal in the sense that they are deemed highly desirable by any thinking person of sound mind because they allow societies to function harmoniously and effectively. I am referring to the kind of moral values that, for instance, are embodied in the Ten Commandments of the Pentateuch or in the moral disciplines of Patanjali’s so-called Classical Yoga. The latter moral code, to be sure, is shared in principle by all other forms and branches of Yoga. In other words, it is fundamental to all schools of Hindu, Buddhist, and Jaina Yoga—the three basic forms of the yogic heritage of India.

To fully appreciate the role of morality within the yogic tradition, we must evoke the Indic concept of *dharma*. As mentioned previously, this Sanskrit term is derived from the verbal root *dhri* meaning “to hold, support, bear, carry” and literally means “that which supports.” It is cognate with the Latin word *firmus*, meaning “firm,” “fixed,” “strong,” “reliable,” “solid.” By implication, *dharma* is thought to firmly uphold or sustain social life and also cosmic existence as such. Depending on the context in which the term appears, it can mean “morality,” “righteousness,” “prescribed conduct,” “virtue,” “duty,” “law,” “custom,” “norm,” “ordinance,” “usage,” “established order,” and “justice,” but also “substance,” “quality,” “reality,” and “teaching.”

The word *dharma* has a long history, which begins with the archaic *Rig-Veda*, the oldest Indic scripture and the source of Brahmanism (“orthodox” Hinduism). In this ancient text already, it signifies “morality” and “custom.” The *Atharva-Veda* (12.1.17), which also belongs to the earliest literary creations of the Indic civilization, extols the greatness of *dharma* with the following words: “The Earth is upheld by *dharma*.”

The Vedic concept of *dharma* is connected with, and in some hymns of the *Rig-Veda* synonymous with, the equally essential Vedic notion of the universal order or cosmic harmony. The cosmic order (*rita*) is *dharma* at the level of the macrocosm, while *dharma* can be considered to be a microcosmic manifestation of the macrocosmic harmony.³ To put it differently, the inner moral law corresponds to the overarching “natural” laws that govern the cosmos at large. In the language of medieval European hermeticism, “As above, so below.”

It was the eighteenth-century German philosopher Immanuel Kant, a great rationalist, who wrote in the conclusion of his *Critique of Practical Reason*: “Two things fill my mind with ever new and increasing admiration and awe the more often and more intensively I ponder them: the starry heaven above me and the

moral law within me.”⁴ Of all the thousands of words written by Kant, these were the ones to be inscribed on his gravestone.

Any sensitive person cannot fail to be touched by the grandeur and astounding orderliness of the rhythms of Sun, Moon, the other planets, and the array of stars. He or she would also be filled with awe and wonder at the beauty and orderliness of the mesocosm—the human body and its environment with seasons, ebb and tide, cycles of rain and sunshine, and not least the miracle of plant, animal, and human growth. Furthermore, anyone who has ever looked through a microscope at a crystal, a plant cell, or a drop of pond water will have been astonished by the spectacles of the microcosm, which reaches down to the subatomic level. All three realms of Nature—microcosm, mesocosm, and macrocosm—display a rhythmicity that suggests a common ground. Finally, what of the wonderful regularity of mathematics without which the more subtle patterns of Nature would forever elude us?

One way of looking at this cohesiveness is via the notion of interconnectedness (*bandhu*), or kinship between all beings and things, which is quite ancient and which was a favorite subject of meditative inquiry already at the time of the Vedic seers some five thousand years ago. This idea, which has been revived in modern times by ecology but also quantum theory, covers a range of insights. Among these archaic insights is the mystical belief expressed in the above-mentioned maxim “As above, so below”: Manifestations at the material level reflect forms at the mental or subtle level of existence. Likewise, the well-known but poorly understood “law of retribution” or “moral causation” (*karma*), is an expression of the deep interconnectedness and orderliness of the cosmos.

What is important to realize in the present context is that since time immemorial the Indic sages have avowed that (a) in order to live harmoniously human beings must structure their lives

according to the universal interconnectedness and natural orderliness of life and (b) they cannot transcend the human condition without first consciously synchronizing themselves with the cosmic order.

Implied in this age-old belief is the idea that self-transcendence is a natural aspect of human life. In fact, when we look closely enough, self-transcendence is an integral part of the process of growth in general: A form changes either automatically (biologically) or intentionally in the course of its life; one condition is surpassed by another. In modern times, the great Bengali yogi-philosopher Sri Aurobindo expressed this insight relative to human beings in evolutionary terms as follows:

In the right view both of life and of Yoga all life is either consciously or subconsciously a Yoga. For we mean by this term a methodised [*sic*] effort towards self-perfection by the expression of the secret potentialities latent in the being and a union of the human individual with the universal and transcendent Existence we see partially expressed in man and in the Cosmos. But all life, when we look behind its appearances, is a vast Yoga of Nature attempting to realise her perfection in an ever increasing expression of her potentialities and to unite herself with her own divine reality. In man, her thinker, she for the first time upon this Earth devises self-conscious means and willed arrangements of activity by which this great purpose may be more swiftly and puissantly attained. Yoga, as Swami Vivekananda has said, may be regarded as a means of compressing one's evolution into a single life or a few years or even a few months of bodily existence. A given system of Yoga, then, can be no more than a selection or a compression, into narrower but more energetic forms of intensity, of the general methods which are already

being used loosely, largely, in a leisurely movement, with a profuser apparent waste of material and energy but with a more complete combination by the great Mother in her vast upward labour.⁵

In the case of human beings, liberation is simply the final step in a long process of both automatic and intentional acts or processes of self-transcendence. To begin with automatic biological transcendence: Our body naturally grows out of the union of sperm and ovum into a zygote, then a fetus, embryo, independently existing neonate, child, adolescent, and adult until the bodily elements dissolve again upon death. Each step in this developmental series transcends the preceding step or steps.

The mind evolves as well, and therefore can be said to also pass—like the body—through acts of transcendence: The mind of a neonate is not the same as that of a toddler, a teenager, or an adult. It changes with experience and knowledge. Moreover, as the yogins assure us, the mind continues beyond death following its own laws at the mental level. Again we have a clear instance of one state being transcended in favor of another—automatically.

We are involved in more or less *intentional* self-transcendence whenever we love, feel compassion for someone else, or make personal sacrifices. We also transcend ourselves when we learn, change our mind about something, take up a dietary or exercise regimen, break a negative habit pattern, overcome fear, courageously protest against an objectionable behavior or rule, and so forth. Not all these actions are of equal importance or value but they all are self-transcending nonetheless. Of special interest, however, is what I have called intentional self-transcendence.

Full-fledged self-transcendence sets in when we deliberately and voluntarily follow a spiritual path by which we seek to go beyond the normal sense of self, which is the conventional idea of inhabiting a single body that is distinct from all others. The state

of ecstasy, which reveals the interconnectedness or no-thingness of everything, is an instance of radical self-transcendence. Alas, it is only temporary and therefore, from a yogic perspective, it is not ultimately satisfactory. Only with the event of liberation does self-transcendence become fully established. In other words, liberation is radical self-transcendence by which we let go of the illusory or conventional self (*ego*) and recover our true identity as the omnipresent Reality. Prior to this event, we experience ourselves as individuated embodied “selves” rather than as the transcendental Singularity (*ātman*) that is the transcendental Ground of our being and of all existence. The Vedic seers and their Hindu successors have assigned to this ultimate Ground the technical term *brahman*. In the Buddhist Yoga tradition, this ultimate Reality is primarily known as Buddha Nature or the Void. The masters of Jaina Yoga call it *sat*, or “Reality” The different labels and even their underlying conceptual differences should not blind us to the fact that all definitions of liberation imply complete ego-transcendence.

It is not clear when Indic humanity discovered the *ātman/brahman* Reality. Already in the 5000-year-old *Rig-Veda* (1.129), however, we find a hymn that praises the One which “breathes breathlessly by itself” and which is to be known through the Solar Yoga of the seers. Another hymn, which belongs to the *Atharva-Veda* (10.8.44), talks about the “wise, unaging, youthful Self” which, when realized, helps one overcome the fear of death. As scholars are gradually discovering, the composers of the Vedic hymns were not naïve country bumpkins, as originally thought, but seer-bards whose poetry was highly sophisticated and gave expression to extraordinarily profound spiritual intuitions. Much of the deeper meaning of the Vedic hymnodies was lost over time, making room for watered-down interpretations and ritualistic literalism. It took a Yoga master of the caliber of Sri Aurobindo (1872–1950) to retrieve some of

the spiritual teachings of the *Vedas* and set a new tone in the study and exegesis of the Vedic hymns.⁶ His pioneering efforts, unfortunately, are rarely taken into account by the academic establishment.

Sri Aurobindo made it clear that the Vedic seers were not merely praying for material wealth, sons, and cattle, but their hearts were set on discovering the One beyond the Many. Thus we can say that the ideal of liberation was integral already to the Vedic culture.⁷ The pronounced spiritual orientation of the Vedic people notwithstanding, we should not of course expect the general population to have pursued the ideal of liberation. Then, as now, this was very likely the pursuit of only a select few—the seers and sages. Unlike today, though, the people at large in all likelihood revered and listened to those who strove for liberation and perhaps even hoped that, one day, they too might have the same spiritual dedication and capacity.

If the seers and sages probed into the mysteries of the cosmic order, the ordinary person in Vedic times at least attempted to respect the moral law revealed by the great mystics. In their social teachings, the sages emphasized moral orderliness and, in due course, integrated dharma into the well-known Hindu schema of the four “human goals”—material welfare, enjoyment of various kinds, morality, and liberation.⁸

According to this schema, all four pursuits are deemed legitimate. Thus it is good and appropriate to dedicate a portion of one’s life to the pursuit of acquiring a solid material basis, since without some measure of material security, it is difficult to do justice to the duties of a householder, which include taking proper care of one’s spouse and offspring. Householders also are permitted and expected to experience the joys of life—from the birth of a child to the comfort of one’s home, socializing, sexual intercourse, the consumption of tasty and nutritious food, aesthetic pleasure, and delight in knowledge. Likewise, proper

conduct is considered a basic right and duty of householders. In addition, they should also keep an eye on the highest human goal of liberation and appreciate that, at the appropriate time, they must renounce their householder life and dedicate themselves to the great spiritual ideal of complete self-transcendence through the means of Yoga.

It would seem that this social model was at least partly invented in order to stem the flood of renunciators, who abandoned their homes and families in order to pursue the ideal of liberation or, possibly, just to drop out and be done with social obligations. Eager to preserve harmony and balance, the sages and law-makers praised the value of a sound moral life. They argued that without proper attention to dharma, we could not make progress on the spiritual path. By assigning such importance to dharma, the sages opened a veritable can of worms, for the social duties falling under the category of dharma do not inevitably mesh well with the pursuit of spiritual liberation and the obligations specific to the life of a renouncer. The inherent tension between morality and the pursuit of liberation is a major theme of the Sanskrit literature of the so-called Epic Era. It forms the substance of the massive *Mahābhārata* and *Rāmāyana* epics.⁹

The *Bhagavad-Gītā*, which is embedded in the *Mahābhārata*, captures the spiritual and moral dilemma of a member of the ruling class—Prince Arjuna of the Pāndava dynasty. His inner conflict arose out of the stark reality of war. Standing in his chariot on the battle field and surveying the opposing army, he was overcome by great doubt: Did he have the right to slay his enemies even though they had unjustly ousted him and his brothers from their kingdom? After all, the opposing army included family members and respected teachers and elders. Filled with compassion, Prince Arjuna posed the following question to his charioteer and guru, Krishna:

O Krishna, seeing these my own people standing [before me] eager to fight, my limbs fail, my mouth is parched, my body is trembling, and my hair stands on end. (1.29)

I do not wish to kill them, O Madhusūdana [Krishna], even if they should slay me; not even for the sake of the rulership over the three worlds, how much less for the sake of the Earth? (1.35)

Even if they, with their minds corrupted by greed, cannot see that to destroy the family is evil, and treachery toward a friend is criminal—how should we, O Janārdana [Krishna], not be wise enough to turn away from this sin and see evil in the destruction of the family? (1.38-39)¹⁰

Arjuna agonized that by destroying the family, he also would destroy the everlasting family norms, which then would lead to a breakdown of morality and the collapse of the social order. Bemoaning the imminent death of thousands of kinsmen, he refused to give the signal to start the first battle. The remainder of the 700-stanza-long text of the *Gītā* consists in a dramatic dialogue between Prince Arjuna and his enlightened charioteer and guru Krishna. The latter disclosed to him, right there on the battlefield, the secrets of Yoga by which the prince could resolve his moral and spiritual dilemma.

Krishna's activist Yoga was meant to show Arjuna—and every other householder—a way out of the maze of karma while yet doing one's appointed duty. In Arjuna's case, his obligation as a warrior and defender of justice and order was to embark on what obviously would be a devastating war. No one, declared Krishna, can ever be truly inactive. We might sit in a remote, quiet mountain cave but find that our body-mind is still agitated. So, Krishna maintains that it is better to join Nature in its creative work by

doing one's allotted tasks and thereby avoid the pitfall of escapism. Krishna's answer, to be sure, was controversial in his day and also in subsequent eras. He urged the prince to do his duty as a warrior, arguing that Arjuna would merely harvest sin by not proceeding with a lawful combat in which the principle of dharma itself was at stake.

To his credit, Arjuna did not accept his teacher's wisdom without much questioning. How could harmful action ever lead to good, he asked? In this, he voiced the opinion of the entire tradition of renunciation in India, which has never accepted war and harming in general as a solution to anything. But the more prominent tradition catering to householders—the ordinary man and woman with family ties and a sense of group identity or national pride—has largely followed Krishna's ideal of self-transcending activity, or Karma-Yoga. In modern times, social reformers like "Mahatma" Gandhi, Vinoba Bhave, Ram Mohan Roy, and Narayana Guru best exemplified this activist orientation. Gandhi's "passive resistance" to the British hegemony in India is well known. Although Gandhi aspired to uphold the principle of nonharming, his political stance nevertheless led to bloodshed, not least his own death at the hands of a fanatical Hindu nationalist. Nor did Gandhi subscribe to nonharming at any cost. As he often remarked, the mouse does not practice nonviolence by allowing itself to be gobbled up a cat. Martin Luther King, who had taken his inspiration from Gandhi, similarly observed that self-defense is an excusable form of violence.

At the core of Karma-Yoga lies a concern with right action. As the realized master Krishna put it long ago, articulating what was on his disciple's mind:

What is action? What is inaction? About this even the bards are bewildered. I shall declare to you that action which, when understood, will set you free from ill. (4.16)

Indeed, one ought to understand action, one ought to understand wrong action, and one ought to understand inaction. Impenetrable is the way of action. (4.17)

Since, according to Krishna, it is impossible to abstain from all action while one is alive, it behooves one to avoid wrong action and instead cultivate the kind of action that does not produce negative traits within oneself. Krishna's middle path of Karma-Yoga is based on the formula that no undesirable destiny, or karma, is created when one pursues the right action in a spirit of self-transcendence:

He whose every enterprise is free from desire and motive, whose action is baked in the fire of knowledge—him the wise call “learned.” (4.19)

Having relinquished [all] attachment to the fruit of actions, ever content and independent, though engaged in action—he does not act at all. (4.20)

For him who is free from attachment and liberated, whose consciousness abides in knowledge while performing [all deeds as an inner] sacrifice, action is entirely dissolved. (4.23)

Ultimately, so Krishna taught, one would do well to make the Divine itself the focus of one's attention. This kind of self-surrender implies nonattachment to the results of one's rightful actions. One need not even be overly concerned with the rightfulness of one's actions, because by keeping the mind firmly set on the Divine, one's actions will inevitably be lawful, conducted out of compassion and love. This is the grand ideal of Bhakti-Yoga, which is Krishna's suggested approach for those whose heart is awakened.

Others, who wish to remain active in the world but do not feel particular devotion to the Divine Person, may resort to Karma-Yoga. Yet others, who feel strongly moved to renounce the world, may avail themselves of Samnyāsa-Yoga, or the path of renunciation. Krishna was clear, however, that this last option of abandoning one's involvement with the world is inferior to the other two.

To understand Krishna's activism, we must familiarize ourselves with two associated concepts—*sva-bhāva* and *sva-dharma*, one's inner being or nature and one's own norm or inner law. *Sva-bhāva*, which literally means “own being/becoming,” stands for a person's fundamental character or personality: the kind of individual we are when no one is looking, that is, when we do not put on an act. It relates to the basic quality of our mind and psyche. Thus a person may have an artistic or intellectual temperament or be more of the “action type.” He or she may have a philosophical bent of mind or live for the moment, hold strong convictions or be wishy-washy, or be revengeful or forgiving, and so forth.

Prince Arjuna, who had been born into the warrior estate, served the Indic tradition to illustrate the kind of personality that has a strong active component and has a well-developed sense of rightness and justice. By dint of his upbringing, Arjuna had also acquired a taste for and superb mastery of the military arts. He enjoyed pitting his wit, strength, and skills against a worthy opponent in playful combat. Yet he was not a belligerent individual, though also did not fear confrontation, injury, or death. Thus he was ideally suited for the life of a soldier and protector of the social order.

Prince Arjuna's inner nature—as a courageous warrior—was obvious to his contemporaries and has been equally obvious to any traditional reader of the *Bhagavad-Gītā* since then. Arjuna himself, however, experienced a serious conflict about his inner law. When facing the enemy on the morning of the first of eighteen battles, he felt utterly confused about his duties as a military leader.

According to the Indic tradition, one's inner law arises from one's basic constitution. If the enemy lines had not included so many of Prince Arjuna's relatives and beloved teachers, he would have had no doubt about his obligations. He would have fought fearlessly and tirelessly but without hatred for the enemy. But the self-doubt he was experiencing at the outset of the Bharata war sapped his will to fight and even his will to live.

Krishna, the enlightened charioteer and king of the Yādavas, recognized Arjuna's dejection as a momentary lapse in self-understanding. He reminded his disciple of his inner nature and inner law and urged him to fight for the preservation of dharma and in the spirit of Yoga.

The importance of dharma to the philosophy of the epic age is illustrated by the story of Yudhishtira's dog, as told in the *Mahābhārata*. Many years after the war, Prince Yudhishtira, one of Arjuna's brothers, came to die. Because the prince had steadfastly sought to preserve the principle of dharma in all his actions—even when they proved ruinous to himself and his family—he had earned a place in the heavenly realm. God Indra, leader of the divine hosts, invited Yudhishtira to alight the celestial chariot so that he could transport him to Heaven. When Yudhishtira wanted to bring his faithful dog along, Indra was outraged, but the prince refused to ascend to Heaven without the dog. At that moment, the dog revealed his true form as Yama, God of Death, who praised Yudhishtira's unfailing adherence to what is right. Just as the dog had loyally stood by the prince, Yama explained, so everyone must always be loyal to the supreme principle of dharma.

Just prior to the Epic Era, the nature of morality was explored in the spiritual cultures of Jainism and Buddhism. In Jainism—today a minority “religion” of India—dharma is considered central to the spiritual path.¹¹ According to this tradition, the stock of karma cannot be exhausted without moral discipline—notably

nonharming. So long as karmic “stuff” clings to the Spirit, it cannot realize its inherent freedom. Proper moral conduct prevents the accumulation of karma, and existing karmic matter obscuring the Spirit is removed through intense austerities, or Yoga. Thus, much of the yogic path of Jainism is concerned with moral practices, which are grouped under the heading of “proper conduct.” Even at the threat of death, the Jaina practitioner must not waver in his or her commitment to uphold the moral virtues.

According to Haribhadra Sūrī (c. 750 A.D.), proper conduct—along with veneration of one’s teacher, the deities, and other beings of authority (notably one’s parents and elders), penance, and an inclination to attain liberation—belongs to the “preparatory service.” The practice of meditation is intended for more advanced practitioners, who has gained deep insight into the illusory nature of the ego and is intent on reaching enlightenment in this lifetime.

Buddhism, which came into existence in the mid-sixth century B.C., also places a premium on virtuous conduct.¹² In fact, the term *dharma* in its various meanings is so common in Buddhist scriptures that some writers have suggested that when we understand it properly, we also understand Buddhism. The word *dharma* came to stand for the Buddha’s teaching itself, which indicates the importance given to virtuous conduct. Dharma is said to prevent the creation of new negative karma that would keep the individual entrapped in the wheel of life—birth, karmic activity, and death followed by rebirth. After Gautama Buddha’s time, his teaching was further developed into what is called Mahāyāna Buddhism, which focuses on the virtuous path of the bodhisattva, the being dedicated to the spiritual liberation of all. The great moral virtues were turned into actual yogic practices. Motivated by compassion and guided by wisdom, the bodhisattva makes an all-out effort to realize enlightenment in order to promote the spiritual welfare of all others more effectively. He or she seeks to

perfect the six virtues of generosity, patience, moral conduct, vigor, meditation, and transcendental wisdom. The absence of non-harming from this list should not alarm as, as nonharming is implied in the practice of moral conduct.

In the second century A.D., Sage Patanjali, the compiler of the well-known *Yoga-Sūtra*, taught that at the highest level of ecstasy—just prior to full spiritual liberation—the yogin is showered with virtue.¹³ I will discuss Patanjali’s perspective on moral disciplines in detail in subsequent chapters.

What I have tried to show thus far, if only sketchily, is the superlative importance of dharma in the great spiritual traditions of India. I would like to conclude this chapter with a brief consideration of the type of ethics we are dealing with in the yogic tradition. The dual meaning of *dharma* as “morality” and “virtue” contains an important clue on how we ought to look upon Hindu ethics and, by extension, also the yogic ethics of Buddhism and Jainism. As proposed by Bimal Krishna Matilal in his book *Ethics and Epics*, the treatment of dharma in the *Mahābhārata* and *Rāmāyana* epics suggest an ethics that fits the Western philosophical label of “virtue ethics.”¹⁴ This was subsequently taken up by Nicholas F. Gier, a professor emeritus of philosophy at the University of Idaho at Moscow, in his seminal essay on “Hindu Virtue Ethics.”¹⁵

First of all, to provide a little bit of a philosophical background for the lay reader, ethics is the *study* of morality. In other words, ethics is theory and morality is practice, though in daily discourse the adjectives “ethical” and “moral” are widely used interchangeably. The major types of ethics are: metaethics, normative ethics, and applied ethics. Metaethics, which is heavily philosophical, explores questions like “What is ethical behavior?” and “Where does ethical behavior originate?” Normative ethics is concerned with finding practical principles by which we can conduct our lives in terms of right (what we *ought* to do) and wrong (what we

ought not to do). Applied ethics addresses contemporary moral problems that are especially knotty, notably abortion, capital punishment, and animal rights.

Virtue ethics straddles both metaethics and normative ethics. It is an approach that stands in stark contrast to other leading orientations in ethical thought, which focus on action itself, such as utilitarianism and deontology (“duty-ism”). An instance of the former orientation is the maxim formulated by the nineteenth-century British philosopher John Stuart Mill “the maximum good for the maximum number of people.” An instance of the latter is Immanuel Kant’s formulation of absolute moral laws embodied in his famous categorical imperative. Needless to say, virtue ethics also is in opposition to ethical egoism á la Ayn Rand and Friedrich Nietzsche and to ethical nihilism, which rejects all authority, tradition, and standards.

What is unique about virtue ethics is its focus on the individual, arguing that moral action flows naturally from a moral character. For the good or bad, we typically act in keeping with who we *are*. In the West, virtue ethics has had a long ancestry, which commenced with Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, as well as the Stoics and Epicureans (with their hedonistic slant). In fact, this type of ethics seems to have been the dominant orientation in antiquity. Thus, not surprisingly, we find virtue ethics to be at the core of the wisdom teachings also of India and the Far East. In Chinese Taoism, its position is summed up as follows in Lao Tzu’s *Tao Te Ching*:

The sage has no will [lit. “heart”] of his own. The hundred families’ wills are his will.

“The virtuous (*teh*) I meet with virtue; the nonvirtues I also meet with virtue; such is the virtue of virtue. The faithful I meet with faith; the faithless I also meet with faith; such is the virtue of faith.”

The sage dwells in the world mindful, very mindful about his business with the world. He universalizes his will, and the hundred families fix their eyes and ears on him. The sage regards them as his children. (vs. 49).¹⁶

Here Lao Tzu states that the sage has given up all self-will and lives for the larger good. He is inherently virtuous, and therefore all his actions and relations are always virtuous. Because he is virtuous, he always cares about the welfare of others and ever seeks to avoid harming anyone by being utterly mindful of the consequences of his actions. For this reason, he commands the respectful attention of the people whom he treats with the same care as he would his own children.

In the *Mahābhārata* epic, Prince Yudhishtira—an embodiment of the eternal dharma—inquired of Brihaspati who was the truest friend of a human being. Mother? Father? Teacher? Friends? No, replied the old sage, guru of all deities:

One is born alone, O king, and one dies alone; one crosses alone the difficulties one meets with, and one alone encounters whatever misery falls to one's lot. One has really no companion in these acts. Father, mother, brother, son, preceptor, relatives, and friends leave the dead body as if it were a piece of wood or a clod of earth. Having grieved momentarily, they all turn away from it and proceed with their own concerns. Only *dharma* follows the body that is thus abandoned by them all. Hence, it is plain, that *dharma* is the only friend and that it alone should be sought by all.¹⁷

Virtuous behavior, according to the Indic traditions, leaves a karmic imprint on the mind which travels from lifetime to lifetime. Brihaspati informed Yudhishtira that while dharma leads

to the heavenly worlds, nonvirtue/vice leads a person straight to the hell realms. This teaching must be understood in the context of the much older Upanishadic teaching that one becomes what one contemplates. Our behavior, which is an expression of our mental state or character, further shapes our character. In this sense, character is truly destiny. Without any wisdom teachings, we would indeed only recycle ourselves and never truly grow beyond our karmic state of mind. Even the cultivation of dharma, as Brihaspati's words make clear, only leads to heaven. But, according to the teachings of Yoga, heaven falls short of ultimate freedom, or liberation. Hence Patanjali states in his *Yoga-Sūtra* (4.7) that the karma of a yogin is neither black nor white.

In other words, to attain ultimate freedom we must jettison *all* karma, all factors that maintain us in conditioned existence. I will say more about this in subsequent chapters. In any case, even though dharma, or virtue, does not lead directly to liberation, it prepares the ground for the jump into unconditional transcendence. Nonvirtue, by contrast, distinctly leads away from freedom into ever greater bondage, or implication in the conditional realms of existence. We can understand heaven as an experience of great joy, and hell as an experience of intense suffering. Either condition is created solely by our own volitions, or motivations, or as Lao-Tzu put it, our "heart." The choice and responsibility are ours alone.

ENDNOTES, CHAPTER 2

- 1 On moral relativism, see Paul K. Moser and Thomas L. Carson, eds., *Moral Relativism: A Reader* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).
- 2 See Paul Kurtz, *In Defense of Secular Humanism* (Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 1983) and Josef Pieper, "Divine Madness": *Plato's Case Against Secular Humanism* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1995).
- 3 See Madhu Kanna, ed., *Rta: The Cosmic Order* (New Delhi: D.K. Print-world, 2004).
- 4 This is my paraphrase. See Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*. Trans. by Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2002).
- 5 Sri Aurobindo, *Synthesis of Yoga* (Pondicherry, India: Aurobindo Ashram, 1972), p. 2.
- 6 See Sri Aurobindo, *On the Veda* (Pondicherry, India: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1964).
- 7 A growing number of Indian and also Western scholars today are coming to the conclusion that the Indus-Sarasvati civilization, which was the home of the Vedic culture, could possibly claim to having been the cradle of human civilization, as opposed to Sumer. I have argued in favor of this hypothesis in the book *In Search of the Cradle of Civilization*, coauthored with Subhash Kak and David Frawley. Since the publication of this work in 1995, however, I have come across evidence that suggests an even earlier date for the beginnings of human civilization . . . outside of India. The large city of Mehrgarh, dated 6500 B.C., is "recent" by comparison with the age calculated for the Egyptian Sphinx by some investigators. See, e.g., John Anthony West's *The Serpent in the Sky*; Robert Bauval and Adrian Gilbert, *The Orion Mystery*; Graham Hancock and Robert Bauval, *The Message of the Sphinx*. While this hypothesis is highly controversial, I am now more inclined to accept it because of other supportive evidence. See also the iconoclastic and disquieting work *Forbidden Archaeology* by Michael A. Cremona and Richard L. Thompson, who cite numerous artifacts that, if we can find no other explanations for them than the revolutionary ones proposed by them, would turn our understanding of prehistory completely upside down. Cremona and Thompson's contention that there have been civilizations prior to our own (whatever age or provenance we may assign to it) is a well-accepted idea in esoteric circles.
- 8 See Alain Daniélou, *Virtue, Success, Pleasure, and Liberation: The Four Aims of Life in the Tradition of Ancient India* (Rochester, Vt.: Inner Traditions International, 1993).
- 9 For an abridgment of the voluminous *Mahābhārata* epic, see William Buck (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973). The same scholar has also published an abridgment of the *Rāmāyana* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976). On the dialectic between liberation and morality in the Hindu civilization, see Nicholas Sutton, *Religious Doctrines in the Mahabharata* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2000). See also J. A. B. van Buitenen, "Dharma and Moksa," *Philosophy East and West: A Journal of Oriental and Comparative Thought*, vol. 7, no. 1 (1957), pp. 33–40 and vol. 7, no. 2 (1957), p. 37.

- 10 The translation is mine. For a mostly reliable English rendering with an exceptional commentary, see Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, *The Bhagavadgītā* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1973).
- 11 On the Jaina path, see Robin Williams, *Jaina Yoga: A Survey of the Mediaeval Śrāvakācāras* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, repr. 1991).
- 12 See Jamgön Kongtrul Lodrö Tayé, *Buddhist Ethics*. Trans. and ed. by The International Translation Committee (Ithaca, N.Y.: Snow Lion, 1998).
- 13 This state is technically known as *dharma-megha-samādhi*, and the idea behind it was probably influenced by Mahayana Buddhism, which is familiar with the notion of *dharma-megha* or “cloud of virtue.”
- 14 B. K. Matilal, *Ethics and Epics: Philosophy, Culture and Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002). This is volume 2 of *The Collected Essays of Bimal Krishna Matilal*, edited by Jonardon Ganeri.
- 15 See Nicholas F. Gier, “Hindu Virtue Ethics,” www.class.uidaho.edu/ngier/hinduve.htm.
- 16 This is my paraphrase. For a sensitive translation, which avoids surplus verbiage, see Stephen Addiss and Stanley Lombardo, *Tao Te Ching* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1993).
- 17 Retold after *Mahābhārata*, Book 13, Chapter 111 according to the translation by K. M. Ganguly, *The Mahabharata of Krishna-Dwaipayana Vyasa* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, repr. 2003).