

EIGHT

Beyond Transcendence? *A Buddhist Perspective on the Axial Age*

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Should your mind wander away, do not follow it, whereupon your wandering mind will stop wandering of its own accord. Should your mind desire to linger somewhere, do not follow it and do not dwell there, whereupon your mind's questing for a dwelling place will cease of its own accord. Thereby, you will come to possess a non-dwelling mind—a mind that remains in the state of non-dwelling. . . . This full awareness in yourself of a mind dwelling upon nothing is known as having a clear perception of your own mind, or, in other words, as having a clear perception of your own nature. A mind which dwells upon nothing is the Buddha-mind, the mind of one already delivered, Bodhi-Mind, Un-created Mind. . . (Ch'an master Ta-chu Hui-hai, in *Hui Hai* 56)

A well-known line from the *Diamond Sutra*, one of the most important Mahayana Buddhist scriptures, is more succinct: "Let your mind come forth without fixing it anywhere." Whether or not this is the verse that precipitated the great awakening of the sixth Ch'an patriarch Hui-neng, his *Platform Sutra* makes and remakes the same point: "When our mind works freely without any hindrance, and is at liberty to 'come' or to 'go,' we attain liberation." Such a mind "is everywhere present, yet it 'sticks' nowhere." Hui-neng emphasized that he had no system of Dharma to transmit: "What I do to my disciples is to liberate them from their own bondage with such devices as the case may need" (Hui-neng 133).

The basic claim of such Buddhist texts is that the true nature of one's mind is formless, but it becomes "stuck" by identifying with particular phenomena, mental objects (e.g., one's self-image, ideologies) as well as physical ones. Such identifications occur because of ignorance of the basic "non-dwelling"

nature of awareness, and awakening occurs when one's mind is liberated from grasping.

What does that imply about the relationship between *samsara*—this world of suffering, craving, and delusion—and *nirvana*, the goal of the Buddhist path?

There is no specifiable difference whatever between *nirvana* and *samsara*; there is no specifiable difference whatever between *samsara* and *nirvana*. The limit [*koti* “sphere, bounds”] of *nirvana* is the limit of *samsara*. There is not even the subtlest difference between the two. (Nagarjuna, *Mulamadhyamikakarika* 25:19–20, in Candrakirti 259)

The implication is that *nirvana* is not the attainment of some other reality or transcendent dimension but realizing the true nature of this world, right here and now. This is consistent with one of the most celebrated verses in Buddhism, in which the Buddhist philosopher Nagarjuna—often acclaimed as “the second Buddha”—deconstructs the very concept of nirvana: “Ultimate serenity [*shiva*] is the coming to rest of all ways of taking things, the repose of named things; no truth has been taught by a Buddha for anyone, anywhere” (*Mulamadhyamikakarika* 25:24, in Candrakirti 262). We are not liberated by realizing any conceptual truth, for there is no such truth to identify with. This demotes all Buddhist teachings to *upaya* “skillful means,” pointers that may be helpful but not if we take the finger for the moon.

Needless to say, there is much to say about such claims, but this chapter will not argue for or against this perspective. Instead, I will employ it provisionally as a heuristic tool to examine what happened during what Karl Jaspers (among others) named “the Axial Age.” Various paradigmatic figures such as Deutero-Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Parmenides, Heraclitus, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Confucius, Mencius, Lao-tzu, Chuang-tzu, Mahavira, Shakyamuni Buddha, and the authors of the Hindu Upanishads all lived during this period, roughly 800—200 BCE, when profound and arguably similar transformations occurred in Israel, Greece, India, and China (sometimes Persia is also included, although Zoroaster was earlier). Although the precise nature of those transformations is controversial, one way to express it is that those civilizations developed a much stronger sense of transcendence, which created new possibilities along with new problems: the stronger dualism between this world and a “higher” one involved a greater felt demand for individual and social transformation, but the implicit critique of our “lower” world also had the effect of devaluing it.

This is of more than historical interest: in an important sense we still live in the Axial Age, motivated by the possibilities it opened up and struggling against its world-negating dualism. This chapter will use the Buddhist perspective adumbrating above to evaluate the role of *script* in the Axial transfor-

mation, as a new site of collective attachment that was both empowering and deluding. I will conclude by reflecting on whether we need to outgrow Axial dualism and replace its understanding of transcendence—e.g., God, Brahman, T’ien, the Tao and the Logos—with a more nondualistic appreciation of the evolutionary process.

The Axial Age

Jaspers was not the first to notice that something similar happened in Israel, Greece, India, and China in the middle of the first millennium BCE, but he gave it a name and popularized the idea of the Axial Age as a “turning point” in the development of human consciousness. During that period all four civilizations were independently experiencing similar stresses due in large part to new iron technologies, which enabled stronger, more efficient tools (hence more cropland and more crops, larger populations and population centers, more trade, wealth, and exposure to other cultures) but also stronger and more efficient weapons (hence more violent warfare, standing armies, imperial conquest and corresponding social crisis).

The late Israeli sociologist S. N. Eisenstadt provided a helpful summary of the consequences of the new Axial worldviews:

The conception of a high level of tension between the transcendental and the mundane order, along with emphasis on this-worldly activities, tends to generate the highest level of free resources, the widest scope of markets, the greatest articulation of symbolic activities and of their institutional derivatives, and the largest variety of alternative conceptions of social and political order. (Eisenstadt 150)

In pre-Axial cultures people—as members, not individuals—are embedded in society and society embedded into its cosmic role, which meant that even rulers were not “free” but bound by the traditional functions of their position. There were no alternatives until stronger conceptions of transcendence developed, which provided “other-worldly” perspectives to evaluate given social and ideological structures. The political philosopher Eric Voegelin describes the Axial development as “the irruption of transcendental reality” in religious myth that amounted to “a major subjective orientation, a transition from consciousness that conceives of itself as fully immersed in the cosmos (the world of particular entities) to consciousness that is aware of its existence in tension between immanence in the cosmos and the pull of the transcendent pole beyond the cosmos” (Webb 115).

This included a radical restructuring not only of the way we understand the world but also of how we comport ourselves within it. Karen Armstrong’s *The Great Transformation* emphasizes that the new religious programs “were

designed to eradicate the egotism that is largely responsible for our violence, and promoted the empathic spirituality of the Golden Rule. . . . The Axial sages put the abandonment of selfishness and the spirituality of compassion at the top of their agenda (Armstrong 391, 392). As Armstrong also notices, this “social and psychological leap forward” involved the realization that each person is unique. “That is why so many of the Axial spiritualities were preoccupied by the discovery of the *self*” (Armstrong 397). The Axial Age was the origin of salvation religions, as well as the possibility of collective transformation. In contrast to pre-Axial cultures, where political and religious hierarchies were not differentiated—where rulers are sacred because those at the top of the social pyramid play a unique role in communicating with the deities that rule the universe—new conceptions of transcendence opened up the possibility of the divine’s relationship with everyone, a challenge that created *the individual*. “For the very first time, individuals, not collectives, are told that there is only one universal God that reigns over the universe, but that this God seeks a relationship with every human being” (Rifkin, 213). This relationship meant that individuals could, at least in principle, dis-identify from the present social order by identifying with the alternative that the transcendental ideal provided.

The possibility of salvation or liberation implied a new understanding of time. Pre-Axial civilizations were conservative: time is cyclic, the golden age is in the past, so the task is to preserve or recover what is always (in an oral culture) in danger of being lost. “[I]n mythological cultures, people live in an endless now where personal histories don’t exist and life is lived within a narrow circle of birth, death, and rebirth. . . . Historical awareness introduces the idea that every event and every individual story is unique, finite, and unrepeatable” (Rifkin 211). Axial religions became future-oriented and often apocalyptic, looking forward to the day when the transcendent will irrupt into this world to resolve all its problems, and the gap between the two realities will be healed forever.

Axial transcendence also emphasized formalized law, which began to replace cultural tradition. “‘Transcendence,’ whether it takes the form of divine revelation or of theoretical cosmology, implies a search for authority outside the institutionalized offices and structures of the seeker’s society. Even its most concrete form, the law code, implies a transfer of authority from the holders of office to the written rule. Transcendental impulses therefore constitute, by definition, an implicit challenge to traditional authority and indicate some dissatisfaction with it” (Humphreys 92).

The above quotation suggests the tension that limited the consequences of new Axial Age perspectives: emperors needed the universalistic and more portable Axial Age religions (emphasizing scriptures over particular places such as local shrines) to help unify the different peoples they conquered, but rulers

also employed Axial Age perspectives for their own purposes. In place of local custom written law codes were instituted, which might have transcendental origins yet nonetheless implied reduced freedom for those subject to them and institutionalization of the power of those in charge of enforcing them. Jaspers refers to the collapse that occurred in all four Axial civilizations beginning about 200 BCE, when “great political and spiritual unifications and dogmatic configurations held the field” and great States “forcibly realized this unity.” He describes this as “a loss of consciousness. Only a few suitable intellectual possibilities and spiritual figures from the bygone Axial Period were seized upon to impart spiritual community, lustre and concordance to the new State authorities” (Jaspers 194). Jaspers concludes that the Axial Age was “an interregnum between two ages of great empire, a pause for liberty, a deep breath bringing the most lucid consciousness” (Jaspers 51). Nevertheless, the fact that the new religions became script-based meant that Axial Age empires absorbed these profound developments into themselves as holy scriptures, cultural time-bombs that would eventually explode into radical social transformations.

Let me give some content to these generalizations by looking briefly at the development of two Axial Age cultures: Abrahamic and Greek. This will emphasize the role of alphabetic script in their evolution, since that relationship is essential to the argument to be made afterwards.

Religions of the Book

Every Axial culture became a text-based culture. Writing makes possible the great introspective religious traditions such as Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. All these have sacred texts. (Ong 102)

Israel became fully monotheistic only as the result of a long and painful process that included the destruction of the Jerusalem temple and Babylonian exile. J, the first biblical source, imagined Yahweh sitting and talking with Abraham, but by the time of Ezekiel God had become an overwhelming mystery (Armstrong 85). Elijah seems to have been the first prophet to insist on the exclusive worship of Yahweh, though he apparently did not doubt the existence of Baal. The first unequivocal assertion of complete monotheism is found in Deutero-Isaiah: “I am Yahweh, unrivalled. There is no other God besides me” [44:6].

This process was mirrored by a deepening subjectivity. “Man becomes aware of himself *as man* in the encounter with the God who addresses him. This also entails a fundamental rupture between man and cosmos. The cosmos ceases to be divine in its own right, as it was (probably cross-culturally) in the millennia of early human history” (Berger 146). In pre-Axial religions “the

world of men and gods is hewn from the same matter” (Uffenheimer, in Eisenstadt 141), but henceforth for the Israelites there was a gap not only between humans and God but also between humanity and the rest of the world, as in the creation story in *Genesis*.

This individuation emphasized morality—how one acts in everyday life—over the ritual that predominated in pre-Axial religion. Prophets such as Amos, Isaiah and Jeremiah denounced the privileges of the priestly caste: all men are equal before God, and kings cannot do whatever they want, for they too are subject to a higher moral code. “The pagan gods depended upon the ceremonies to renew their depleted energies; their prestige depending in part upon the magnificence of their temples. Now Yahweh was actually saying that these things were utterly meaningless. . . . Isaiah felt that external observance was not enough. Israelites must discover the inner meaning of their religion. Yahweh wanted compassion rather than sacrifice: ‘You may multiply your prayers, I shall not listen. Your hands are covered with blood, wash, make yourselves clean. Take your wrong-doing out of my sight. Cease to do evil. Learn to do good. Search for justice, help the oppressed, be just to the orphan, plead for the widow’” (Isaiah 1:15–17, in Armstrong 44).

“Classical prophecy” began about the middle of the eighth-century BCE, about the same time that the earliest biblical texts, forming the Pentateuch, were written down. In 587 BCE Jerusalem fell and the temple was destroyed; many of its residents were deported to Babylon. In exile religious focus shifted from temple worship to sacred texts—scripture—which were eventually collated and redacted into the *Tanakh* (Hebrew Bible). With the Roman destruction of Herod’s temple in 70 CE and the eventual diaspora of the Jewish people, Judaism survived in large part by becoming a portable religion emphasizing textual study. As Torah study became a sacred act, the temple was in effect replaced by it.

It would be difficult to overemphasize the importance of script in Judaism. “The invention of the phonological alphabet in the South Sinai in the fifteenth century BCE almost certainly made the idea of an abstract monotheistic God thinkable for the first time” (Porush 553). With script language apparently achieves a life and meaning of its own. The Ark in the Temple that housed a record of the covenant between the Hebrews and their God was originally the focal point of worship because it served as the primary symbol of the presence of God. The story of Moses receiving the Decalogue on Mt. Sinai and destroying the golden calf can be understood as a shift in focus from graven images to a God who is now invisible but whose sacred words can be recorded and revered. Two contemporary by-products of this sanctification of script are the *mezuzah* metal cylinders attached to doorposts, which contain the first two paragraphs of the *Shema* liturgical prayer, and the *tephillin* phylacter-

ies worn on left arm and forehead during prayer, which also contain sacred verses. Given such emphasis, the word “mysticism” of the Kabbalah becomes less peculiar, perhaps even inevitable.

Later Abrahamic developments emphasize scripture in different ways, but of course it is no less important for Christianity and Islam. Christianity focuses on Christ, the *Logos* incarnated as man, yet (especially since the Reformation) the Bible—God’s word—became for most Christians the primary mode of access to the divine. For Islam the *Logos* is the uncreated Quran, the Heavenly Book dictated by the Archangel Gabriel to Muhammad. For all three religions God is formless and invisible, but we have access to the divine through God’s *written* Word. Their adherents are encouraged to adhere to those words.

Classical *Greece*, where religious authority was weak and there was more competition among worldviews, offers a very different example of Axial Age transcendence: instead of the ethical monotheism of the Abrahamic traditions, the *Logos* was understood more philosophically and monistically by such pivotal thinkers as Parmenides and Plato. Greek Axiality involved the discovery or invention of what we now understand as *rationality*, which offered a different challenge to the *mythos* of pre-Axial cultures. Logic is a reflective activity that thinks about thinking, which emphasizes another function of Axial transcendence (from Latin *trans* + *scendere*, “to climb over, rise above”): abstracting (*ab[s]* + *trahere*, “to separate, draw out from”) us from the given world by providing a theoretical perspective on it. As these etymologies suggest, theoretical thinking is a “second order” mental process that involves “rising above” the world as it is now, providing us with a conceptual (rather than an ethical) evaluation of it, and another possible way of changing that world.

The development of Greek Axiality was much influenced by the astonishing mathematical discoveries of Pythagoras. Mathematics for us is a science but “the father of numbers” was as much a mystic sage as a mathematician, and in fact our distinction between them would have made no sense in his time. Pythagoreans believed that numbers are the ultimate reality and that everything could be measured and predicted according to their laws and patterns. “The so-called Pythagoreans, who were the first to take up mathematics, not only advanced this subject, but saturated with it, they fancied that the principles of mathematics were the principles of all things” (Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 1–5). Pythagoreans also believed in the transmigration of souls and practiced Orphic-like purification rites and other rules of living to help their souls ascend to higher, presumably mathematical, realms.

Today we have lost the strangeness of the amazing realization that our world is a function of mathematical relationships whose truth is not dependent upon any particular physical arrangements. This suggests another, more ab-

stract reality that is distinct from anything the senses can experience and not vulnerable to decay and mortality. That perspective was developed by Plato, the doorway to whose Academy announced: “Let no one ignorant of geometry enter herein.” For Plato human imagination is mimetic and derivative, subject to the ravages of time; his philosophy seeks instead the *eidos* (ideas or forms) that manifest timeless Being, which are accessible only by reason. Everything in the physical world is an imperfect expression of such eternal and unchanging forms. In the parable of the cave (*Republic* book 7) one escapes the shadows of imagination for the changeless Being of the Sun (the One/the Good). Pure justice or beauty could not be experienced by our fallible senses but could be comprehended using the reasoning abilities that characterize our immaterial souls (*psyche*), which involved spiritual ascent to a higher reality. “Plato used the imagery and vocabulary of the Eleusinian and Dionysian mysteries to describe the process of illumination and recollection” (Armstrong 318). For Plato, as for Pythagoras and Parmenides, reasoning at its best is a mystical act.

Aristotle did not believe in Plato’s forms and was not as influenced by mathematics, but he agreed that what distinguishes humans from all other beings is *theoria*, our ability to think rationally. “The life according to reason is best and pleasantest, since reason, more than anything else, is man” (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1178a). Our divine and immortal intelligence (*nous*) links us to the gods, for it gives us the ability to grasp the highest truth. In fact, *noesis noeseos*, “thinking about thinking,” characterizes the nature of Being itself, which is an Unmoved Mover: the highest divinity is pure *nous*, self-absorbed and self-sufficient (Armstrong 327).

What role did writing play in this transformation? Plato (born in 428 BCE) was a member of the first cohort of Athenian boys taught how to read, and this crucial historical transition is reflected both in his relationship with Socrates (who wrote nothing and presumably could not read) and in his own later philosophy. Plato’s early writings express the power of Socrates’ dialogical style, while his later works record a more script-based way of thinking. According to Harold Innis the balance between orality and writing contributed much to the extraordinary cultural efflorescence of that transformative period (Innis 68–69).

In his controversial book, *Preface to Plato*, Eric Havelock pointed out that the etymology of our English word “idea” has visual connotations.

Havelock argues that Platonic forms were conceived as analogies to visible forms, not just the perfect shapes of geometry, but the visible forms of the alphabet. Like letters, Platonic ideas were immobile, isolated, and devoid of warmth and secondary qualities; they seem to transcend the world at hand. As David Abram observes, the letters, and the written words they present, are not subject to the flux of growth and decay, to

the perturbations and cyclic changes common to other visible things; they seemed to hover, as it were, in another, strangely timeless dimension. (Davis 112)

As a response to our mutable world of suffering and death, the idealization of such a dimension is quite understandable, as well as the associated distinction between an idealized rationality and the more messy world of physical bodies and their emotions.

As with Abrahamic monotheism, the Greek case also suggests a significant relationship between the development of transcendence and a cultural shift from orality to literacy.¹ Let us look more closely at the connection between this transformation of human consciousness and stronger conceptions of transcendence. We will then consider further the problematical aspects of script, as a place where our collective awareness has become fixated, with dualistic consequences that call for a new paradigm today.

Script/ure

More than any other single invention, writing has transformed human consciousness. (Ong 78)

The consequences of script are difficult for us to comprehend, because we live on the other side of that great transition, which means that the way people in an oral culture experience their world is foreign to us.

The earliest writing systems—those of the Sumerians and the Egyptians—incorporated pictographs that kept them visually connected to the sensory world and thus “retained a large measure of the animist magic of archaic perception. Like many ancient peoples, the Egyptians believed that a name captured the essence of a thing, but they also held that such supernatural power lived in the inscriptions themselves—that spelling was, in fact, a spell” (Davis 25). Neither of these early writing systems developed the more radical and transformative transcendence of an Axial civilization. With the notable exception of China, the big jump occurred with alphabetic scripts, which use written symbols to re-present sounds: now the lines actually speak to you: you *hear* the words with your *eyes*! Vision becomes much more dominant, overshadowing the other senses and thus transforming the whole sensorium. In effect, this amounts to a type of animism that we have learned to take for granted. Inert objects now speak to us: “Stop here before proceeding”; “The name of this street is. . .”; “This shop is a place where you can buy bread.” Today we live in a world filled with voices, not just birds and internal combustion engines, but voices that whisper or assault us, especially in urban areas.

We are all too familiar with the cultural advantages of script, and the problems for those who cannot read, but David Abram's celebrated book *The Spell of the Sensuous* gives us some sense of what has been lost:

In indigenous, oral cultures, nature itself is articulate; it *speaks*. The human voice in an oral culture is always to some extent participant with the voices of wolves, wind, and waves—participant, that is, with the encompassing discourse of the animate earth. There is no element of the landscape that is definitely void of expressive resonance and power: any movement may be a gesture, any sound may be a voice, a meaningful utterance. . . . To directly perceive any phenomenon is to enter into relation with it, to feel oneself in a living interaction with another being. (Abram 116–117)

As the focus shifts to printed letters “the stones fall silent. Only as our senses transfer their animating magic to the written word do the trees become mute, the other animals fall dumb” (Abram 131). One's relationship with the natural world, including our own bodies, is transformed, as our more visually based sense of self becomes alienated from them. “Transfixed by our technologies, we short-circuit the sensorial reciprocity between our breathing bodies and the bodily terrain. Human awareness folds in upon itself, and the senses—once the crucial site of our engagement with the wild and animate earth—become mere adjuncts of an isolate and abstract mind bent on overcoming an organic reality that now seems disturbingly aloof and arbitrary” (Abram 267).

In an unpublished essay on “The Axial Age and the Space of Writing,” the Egyptologist Jan Assmann considers the consequences of alphabetic scripts for the new types of transcendence that developed in the Axial Age. “Without the invention of writing, without the use of writing for the codification of cultural memory, and without the processes of canonization, the ‘Axial Age’ would have never occurred. The Axial Age is nothing else but the formative phase of the textual continuity that is still prevailing in our western and eastern civilizations” (Assmann 13).

Oral cultures necessarily focus on preserving the old customs, since they must be transferred afresh to—that is, memorized by—each new generation. Such societies are naturally conservative, preoccupied with conserving what has been laboriously developed. By preserving tradition in a different way (externalizing memory in books), print frees awareness from that task, and thus encourages reflexivity, i.e., theoretical thinking, thinking about what one reads, which enabled the aspect of Axiality most emphasized in classical Greece.

Such reflexivity provides a strong incentive for originality. Assmann gives the example of Western music, which was transformed when notation developed in the late Middle Ages, allowing the creation and preservation of complex scores unthinkable in an oral culture. There is no possibility of a Beethoven symphony or a Wagner opera in an oral culture.

Writing enables the canonization of sacred scriptures that codify the teachings of religious founders. This happens in two stages, according to Assmann: in primary canonization, various versions of (previously oral) teachings are combined into one standardized text. Once collation is concluded, secondary canonization involves commentary and exegesis on the now-fixed canon.

A non-literate society has an oral religion where several versions of the most important myths usually circulate, where the extent of the religion is limited by the reach of the spoken word, and where there is no fixed set of dogmas that the faithful must adhere to. A literate society, on the contrary, usually has a written religion (often in the shape of sacred texts), with a theoretically unlimited geographic reach, with a clearly delineated set of dogmas and principles, and with authorized, 'correct' versions of myths and narrative. (Eriksen 36)

One now has a new mode of access to the sacred: the recorded *Truth*, which not only needs to be explained but must be defended from error and heresy that might lead people astray.

As the main agent of "cultural memory," texts tend to replace more performative modes of religious practice: doctrine/dogma supersedes ritual, whereas in an oral tradition what you do is much more important than what you think. Thomas Eriksen points out that the judicial systems of non-literate cultures are based on custom and tradition, but literate cultures have law-making institutions such as legislatures. In place of a morality based on tangible interpersonal relations, the morality of literate societies becomes more impersonal and legalistic. "It should be clear by now that writing has been an essential tool in the transition from what we could call a *concrete society* based on intimate, personal relationships, memory, local religion and orally transmitted myths, to an *abstract society* based on formal legislation, archives, a book religion and written history" (Eriksen 38). And what is more abstract than transcendence: e.g., the monotheistic God of the Abrahamic religions, or the *logos* of Greek philosophy?

Assmann understands writing as "a special kind of symbols that bestow visibility to the invisible, stability to the volatile and wide dissemination to the locally limited," in contrast to orality which "uses sound symbols that are invisible, volatile and locally restricted" (Assmann 4). Script satisfies our desire to have something concrete to identify with, a fixed vehicle of salvation that can even be held in one's hands.

The codification of revelation leads to an expatriation of the holy from the worldly immanence into transcendence and into scripture. The pagan or pre-axial cult-religions presuppose the immanence of the holy in images, trees, mountains, springs, rivers, heavenly bodies, animals, human beings and stones. All this is denounced as idolatry by the new scripture-based world-religions. Scripture requires a total reorientation of religious attention which was formerly directed towards the forms of divine imma-

nence and is now directed towards scripture and its exegesis. Secondary canonisation means an exodus both of the holy and of religious attention from the cosmos into scripture. To the extra-mundane nature of God corresponds the textual character of his revelation. (Assmann 12)

Paradoxically, texts transcend this physical world: they attain a life of their own, liberated from the person who wrote them. Written words are in principle immortal, unchanging, with an origin now invisible and intangible. They have a meaning that transcends their material medium—but where does this meaning exist? Alphabetic script gives us a *transcendental* perspective because writing speaks to us of things and worlds unseen and unknown. We “see” them in the mind’s eye, from the sounds heard and interpreted there, but where is that? This makes conceivable the possibility of a truth and reality that “transcends” any place and time—for example, a “higher law” that challenges us to change what we do, or the logical reasoning that reflexive theory employs.

“Writing creates an artificial memory, whereby humans can enlarge their experience beyond the limits of one generation or one way of life. At the same time it has allowed them to invent a world of abstract entities and mistake them for reality” (Abram 56). Concepts become more important than images: henceforth we can have doctrines about God but not depict him, which would be idolatry. In *Moses and Monotheism*, Freud understands the prohibition against making images of God as “the compulsion to worship an invisible God” that “signified subordinating sense perception to an abstract idea; it was a triumph of spirituality over the senses” (in Kearney 45). If Abrams is correct that by sanctifying script (fixating on those words, from a Buddhist perspective) the sacrality of our sensuous life in the world is lost, then it is difficult to avoid the awkward question: does our relationship to “sacred scriptures” amount to a new kind of idolatry? “An idol, in the theological sense, is a creation of man’s hands, as the Bible says, in front of which we worship, and to which we attribute a power which transcends our own” (Ivan Illich, in Cayley 254). Are the Torah, the New Testament, the Qur’an examples of such creations?

According to a famous formula in the *Heart Sutra*, one of the primary texts of Mahayana Buddhism, “form (*rupa*) is emptiness (*shunyata*), and emptiness is not other than form.” *Shunyata* is not “nothingness” but the formless potential that describes awareness prior to identification with any form. From that perspective, attributing ultimate value to any particular form is delusive, whether that is a golden calf or a religious dogma. Replacing a graven image with a written covenant has great consequences, but from a Buddhist perspective that shift is not liberative insofar as it replaces one type of clinging with another.

Erik Davis cites the great insight of both Plato and McLuhan that “technologies extend our creative powers by amputating our natural ones” (Davis 13). Writing is a case in point: as script began to speak to us, we became unable

to hear what the rest of the world has to say. It is another version of the mythic scenario that McLuhan argued was the archetypal scene of all technology: Narcissus gazing into the pool, mesmerized by his own reflection (Davis 155). A classic example, of course, is a reader absorbed in his or her text.

The Problem with Transcendence

“Give me a place to stand and I shall move the earth,” Archimedes is reputed to have said. Culturally, that leverage has been provided by (our belief in) transcendence, which offered the distance—the alternative perspective—necessary to evaluate both oneself and this world and to try to improve them. To paraphrase what Renan said about the supernatural, the transcendent is the way in which the ideal has made its appearance in human affairs. The world we live in today—including our concern for democracy, human rights, and social justice—would be literally unthinkable without the strong conception of an “other world” that the Axial Age developed.

Axial Age thinkers . . . created alternative ideological systems to counteract and protest the empire and politics. They developed moral and legal systems outside the prevailing military and social structures of their day. These systems criticized the status quo and offered an ethical and often religious option rooted in humane values, such as personal responsibility to others, benevolence, virtue, compassion, justice, wisdom, and righteousness (dharma). This relativizing of the state and its cults brought human subjectivity and personal morality back into the center of religion—the covenant of the heart in Jeremiah, the Confucian virtuous gentleman, the Platonic wise sage, and the Buddhist enlightened monk—effectively undercut rigid class stratifications and the power of temple cults. (Armstrong 92)

Nevertheless, that stronger conception of an other and better world has also been problematic. The dualism between the transcendent and this world is also a split within us, between the “higher” part of ourselves (the soul, rationality) that yearns for escape from this vale of sorrow and the “lower” part that is of the earth (our physical bodies and emotions). The Axial legacy included Manichaeism and Gnosticism, which are only two of the more extreme examples of a more pervasive orientation that later included Cartesian mind/body dualism and, most recently, “transhumanists” who fantasize about escaping death by transferring their consciousness into silicon chips.

The example of transhumanism suggests the problem that encourages us to seek a “higher” reality: as the Buddha emphasized, this world is a place of suffering and death. Much of the attraction of the Axial religions is that they seemed to offer an escape from mortality, our dread of which also explains our fear and degradation of nature, animals, sex, and women (who bleed and remind us that we are conceived and born like other animals). It is no coincidence

that the Axial Age was also an age of patriarchy: the dualism between higher and lower worlds became reproduced in the dualism between men and women.

The male body becomes an instrument of dominance and control, while at the same time, women are held responsible for male sexual behavior. The female body becomes a symbol on which men project and act out a series of ideas about sexuality, birth, physical existence, and intimacy. The male body, in turn, symbolizes potency and power, capacities related to domination and conquest as religious values. For example, the biblical book of Hosea, which recounts what took place in the ninth century BCE, uses images of rape, prostitution, and domestic violence to describe God's relationship to Israel in a way that makes the voice of the rapist and batterer virtually indistinguishable from the divine voice. (Brock and Thistlewaite 82–83)

Although Axial religions emphasized the equality of all men (if not all humans) in relation to God, the hierarchical relationship between the transcendent and the human world also provided a model for inequitable social structures.

Ironically, the “higher” religions create suspicion toward and a sharp critique of the military empires of their day by developing an alternative system that structurally resembles those very empires. The Axial Age thinkers were men in male-dominated societies, and they draw their structures and images from what they know, which is male dominance. Hence, their religions were partially co-opted into social systems of power and privilege, even as they sought to save people from them. Rather than consistently depicting male dominance, hierarchy, or militarism as the essential problem, they were often metaphorically and mythically appropriated to structure power within their own systems. Hierarchical images of totalitarian power were transmuted into benevolent images. (Brock and Thistlewaite 90)

Today we find ourselves increasingly challenged by another hierarchy of domination and privilege, that between *Homo sapiens sapiens* and the (rest of the) natural world. The Axial dualism between higher and lower worlds is replicated in the alienation between the collective “wego” of humanity and the rest of the biosphere, which is suffering the consequences of our institutionalized greed and exploitation. Rapid climate change—not just a future possibility but something that has already begun—makes it obvious that we must achieve a new relationship which acknowledges our nonduality with the earth and responsibility to the earth—our mother as well as our home.

To these three axiological critiques must be added that of the physical sciences, whose explanatory success constitutes the greatest challenge to any religious belief in a transcendent alternative to this world. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that, although Axial-type transcendence has been historically important, it is no longer sufficient for what we know today. Such conceptions provided the symbolic leverage that freed us from the embeddedness of pre-Axial societies, but today we need to be liberated from its dualisms, which have outlived their role. Is there another paradigm that might offer the trans-

formative leverage we still need, without devaluing this world? I conclude with some Buddhist-inspired reflections on what that paradigm might involve.

The Spirituality of Evolution

Axial religions have generally denied or ignored biological evolution, for their creation stories are more concerned with the relationship between this world and the “higher world” from which it originates. What might happen if we instead embrace evolution and make it central to our worldview?

That means asking whether evolution is really random and meaningless. According to the cosmologist Brian Swimme, the most mysterious phenomenon in the universe is that if you leave hydrogen alone for 14 billion years, it eventually transforms into rosebushes and giraffes and *us* (Swimme interview, 2). Fourteen billion years might seem like a long time but one could plausibly argue that it is actually quite a short period of time to evolve from Big Bang plasma (which after hundreds of thousands of years stabilized enough to become hydrogen) to a Shakyamuni Buddha or a Gandhi—unless, of course, physical matter is something quite different from the reductionistic way it is usually understood.

Many biologists balk at any notion of progress, but it is difficult to understand the development of consciousness in any other way. According to E. O. Wilson: “Progress . . . is a property of the evolution of life as a whole by almost any conceivable intuitive standard, including the acquisition of goals and intentions in the behavior of animals. It makes little sense to judge it irrelevant. . . . An undeniable trend of progressive evolution has been the growth of biodiversity by increasing command of earth’s environment” (Wilson 187). The evolutionary biologist Theodore Dobzhansky agrees: “The evidence of progress and directionality in biological evolution is clear enough if the living world is considered as a whole” (Dobzhansky 119).

What we usually think of as evolution—the genetic variability that leads to more complex life-forms—is only one of three interdependent and progressive developments that together constitute a story as amazing as any religious myth. The first step was the creation of the heavier elements in the periodic table, which were formed when hydrogen fused in the super-heated cores of stars and supernovas, which later exploded, scattering those elements to coalesce into new solar systems. Elements such as carbon, oxygen, and calcium could now provide the material basis for the eventual appearance of self-replicating species about 4 billion years ago, including the appearance of human beings approximately 200,000 years ago. Last but not least are the cultural developments that have been necessary to produce highly evolved human beings such as the Buddha and (in our day) Gandhi and Einstein.

To me, at least, it seems implausible that all this is accidental, which does not necessarily mean that there must be some transcendental being outside the process that is responsible for directing it. Theists tend to see a Being outside these processes who is directing them. Many scientists see these developments as haphazard, including the evolution of life due to random DNA mutations. Is there a third alternative? According to Dobzhansky, evolution is neither random nor determined but *creative*. Can we understand this groping self-organization as the universe struggling to become more self-aware? In *The Universe Story*, Brian Swimme and Thomas Berry offer such a nondualistic interpretation: “the eye that searches the Milky Way galaxy is itself an eye shaped by the Milky Way. The mind that searches for contact with the Milky Way is the very mind of the Milky Way galaxy in search of its own depths.” What is really happening when Walt Whitman is admiring a beautiful sunset? “Walt Whitman is a space the Milky Way fashioned to feel its own grandeur” (Swimme and Berry 45, 40).

Is this the answer to the old question, “If there is no self, as Buddhism says, then who becomes enlightened?” Perhaps my desire to awaken (“the Buddha” means “the awakened one”) is nothing other than the urge of the cosmos to become aware of itself, in and as me. Is this the way the Buddha’s enlightenment should be understood today? “Waking up” is realizing that “I” am not inside my body, looking out at a world that is separate from me. Rather, “I” am what the whole universe is doing right here and now: one of the ways that the totality of its various causes and conditions comes together.

After his own awakening, when “body and mind fell away,” the twelfth-century Japanese Zen master Dogen Kigen described what he had experienced: “I came to realize clearly that mind is no other than mountains and rivers and the great wide earth, the sun and the moon and the stars” (in Kapleau 229). According to the Mahayana tradition, the historical Buddha (fl 6th-5th C. BCE) became enlightened when he looked up from his meditations and saw the morning star (Venus), whereupon he declared: “I am awakened together with the whole of the great earth and all its beings.” Did he suddenly realize his nonduality with that star?

Every species is an experiment of the biosphere, and biologists tell us that less than one percent of all species that have ever appeared on earth still survive today. The super-sized cortex of *Homo sapiens* makes us co-experimenters and co-creators. (Is this what “created in the image of God” means?) With us new types of “species” have become possible: knives and symphonies, poetry and nuclear bombs. . . . But it is also becoming more obvious that something has gone wrong with our hyper-rationality. Nietzsche’s Zarathustra says that “Man is a rope stretched between the animal and the Overman—a rope over an abyss. . . . What is great in man is that he is a bridge and not a goal”

(Nietzsche 43–44). Are we a transitional species? Must we evolve further in order to survive at all? In Buddhist terms, our delusions of a self separate from others, and our collective delusions of a collective self separate from the rest of the biosphere, motivate us as species to do too many things that are self-defeating and sometimes self-destructive. According to Thomas Berry “the historical mission of our times is to reinvent the human—at the species level, with critical reflection, within the community of life-systems, in time development context, by means of story and shared dream experience” (Berry 159).

In short, we need a new, more therapeutic paradigm, which emphasizes not only realizing our nonduality with the earth but also the healing necessary to embody that healing, because we are sick, our societies are sick and our biosphere is sick. In the context of this essay, an important question is whether digital and interactive technologies such as the internet, which are transforming if not supplanting older media such as print, will contribute to such a development, but that issue is beyond the scope of this essay.

Figures like the Buddha might be harbingers of how our species needs to develop, in which case the cultural evolutionary step most important today involves spiritual practices that address the fiction of a separate self whose well-being is delusively distinguished from that of “others.” Perhaps our basic problem is not self-love but a profound misunderstanding of what one’s self really is. Without the compassion that arises when we realize our nonduality—empathy not only with other humans but with the whole biosphere—it is becoming likely that civilization as we know it will not survive the next few centuries. Nor would it deserve to. Perhaps we are challenged to grow up, or get out of the way. If so, it remains to be seen whether the *Homo sapiens* experiment will be a successful vehicle for the cosmic evolutionary process.

Note

- 1 Space does not allow a similar discussion of China or India, but I want to point out another significant parallel in the difference between early Pali Buddhism, which was an oral tradition, and the great rupture within Buddhism that occurred with the development of Mahayana (which eventually became the dominant tradition in Central and East Asia), a split that can be associated with the shift from oral teachings to written texts. Although script was not unknown in India at the time of the Buddha, he was the product of an oral culture and his teachings were transmitted by mouth for at least three centuries before being written down. When those original teachings were eventually recorded, new ways of understanding the Buddhadharmā appeared in new types of sacred texts. In place of earlier focus on *stupa* cults and relic worship, devotion to the scriptures became emphasized, and there was a transformation in the way that the Buddha was understood in many of those sutras: no longer simply an awakened human, he became elevated into a transcendent being whose body, for example, could suddenly become radiant and illuminate all the world systems in the cosmos.

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