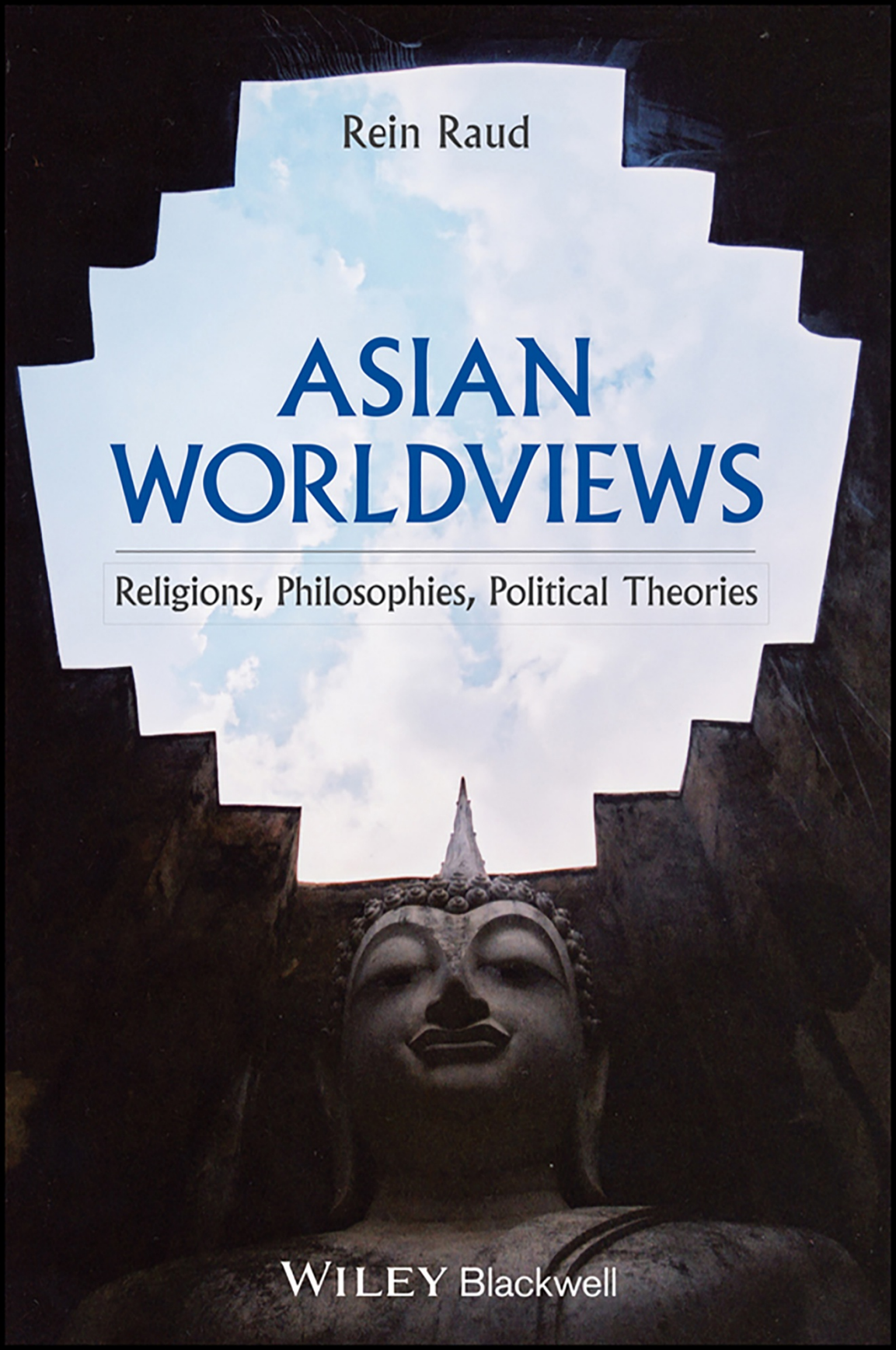
Rein Raud
ASIAN WORLDVIEWS
Religions, Philosophies, Political Theories
WILEY Blackwell

Asian Worldviews

Asian Worldviews

Religions, Philosophies, Political Theories

Rein Raud

WILEY Blackwell

This edition first published 2021

Registered Offices
John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 111 River Street, Hoboken, NJ 07030, USA
John Wiley & Sons Ltd, The Atrium, Southern Gate, Chichester, West Sussex, PO19 8SQ, UK

Editorial Office
111 River Street, Hoboken, NJ 07030, USA

For details of our global editorial offices, customer services, and more information about Wiley products visit us at www.wiley.com.

Wiley also publishes its books in a variety of electronic formats and by print-on-demand. Some content that appears in standard print versions of this book may not be available in other formats.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Raud, Rein, author.
Title: Asian worldviews : religions, philosophies, political theories / Rein Raud, Professor of Asian and Cultural Studies, Tallinn University, Estonia.
Description: Hoboken, NJ : Wiley-Blackwell, 2021. | Includes index.
Identifiers: LCCN 2020023699 (print) | LCCN 2020023700 (ebook) | ISBN 9781119165972 (paperback) | ISBN 9781119165989 (adobe pdf) | ISBN 9781119166009 (epub)
Subjects: LCSH: Asia–Intellectual life.
Classification: LCC DS12 .R35 2021 (print) | LCC DS12 (ebook) | DDC 950–dc23
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2020023699
LC ebook record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2020023700

Cover Design: Wiley
Cover Image: © Rosita Raud

Set in 9.5/12.5pt STIXTwoText by SPi Global, Pondicherry, India

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Contents

Preface

The aim of this book is to acquaint its reader with the rich thought traditions of Asia (India, China, Japan, Korea, Tibet, and South East Asia), which have mutually influenced each other throughout history and consequently share large parts of their intellectual heritage. It can serve both as an introductory textbook for the future specialist and as a source of background knowledge for those whose primary interest lies outside Asian studies, be it religious studies, Western philosophy, political science or anything else. No previous knowledge of the history or cultures of this region is presupposed, entanglement in specific debates is avoided and names and terms have been kept to the minimum. If you think that an educated person anywhere in the world should know who are St Augustine, Luther, and Mother Theresa or Aristotle, Kant, and Wittgenstein or Machiavelli, Rousseau, and Marx, or what is the meaning of 'cardinal sin', *cogito*, and 'separation of powers', the names and terms printed bold in this book are those you should be familiar with from a range of Asian points of view. I have done my best to keep the scope of the book equally balanced throughout and to maintain a more or less similar level of coverage in all areas. The book thus addresses all teachings, schools, and individuals that have usually been included in the range of such introductory intellectual histories. However, the reader will notice that some authors and ideas not always present in similar overviews, such as feminist theorists, have been given more space here than has been customary up to now.

The worldviews described in this book influence the choices and actions of the people who currently make up about one half of the world's population. This alone is reason enough to be interested in Asia, but there is more. Having been economically handicapped for over a century by Western domination and inefficient, if not directly harmful domestic politics, Asian countries have now emerged to form the world's most quickly developing region, one that can no longer be excluded from global decision-making. Culturally, geographically and politically, Asia is perhaps more diverse than any other part of the world. Dominated by two ancient, multilayered, and rich civilizations, India and China, this region is the home of some of the world's oldest and worthiest literary and philosophical cultures, theatrical traditions, and aesthetic systems. So undoubtedly at least some

knowledge of Asian worldviews is necessary for anyone with an interest in the world beyond one's own home ground, were it for cultural history or current political and economic affairs.

Of course, traditional opposition pairs such as 'east–west' always rely on simplifications. Norway differs from Portugal and Texas from Scotland perhaps more significantly than Singapore from Vancouver. Moreover, for the purposes of this book the 'West' includes also a large portion of what most Westerners consider to be in the East, namely the Islamic world. This may seem strange, because religious wars throughout centuries and recent political conflicts as well as European colonial presence in the 'Orient' have shaped the image of Muslims for most Westerners as the Other, whose cultural and social habits are incompatible with 'Western values'. However, historically and etymologically, Islam is most certainly a part of 'Western' culture, sharing both in the traditions of Greek antiquity – which it actually preserved for Europe during the times when the West was militantly fundamentalist – and the Judaic legacy of monotheism. Muslims themselves have always felt a unity with other 'people of the Book', that is, those whose religion is based on the foundations of the Old Testament, and Islamic thought has exercised a decisive influence on Western intellectual history through the work of such thinkers as, for example, Ibn Rushd (Averroes) or Ibn Sina (Avicenna). Thus, even though Islam is prominently present also in Asia, it is treated there as a Western import that has taken on local colour, but nonetheless has its roots elsewhere – not unlike Christianity or Marxism. The reader who would like to be better informed about the teachings of Islam will find a few suggestions in the section of further reading recommendations at the back of this book.

As a result, the term 'Asia' does not refer in this book to the entire geographical range that includes also the Middle East, the majority of the territory of Russia and the former Soviet republics of central Asia, but only to those parts of Asia that are usually addressed in publications dedicated to 'Asian religions', 'Asian philosophies', and 'Asian politics', namely south, east and southeast Asian countries as well as Tibet. More attention has been dedicated to the two most ancient civilizations of Asia, India and China, as well as to Japan as the first successful modernizing country to have emerged from outside the traditional West. Smaller subchapters have been dedicated to Korea, Tibet, Indic South East Asia and Vietnam, not because their intellectual contributions would be less valuable, but largely due to the fact that these regions have, for historical reasons, had less impact on the global processes and the interest in their intellectual history has been mostly academic up to the present.

There are quite a few good introductions to the religions, philosophies and political ideologies of each of the countries and regions that this book deals with, but most of the time these different types of convictions and beliefs are kept separate. However, as soon as we leave the Western cultural environment, the division of worldviews into 'religions', 'philosophies', and 'political theories' starts to obscure

more than it reveals. Philosophy and religion have been in a complicated relationship in the West, almost since their moment of separation, when Socrates was accused of disrespect for the gods, yet many Western philosophers, too, have been devoutly religious and have made significant efforts to bring their beliefs and their reasoning into harmony. Religions can seldom manage without a certain metaphysical grounding, and we often see them prompting rulers how to conduct their affairs properly. Political ideologies are always grounded in theories of justice and ideas about the course of history, which are related to both the religious and the philosophical convictions of their proponents. It therefore makes sense, especially when stepping on unfamiliar ground, to highlight these connections rather than the divisions, and to treat worldviews as holistic, even if they occasionally seem incoherent to us – they seldom do to the people whose lives they guide.

But we might want to go even further than that and question at the outset the very validity of the concepts 'religion', 'philosophy', and 'ideology' as such for a broader perspective. Most Westerners associate religion on a non-analytical level with belief in a god, or gods, which is grounded in a certain doctrine, one normally fixed in scriptures and upheld by an institution of spiritual professionals. Religions are also exclusive and make strong claims on the identity of the individuals who profess them, often causing distrust or even open hatred between religiously defined communities. Philosophy, in turn, is a kind of rational and conceptual inquiry into the first principles of how the world is, how we are in it, and how we should reason about things, while political theories and ideologies are sets of principles on which their proponents consider the build-up of society and its governing should be based – these principles can also be implicit and presented to the community as a sort of natural order, which nonetheless does not affect their ideological character.

All of these commonsensical assumptions are challenged to a certain degree by Asian worldviews. In fact, what is known as an Indian or Chinese religion and philosophy may not correspond to these tentative definitions at all. Quite a few so-called religions, such as early Buddhism or Confucianism, do not speak about any supernatural agency, others, such as Shintō, do not have doctrines or scriptures. Their institutions, like the huge Buddhist monasteries of pre-Islamic India, may appear more similar to what we call universities than to what look like monasteries from our point of view. And people can often identify with several religions at the same time in many regions of the area. Strangely enough, the term 'religion' is often forced on such worldviews that lack some, if not most of the characteristics many Westerners consider to be core properties of religion – such as the belief in a transcendent agency – while the label of 'philosophy' is being denied to sophisticated conceptual constructions because they lack some particular element that the critic considers crucial, even though there are Western thinkers, who are legitimately called philosophers and lack that same element as well.

The entanglement of different intellectual pursuits is also one of the reasons why the book is organized according to a historical principle rather than treating

worldviews such as Buddhism or Confucianism one by one. Asian worldviews are more often than not lacking in the type of jealousy that characterizes Western religions, and ideas, motifs, and practices migrate relatively freely over their borders. Thus, for example, the Japanese Shintō took shape as a kind of an institution only when the Dao creed had entered Japan from China, and the Dao creed itself had been inspired to do the same by Buddhism, which had been imported to China from India. A treatment by tradition might perhaps encourage us to emphasize the borders between them, while progressing along the historical timeline makes it easier to trace borrowings and influences and to understand how and why the worldviews developed in the way they did.

Another related problem that often occurs in literature is the separation of classical heritages from the ideas of the present. Excellent books on traditional thought seldom venture to see it reflected in modern ideas, and brilliant analyses of new views often summarize their classical origins in succinct introductions and then proceed to treat the thinkers of the last 150 years exclusively in the context of Western discourses. These have undeniably played a decisive role in the development of present-day Asian societies and their worldviews, but the ways how all these Western discourses have been received, interpreted, and modified can hardly be understood without a sufficient knowledge of past thought systems. It could be said that many people in contemporary Asia operate with parallel conceptual structures in which traditional ideas and Western notions are used side by side. A treatment of Asian ways of thought as simply local and possibly imperfect versions of universal patterns best exemplified by Western cultures is not only racist and imperialist, it is also quite wrong. Asian ideas have been in dialogue with Western thought in the past and should be doing so also in the future, and mutual understanding between structurally different cultures should start with an open approach to the other. This book is for those who would like to take the first step on this way and I can only hope that it will inspire its readers to pursue their study of Asian worldviews forward to higher levels of competence.

The transcription of Indian names and terms is given in a simplified spelling, thus Shankara instead of Śaṅkara and Vishishtādvaita instead of Viśiṣṭādvaita, given that the nuances of pronunciation indicated by these diacritics are largely ignored also by advanced readers of Indian texts. Unlike in many texts that use a simplified spelling, the distinction between short and long vowels is maintained and the reader is encouraged to make note of it. Chinese terms and names have been written in the pinyin transcription unless used in a different form by the persons in question, Japanese terms and names are given in the modified Hepburn transcription, Korean names are given in the Revised Romanization system, with the exception of widespread family names such as Kim and Pak/Park. Vietnamese names appear in the quoc ngu Latin script without the diacritics, Tibetan names in phonetic approximations regularly used in literature.

Unless indicated otherwise, all translations of quoted source texts are my own.

Acknowledgements

First of all, many thanks go to all of the students who have participated in my classes on the topics of this book – and in particular those who have asked questions – in the Free University of Berlin, Tallinn University, University of Helsinki, and University of Tōkyō.

Many heartfelt thanks are also due to Douglas Berger, Matthew Kapstein, Viktoria Lysenko, Margus Ott, Jin Y. Park, and Geir Sigurdsson for reading and commenting on parts of the manuscript. There would have been so many errors and misreadings without you.

I hope colleagues will forgive me that instead of quoting them by name, I refer to their (as well as my own) views as 'recent scholarship' throughout this book which, meant as it is for novices in the discipline, is in any case already overcrowded with names and terms. But let those to whom my work is most directly indebted be listed here (in alphabetical order): Roger Ames, Stephen C. Angle, Christopher Bartley, Douglas Berger, John Berthrong, Richard Bowring, Bidyut Chakrabarty, Anne Cheng, Chung-ying Cheng, Julia Ching, George Chryssides, Edward Chung, Philip Clart, Fred Clothey, Arthur Cotterell, Paul Dundas, Gavin Flood, Jeaneane Fowler, James D. Frankel, Edmund S. Fung, Yiu-ming Fung, Jonardon Ganeri, Jay Garfield, Richard Gombrich, Angus Graham, Chad Hansen, Chang Hao, Peter Harvey, Richard Hayes, James Heisig, Barbara Hendrischke, Radhika Herzberger, Tze-ki Hon, Yong Huang, Tao Jiang, Matthew Kapstein, Thomas Kasulis, Halla Kim, Nick Knight, Gereon Kopf, Karyn Lai, Whalen Lai, Jae-Cheon Lim, Liu Feng, JeeLoo Liu, Donald S. Lopez Jr., David Loy, Dan Lusthaus, Vera Mackie, John Makeham, Linnart Mäll, Arvind-Pal Singh Mandair, John Maraldo, Daigan and Alicia Matsunaga, John McRae, Maurice Meisner, Bo Mou, Charles A. Muller, Randall L. Nadeau, Jan Nattier, Nguyen Van Huyen, Steve Odin, Rosalind O'Hanlon, Patrick Olivelle, Gail Omvedt, Charles Orzech, Margus Ott, Rajendra Kumar Pandey, Jin Y. Park, Graham Parkes, Lauren Pfister, Red Pine, John Powers, Gil Raz, Young-chan Ro, Isabelle Robinet, Henry Rosemont Jr., Li-Hsiang Lisa Rosenlee, Stuart R. Schram, Anna Seidel, Mark

Siderits, Edward Slingerland, Paul Swanson, Sor-hoon Tan, George J. Tanabe Jr., Ithamar Theodor, Hoyt C. Tillman, Justin Tiwald, Bryan van Norden, Rudolf Wagner, Xinzhong Yao, Carl Young, Michiko Yusa, and Brook A. Ziporyn. Thank you.

This has been a work of many years and has benefited from various grants. Two field trips were financed by a research grant of the University of Helsinki, a grant of the Nordic Institute of Asian Studies enabled me to stay at the École Française d'Extrême-Orient in Paris and use its library. Several stays as a visiting scholar at the University of Cambridge have greatly contributed to the work, and a DAAD scholarship enabled me to carry out parts of it at the Free University of Berlin. The final part of the research for this book was funded by the Estonian Research Council (ETAG) research grant PUT1365.

1

India

Introductory remarks. India is home to one of the oldest continuous civilizations on Earth and simultaneously to a degree of cultural variativity with which few other regions can compare. It is also the birthplace of many inventions and discoveries that have influenced the development of science, philosophy, linguistics, literature, art, architecture, theatre, and religion far beyond its borders. Indian religions have attracted a large following in many Asian countries and Buddhism, in particular, around the whole world. Today, the Republic of India, with a population over 1.3 billion people, is the world's biggest democracy. At present, India has the world's seventh biggest economy, but only ranks third in purchasing power parity. It is projected to bypass the United States in the next decades and rank second only to China on this scale. Besides, when we speak of the 'Indian subcontinent', we do not think only of India as a country, but also of quite a few neighbouring states that have a common cultural history with it and, for some of these, experts project similarly spectacular growth. What takes place in these societies, however, is difficult to understand without a knowledge of the background concepts that inform all spheres of thinking in Indian and related cultures, from the most general views of how the universe is organized to particular processes of decision-making and political preferences.

All of this should be enough to promote interest in Indian thought. Nonetheless, it would be just as worth studying even if India would not have such a growing role in the world of the present. Some Hindu and Buddhist philosophical systems belong to the most profound achievements of human thought. Indian views on language, logic, psychological processes as well as ontological problems have historically influenced Western thought and are able to contribute to philosophical debates also in the present. Many twentieth century landmarks of Western philosophy bear similarities to the positions of Indian thinkers, which put these advances into a much broader perspective. The developments of science, the move from a Newtonian space populated primarily by solid, self-identical objects

Asian Worldviews: Religions, Philosophies, Political Theories, First Edition. Rein Raud.

to relativity and quantum physics, have lent even more actuality to Indian thought, which historically has developed many categories and conceptualizations that are often better equipped to speak of such phenomena than the language of traditional Western metaphysics.

Periods of cultural history. The highly advanced Harappan civilization, which dominated the north-western part of the Indian subcontinent for the better part of the second millennium BCE, has unfortunately left us only with very short inscriptions, up to now undeciphered. Thus, the documented history of India begins with the advent of the Aryans, a mixed company of nomadic tribes who shared an Indo-European language, which later evolved into Sanskrit. Starting with the arrival of the Aryans, we can divide the historical development of Indian thought into six distinct periods. First, there is the Vedic period (c. 1500–600 BCE), which has received its name after the Vedas, initially orally transmitted Aryan scripture, which allegedly forms the basis of the Hindu worldview to this day. During that time, a worldview usually called **Brahmanism** was developed out of the Indo-European shared corpus of beliefs, possibly influenced by a substratum derived from the Harappan civilization, and reflecting the adaptation to local circumstances that the Aryan society went through during that time. One of these was the emergence of the **caste** system, which placed the priests at the top of the social ladder. A theory of divinely sanctioned kingship helped them to maintain this position even though they did not directly hold any political power after states began to consolidate.

The Vedic period is followed by the period of reform movements (c. 600–200 BCE), sometimes also called the period of 'second urbanization'. During this time, social processes, notably the transformation of a large number of small-scale settlements into republican states collectively governed by the warrior estate, led to religious innovation, which opposed the simultaneous opposite development of strict social divisions within the Brahmanist tradition. The questioning of the Brahmanist worldview by such reform movements, primarily the Jains and the Buddhists, also triggered a sophisticated response on the traditionalist side that started the development of new practices and religious trends that gradually formed what we now call **Hinduism**.

It is also during this time that the first contacts of the Indian civilization with other cultures were established. The eastern outposts of the Iranian empire of the Achaemenids served to open up both trade and the movement of ideas. Towards the end of the period of reform movements, India was briefly invaded by Alexander the Great (327–325 BCE), which inaugurated a dialogue between Greek and Indian thought, with ideas moving in both directions. Even though Alexander retreated quite soon, Hellenic states continued to exist for some time in the Indian

north-west and, a few centuries afterwards, Greek and Roman traders started a commercial maritime traffic to the extent that trade stations were established in the south of India.

Soon after Alexander, India was united into a short-lived empire by the Maurya dynasty (c. 322–180 BCE), which inaugurated the period of classical Indian culture (c. 200 BCE–1200 CE), during which kingdoms were the norm of government, even though only one of them, the empire of the Guptas (c. 240–590 CE), gained control of most of the subcontinent for a longer period of time. The culture of the classical period is characterized by a highly sophisticated urban lifestyle, a tremendous amount of literature in a variety of genres as well as theatre, music, and science. During that time Buddhism and Hinduism existed side by side in India and influenced each other, and both of them also spread to neighbouring countries. The Hindu religion became dominant in both continental and maritime South East Asia, while Buddhism spread to the south and south-east, on the one hand, and to the north and north-east (China and Tibet), on the other.

But this was not to last. The start of a new era was predicted by waves of immigration of Parsis (Persians), the followers of the ancient Iranian religion of Zoroastrianism, fleeing from Muslims who were taking over their country. The period of Islamic conquests (c. 1200–1800) led the Indian subcontinent to be dominated by Muslim rulers, dynasties of various origins replacing each other until the Mughals finally established themselves as the rulers of the country. The Muslims introduced Islam to India, but the greatest rulers of the Mughal empire, such as Akbar (1542–1605), were tolerant leaders interested in interfaith dialogue rather than the subjugation of all other religions. This led to attempts at the synthesis of Muslim beliefs with the Hindu heritage – from one such effort, the creed of the Sikhs emerged – and fierce struggles for domination. Buddhism, however, having already lost much of its royal patronage before the Muslim invasion, now suffered a final blow from which it never fully recovered in India.

The discovery of the sea route around Africa to India by Vasco da Gama (1498) soon led to an era of colonial wars, during which the Portuguese, the Dutch, and the British vied for control of the Indian subcontinent. The British finally emerged victorious over their competitors as well as the Mughal empire and its descendant states. Modern Indian thought (approximately from 1850 onwards), started to emerge already under the British colonial regime and provided the discourses for a cultural and political independence movement. Contemporary Indian thought, from after the end of the colonial rule and the partition of the subcontinent (1947), presents us with multiple efforts at synthesis of concepts inherited from the past and imported from the West, and this dialogue is still ongoing. However, this has also been the period when various nationalist and fundamentalist ideologies have tried to gain control of the public space.

Linguistic diversity. It should be noted that cultural and linguistic diversity has been one of the characteristic features of the Indian subcontinent for many centuries, and attempts to create discourses for living together have constantly competed with conservative strivings to separate different ethnic and religious groups from each other. The Aryan tribes that invaded India spoke Indo-European dialects that were related to English and many other European languages, while many indigenous people (possibly including the creators of the Harappan civilization) spoke Dravidian dialects, the forefathers of modern Tamil, Telugu, and other languages.

The classical Indian civilization was based on the single, shared, and strictly normed literary language of Sanskrit. However, Sanskrit was a learned skill for all its users, who spoke a variety of Indo-European and Dravidian languages as their mother tongues – a situation quite similar to medieval Europe, where Latin was used for official and scholarly purposes, while local vernacular languages were used in daily communication. After Sanskrit lost its position due to the Islamic conquest, new Indian languages (Hindi, Urdu, Bengali, Punjabi, Marathi, and so on) have gradually developed into full-fledged vehicles of cultural self-expression and modern Dravidian languages have similarly been able to establish themselves. This has created a cultural and linguistic diversity comparable perhaps only to Europe, which also functions as a political and supranational entity with a shared cultural base.

Practice. Before moving on to the discussion of the views expressed in Indian thought systems, it should be pointed out that none of these were conceived for mere intellectual beauty or out of the need to learn the truth for its own sake. They were meant to elucidate and give a conceptually sound foundation to the various methods to achieve, or at least proceed towards, a fulfilment of one's purpose in life. For most of these systems, this goal was synonymous with 'liberation' or 'emancipation' from the circle of rebirths. Knowledge about the architecture of the universe and its internal dynamism was only necessary in order to understand why and how the practice one had undertaken would lead to this goal. Not all forms of practice needed such a justification – for some, the intellectualism of the Hindu philosophical systems might even appear as a hindrance rather than help in their religious advancement. However, for most Hindus, practice pervades their life in any case: to be alive is tantamount to engendering new karma, and being careful about it is not necessarily a distinct activity or sphere of life, but just a commonsensical attitude to things like, for example, being mindful of what one eats or drinks or remembering to have one's documents in order before a journey. Ritualist practice is thus also a way to maximize the positive karma-producing potential of one's position in the world. Just as medieval Europeans, Indians did not have a distinct word for *religion*, which was just another natural aspect of their life.

All in all, there are three distinct directions of practice that most Indian worldviews could take: ritualist, ascetic, or devotionalist. All three can be traced back to the scriptures. *Ritualist* practice derives from the assumption that transcendent agency responds to ritualist action and can therefore be manipulated by priests who are, through the scriptures, privy to secret knowledge of how this is done. By performing certain lower-level rituals laypeople may similarly assure themselves of a certain degree of goodwill of the gods and contribute to the upholding of the cosmic order. This is in accordance with the view that the logical order of the universe is manifested in the social hierarchy. Therefore the kind of involvement in ritual practice expected from people with different social standing and in different stages of life varies accordingly.

Ascetic practices are grounded in the belief that by controlling the body one can increase and manipulate the energy of life and put it to unexpected uses. In particular, the epics abound with stories how ascetics, by accumulating spiritual power, can perform supernatural acts. On a more realistic level, asceticism of varying degrees has been advocated by some Hindu and Jain traditions as a method for calming the emotions and clearing the mind to such a level that one can perceive the truth and attain liberation. Ascetic practices are normally combined with psychotechnical exercises, including various forms of meditation, which are meant to emancipate the mind from the confines of daily routines and to control its activity. The historical Buddha has warned against ascetic practices as an excess and advocated a 'middle path' between extreme approaches to the body, but also advocates meditation as the way to spiritual progress. This is in accordance with the Buddhist rejection of all attachments: when someone starts to engage in ascetic mortification of the flesh, it may quickly turn into a sport practised for its own sake to commit increasingly further feats of corporal austerity. However, such an attitude is not conducive to mental liberation at all.

The last variety of practice is *devotionalism*, which is an attitude first met in some Vedic hymns that credit a particular deity with maximum power and positive attributes that can just as well be attributed to some other deity in some other hymn. Constantly ongoing activities of worship and veneration, dedicated to particular deities, have later become the main form of practice of some sectarian movements that have gathered a strong following. In particular, the *bhakti* movement, which arose in south India in the seventh century, has been influential in supporting the split of Hinduism into branches of devotees of different gods, primarily Vishnu and Shiva. The word *bhakti* means 'devotion, love, attachment', but a primarily spiritual one, even if sex and erotic connotations often also have a significant role in Hindu beliefs.

The Brahmanist Worldview

Background. The worldview that developed from the beliefs of the Indo-Aryan tribes who moved into India between 1500 and 1300 BCE is designated by two terms, Brahmanism and Hinduism. Hinduism normally refers to the newer (including present) forms of it, because the term 'Hindu' started to gain general currency only after the Muslim invasion as a term for people who were not Muslims. However, their forms of worship started to evolve already during the classical period. Sometimes the term 'Hindu' is also used for the much earlier forms of this religion, especially in popular literature.

During the Vedic period, Indian society went through a series of changes. Initially, it was a fairly egalitarian association of householders, who were responsible for both the economic well-being of their dependents and the performance of necessary rituals, that is, sacrifices to the gods. Soon enough, the society evolved into a much more strictly organized hierarchical system, with an institutionalized division of labour. This fostered the appearance of small states and the development of urban culture. Dealing with the divine became a profession and the knowledge associated with it a closely guarded form of cultural capital, which was used by the priests to guarantee themselves the leading position in the social system.

Eventually, the political system started to change and the privileged status of the priests came to be questioned by new religious movements that did not recognize their authority. These reform movements, two of which (the Jain religion and Buddhism) have survived to this day, forced Brahmanism to reinterpret some of its own basic tenets and started a philosophical dialogue which provided Indian thought with a broadly accepted conceptual foundation for centuries to come.

Vedic scripture. The word *veda* means 'knowledge'. Technically, the term refers to four groups of texts, each of which is headed by a collection (*samhita*) of hymns and formulas used during the sacrifice ritual. However, the titles of these collections all contain the word 'veda', so quite often the term is used to refer to these alone, without the other texts in the group. Collectively, the Vedic scriptures are also called *shruti*, 'what is heard', because they were initially transmitted in oral form, and opposed to authored treatises as well as the epic poems that describe, in wildly mythicized form, the history of ancient Aryan India. Older sources credit the vedas to ancient sages, who have given shape to this authorless wisdom, but in some texts we find them also attributed to the creator-god Brahmā. The orthodox tradition considers the Vedas to be uncreated eternal truth.

The oldest and most important samhita is called ***Rigveda***. It is divided into 10 books and contains the hymns and invocations (1017 in number) used for summoning gods to participate in the ritual. Other collections contain formulas to be used during the ritual and after the ritual, checking its efficacy. There is a

great deal of overlap between the five collections. While the *Rigveda* has been partially (and sometimes also in full) translated into several Western languages, including English, and is widely studied by scholars of comparative religion and mythology as well as philosophy, most of the others are of interest mainly for specialists in early India.

The secondary texts in each group are divided into three further categories and present early comments on Vedic knowledge. Of these, the last category of the ***upanishads*** is the most important. This group of texts originates from the very end of the Vedic age and the period of reform movements, reflecting the changes towards a more philosophically grounded worldview that Brahmanism was undergoing at the time.

---

veda ('knowledge') the scriptural tradition of Brahmanism/Hinduism, collections of ancient, initially orally transmitted hymns and comments to them

---

Vedic gods. Most Vedic hymns are dedicated to a particular deity, although there are some that evoke them collectively or tell the story of creation. The gods of the Vedas are called *devas* and *asuras*. While deva remained the standard designation of a divine being, asuras were later described as demons. The early Vedic texts still talk about them in a positive key and sometimes even the same deity can be categorized in both groups. The difference, however, must have been developing from earlier on, as it had been one of the causes to split the Aryan tribes into Indians and Iranians – for Iranians, it was the asuras who were the good deities and devas were considered evil.

Many of these deities are originally of shared Indo-European stock, with possibly a few additions from the Harappan civilization. Thus, for example, we find in some hymns of the *Rigveda* invocations to Dyaus pitar (Father Heaven), who is recognizably the same figure as the Greek Zeus pater or the Roman Jupiter. In the Vedas, Dyaus pitar is usually mentioned together with Prithivi, or Mother Earth. In contrast, we know almost nothing about the Harappan gods. There is a figure, depicted on many seals, sitting in a lotus posture with horned headgear and an erect penis, has sometimes been identified as a predecessor of the god Shiva, even though Shiva (bearing the name Rudra) only plays a minor part in the Vedas. Most of the Vedic gods are male, but there are a few goddesses as well.

Characteristically, many Vedic deities are personalized natural phenomena, so Agni (Fire, important for his central role in rituals), Vāyu (Wind), Sūrya (Sun), Vāk (Speech), and Soma (a certain hallucinogenic drug) are glorified by names that are the usual Sanskrit words referring to these things. Similarly, the river Sarasvati also appears as a deity.

The greatest of all Vedic gods, however, is **Indra**, whose name has no other meaning. He is depicted as a warrior, and the most important story about him is the slaying of the dragon or serpent Vritra, the personification of drought. Later on, Indra becomes the god of thunder and the smashing weapon he uses is transformed into a thunderbolt. He is also often depicted consuming large amounts of the hallucinogenic soma, which gives him power to combat his enemies. One of his companions is Vishnu, who later eclipses him as one of the central figures of the pantheon.

The Vedic gods can be grouped into categories, but they are not organized into a clearly hierarchical system, where one of them would have the power to command others. Hymns dedicated to each of them mostly extol the virtues of that particular god as the supreme figure, and they often credit their addressee with the creation of the universe, while another hymn may ascribe that feat to some other deity.

> He has a form corresponding to every form; this form of his is for display.
> Indra keeps going about in many forms through his magical powers, for ten hundred fallow bays are yoked for him.
> (*Rigveda* VI 47: 18, trans. S. Jamison and J. Brereton)

Similarly, to Greek gods, Vedic gods, especially Indra, can adopt different shapes. This eventually led to the appearance of another well-known characteristic feature of Indian deities: they have certain more stable forms in which they can appear among the humans of the Earth and perform certain tasks. These forms came to be called *avatars*. The word means 'descent', that is, the descent from heavens of a deity to assume an earthly shape. The word does not yet appear in Vedic texts, although the idea is already there, but it is met in some Brahmanist texts written during the period of reform movements. The concept is most often associated with the god Vishnu, but some others are known to engage in such appearances as well.

avatar the form a deity takes to appear and act on Earth

Towards the end of the Vedic period, we see a new figure appearing on the scene who soon displaces Indra as the greatest god. This is Brahmā, more powerful than any other deity, the creator of the universe, before whom all other deities are just as powerless as humans. The appearance of Brahmā signalizes the transition from a mythological pantheon to a philosophically conceptualized view of divinity, as

elaborated in the last layer of Vedic texts, the *upanishads*, where **Brahmā**, a personalized creator god (a masculine noun) gradually approaches *Brahman* (a neuter noun signifying 'foundation'), the absolute, ubiquitous world-spirit.

Upanishads. The *upanishads* are only loosely associated with the samhitas and even though they claim to uphold their authority, they present a worldview that is already quite different from what can be deduced from earlier Vedic scriptures. They present a philosophical response – or an array of related responses – to the changes in the society and the challenges to the Brahmanist worldview posed by the reform movements.

A later tradition identifies the *upanishads* as the final and deepest teaching that a knowledgeable person has to grasp in life. During the first centuries of the common era, the followers of the Brahmanist tradition started to divide the ideal human life into four stages (student, householder, forest ascetic, recluse), but some scholars think that such a division was already being invented at the time when the principal *upanishads* were written. In any case, it conveniently corresponds to the fourfold division of Vedic scripture and credits the *upanishads* with the ultimate wisdom of the sage. The precise original meaning of the word *upanishad* is unclear, and the classical explanation of it as 'secret teachings', meant only for the most advanced followers, is unfounded. Recent scholarship has suggested that the word indicates a 'juxtaposition', that is, a doctrine establishing an equivalence between the external and the internal, or the macrocosm and the microcosm.

There are altogether more than 200 *upanishads* of varying length and importance. The more important ones have been composed during the eighth to fourth centuries BCE. The two best-known texts of this category are the *Brihadāranyaka* and the *Chāndogya upanishads*, which both date from before the advent of Buddhism and thus represent the internal development of Brahmanist thought.

Concepts and doctrines. As any student of Asian worldviews quickly discovers, the very terms Indian thought uses to speak about the world differ considerably from the vocabulary Westerners usually take for granted. However, even though there is considerable variation between Indian worldviews as well, most of them share a common conceptual vocabulary that has been developed by and inherited from Brahmanism and is thus shared also by those religions and philosophical schools that have challenged it and do not recognize the authority of the Vedas.

In Greece, one of the foundational moments of philosophy was the trial of Socrates, accused of disrespect for gods. The early impulses inspiring the Brahmanist philosophical tradition, however, stem from the opposing need to uphold the worldview expounded in the scriptures. That said, the concept of divinity in Indian and Greek thought is quite different, even though both systems are polytheist. While Greek gods are organized in a hierarchy, on the one

hand, and myths report their (very human) struggles, on the other hand, Indian gods form a curious polycentric system of various layers. The scriptures contain several conflicting accounts of creation and texts dedicated to particular gods often place their particular object of veneration above all others. Perhaps this could be interpreted as excessive politeness – after all, the goal of the hymns was to incline the gods to grant what was asked of them during rituals of sacrifice. This resulted in an interesting view: knowledgeable humans started to see themselves on par with the gods they were addressing, because their activities were able to manipulate them. Professionals well-versed in techniques of interaction with the divine did not think they were at the mercy of their gods any longer. On the contrary, it was them who controlled the rituals on which the gods were dependent. The knowledge of the general order which the gods also had to obey became the real target of learning. This supported the emergence of a strictly hierarchical society in which the priests, or Brāhmans, were at the top, the warriors-rulers (*kshatriya*) ranked second, the self-employed (*vaishya*, or agriculturalists, merchants, and owners of handicraft businesses) ranked third, and hired labour (*shūdra*) ranked fourth. The upper three castes were called 'twice-born', because their male members had to go through an initiation ritual that qualified them for instruction in some scriptural wisdom, while hired labour was not supposed to do that. At the bottom of this society were the casteless, or untouchables, contact with whom was considered polluting. These included many indigenous ethnic groups as well as such professions that were not considered pure enough by the dominant culture. A legitimation of this division is to be found in one of the scriptural hymns, which describes the emergence of the universe from the symbolically sacrificed body of a primary Man.

When they apportioned the Man, into how many parts did they arrange him? What was his mouth? What his two arms? What are said to be his two thighs, his two feet?

The brahmin was his mouth. The ruler was made his two arms. As to his thighs – that is what the freeman was. From his two feet the servant was born.

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

From his navel was the midspace. From his head the heaven developed. From his two feet the earth, and the directions from his ear. Thus they arranged the worlds.

(*Rigveda* X 90: 11–14, trans. S. Jamison and J. Brereton)

This view came to have a strong bearing on the concept of social and cosmic order, and consequently on the morality based on it. In particular, it inspired the theory that the actions of all persons had to correspond to their station in life and not to universal rules. Soon enough this view found its way into political and legal treatises and was later elaborated further by Hindu (particularly Mīmānsā) thinkers. Combined with the emergent doctrine of reincarnation, this produced a workable ethical system, according to which the task of individual people was thus not to perform well on a universal scale, but to live out their particular destinies. These were dependent on the circumstances of their birth, which, in turn, were not random, but determined by their previous actions. The idea of reincarnation is not yet articulated in early Vedic texts, but appears in later layers and emerges as orthodoxy in the *upanishads*.

---

karma the consequences of one's actions which influence one's destiny in future existences

samsāra the cycle of rebirths, the conditions of which are determined by one's karma and liberation from which is considered to be the target of one's earthly striving

---

The mechanics of reincarnation theory is very simple: each action an individual performs creates a trace, karma, which influences that individual's future. No actions (apart from breathing and involuntary bodily movements) are ethically neutral, all of them are either in accordance with the individual's duty or not. Those that correspond to one's duty contribute to the future good of that individual, those that are not will have negative consequences. After an individual dies, their core self (*ātman*) moves to another body. Thus all individuals transmigrate through a cycle of rebirths (*samsāra*), through different bodies and different spheres of existence, depending on how well they have performed their duties in each life. However, even though everyone can ensure themselves comfortable future lives by behaving properly, this in itself is not what life should be about.

Brahman all-pervasive world soul, the absolute, a philosophical derivate of an omnipotent and ubiquitous divinity

ātman the core individual self, which survives after the death of the person and transmigrates to another body; it is the form in which the absolute is present in each individual

---

The major contribution of the *upanishads* to the Brahmanic worldview is the idea that the absolute world-soul, *Brahman*, is essentially identical to the core self of a person, or *ātman*. The goal of religious practice is to attain a deep-level knowledge of this, which makes it possible that the self of the individual is released after death and can dissolve itself in the *Brahman*, instead of transmigrating to another body. This is the idea of liberation, which becomes one of the central topics also for the reform movements. Even though the Jains and the Buddhists have their own terms for some of these concepts and they may disagree about the details of how the mechanics work, the idea that individuals should liberate themselves from an otherwise uninterrupted circle of rebirths by proper behaviour and practice remains the same.

'Put this chunk of salt in a container of water and come back tomorrow'. The son did as he was told, and the father said to him: 'The chunk of salt you put in the water last evening – bring it here'. He groped for it but could not find it, as it had dissolved completely.

'Now, take a sip from this corner', said the father. 'How does it taste?' 'Salty'.

'Take a sip from the center. – How does it taste?' 'Salty'.

'Take a sip from that corner. – How does it taste?' 'Salty'.

'Throw it out and come back later'. He did as he was told and found that the salt was always there. The father told him: 'You, of course, did not see it there, son; yet it was always right there. The finest essence here – that constitutes the self of this whole world; that is the truth; that is the self (*ātman*). And that's how you are, Shvetaketu'.

(*Chāndogya Upanishad*, 6.13, trans. Patrick Olivelle)

Language. Even before the rise of properly philosophical thinking, we can observe the development of critical views on language, as the only vehicle that can articulate such ideas. In India, we find language in a prominent role already in the sacred Vedic texts. The *Rigveda* contains a hymn (X 125) dedicated to the goddess Vāk, the impersonation of speech, which credits her, in the usual Vedic manner, with the most supreme powers including omnipresence and involvement in everything that happens. This view is taken even further in later texts, where language is called the endless source of what all gods consist, the primary truth, the mother of knowledge, and the navel of immortality. Occasionally language is in rivalry with thought and their relation to each other is not made quite clear. Finally, in the *Brihadāranyaka Upanishad*, *Brahman* itself, the absolute world-soul, is equated with speech (4.1.2).

Given the multilayered and multicentral nature of the early Indian worldview, we cannot, of course, draw very broad conclusions from these extracts. In some other narratives of creation and order maintenance, language is much less central, if mentioned at all. Nonetheless, even occasional attributing of such colossal powers to language is not accidental. The emergence of the caste system with the priests, or Brāhmans, at its head had to be justified by their extraordinary capacity to manipulate the world order. The privileged knowledge that the scriptures contained, in particular the technology of sacrifices, made the divine creatures dependent on the priests who could control them by their actions. This knowledge was embodied in linguistic form, and particularly the sacred formulas called *mantra* (more often than not senseless syllables, even though full of esoteric meaning explained to the followers), which had to be appropriately pronounced at certain stages of the ritual.

> [Language speaks:] I am ruler, assembler of goods, observer foremost among those deserving the sacrifice.
>
> Me have the gods distributed in many places – so that I have many stations and cause many things to enter me.
>
> Through me he eats food – whoever sees, whoever breathes, whoever hears what is spoken.
>
> Without thinking about it, they live on me. Listen, o you who are listened to: it's a trustworthy thing I tell you.
>
> Just I myself say this, savored by gods and men:
>
> 'Whom I love, just him I make formidable, him a formulator, him a seer, him of good wisdom'.
>
> (*Rigveda* X 125: 3–5, trans. S. Jamison and J. Brereton)

Sacred knowledge. The possession of this knowledge was almost equivalent to mastery over the universe. This is most likely the origin of the belief in the magic powers of words, also written texts, shared everywhere in Asia where currents of Indian thought (such as Buddhism) have reached. It was believed that studying texts, reciting them (in the Brahmanist tradition) and copying them (in Buddhism) created significant karmic merit. The Buddhist *Diamond Sūtra*, for example, asserts plainly that understanding and explaining no more than four lines of it creates more merit than filling ten thousand galaxies with treasures to be distributed to the poor. But even understanding is not really necessary. In the Jain tradition, for example, certain texts have been so sacred and important that even the priests were not supposed to touch them, until those manuscripts had to be

rescued from decay. And in Japan we find a priest covering the body of a blind musician with phrases from *sūtras* when he is sought after by ghosts who want to listen to his performance, so that only the ears, difficult to write on, remain unprotected – and are therefore ripped off by disappointed ghosts. Such powerful words or phrases encapsulating the sacred were called **mantras**.

The same kind of power continued to be attributed to mantras also during later times, when the political centre of the Indian society shifted to the warrior class, but held on to this body of higher knowledge. But gradually their rationale changed: little by little some mantras acquired the status of psychotechnical devices, with the help of which the Hindu or Buddhist ascetic could manipulate his or her (some, albeit very few of the ascetics were women) own consciousness. It was believed that the sounds affect the mind directly and may produce mental states necessary for reaching higher understanding. These practices are still alive today, among the Hindu in India as well as esoteric Buddhist traditions which have survived in Japan and Tibet.

Attention to form. Whatever the cosmogonic role of language may have been, its function as the carrier of sacred knowledge in the Vedic tradition and, accordingly, its crucial importance for the successful implementation of rituals, was beyond any doubt. This is why a distinction was made at a very early stage between texts belonging to the sacred 'heard' and the humanly produced 'remembered' texts – the former had to be memorized exactly in their correct phonetic form, while, for the latter, only the semantics mattered and they could be paraphrased or even translated into spoken languages, which gradually started to diverge from the Vedic norm. As a result, various procedures of linguistic analysis were undertaken by the priests in order to preserve the integrity of the most holy texts. The early Indian linguists noticed quite soon that certain regularities govern the behaviour of sounds that share other traits and devised a fairly sophisticated classification of sounds as a result, something that has not only become the foundation of all domestic Indian scripts, but has also influenced the composition of other writing systems from Tibet to southeast Asian islands and even Japan. But certain analytical procedures even predated the invention of Indian scripts: it was necessary to break the texts down into single words in order to best preserve their form and content. The structure of their language made this undertaking quite complicated: it is customary in Sanskrit to fuse the last sounds of preceding words with the first sounds of the following ones so that long compounds result within which single individual meaning-carrying units – words and grammatical indices – are not always easy to identify. Moreover, the relations between the singular units of such compounds can be very different, they can form new words (with up to 30 elements joined into one semantic whole), but they can also be sentences in which syntactically connected words similarly melt into each other (as, for example, in the English expression 'killjoy').

Language as a system. A radical leap in the Indian debate on the nature of language took place with the grammar of **Pānini** (around 400 BCE). Among other things, he devised a tentative classification of such compounds which made it easier for a reader to establish the relations between single meaning-carrying units in a long word, or sentence, or a fusion of both. But what is perhaps most innovative about his work is the ingenious metalanguage he created to formulate rules that cover grammatical material. For example, he inserted markers into the phonetically arranged systemic sequence of Indian sounds in order to define borders of sound groups by them – from vowel 'a' up to the mark 'K', that is, a group consisting of a, i, u, ṛ, and ḷ, would be denoted as 'aK', an artificial term that could then be treated as an independent word and accept, for example, case endings. (A group consisting of only u, ṛ, and ḷ would correspondingly be 'uK'.) Thus Pānini could very efficiently code the rules of regular sound alterations as short formulas that were easy to remember and decode. Similarly, he developed formulas for categories of morphemes, such as case and tense endings, and as a result achieved a complete and flawless system of rules that could describe the entire system of Sanskrit.

Even more important than this practical toolbox, however, was the methodological separation of the language under scrutiny from the language used to describe it. The former contained everything normal people would say or write, the latter was a code for the initiated that enabled them to formulate rules, systematic principles quite unknown to most users of the language themselves, to which any single sentence they pronounced nonetheless had to conform. For Pānini, Sanskrit was most probably still quite close to the language that he himself grew up with. For most later grammarians, it was an acquired cultural language, which they learned already together with Pānini's metalevel view of it. Thus his accomplishment also linked the notion of a perfect order not to language as such, but to a distinct form of it, the classical Sanskrit.

This understanding of language as a system of rules that generates specific individual utterances was remarkably advanced for those early times and subsequently served as a foundation for rather sophisticated discussion about other issues in linguistic philosophy, such as the theory of meaning. A need for a good theory of meaning was again dictated by priestly concerns. For example, early texts had specified with precision the materials and ways of producing necessary implements for conducting rituals in the proper way, but migration to new places of settlement had made some of these materials, such as particular plants, unavailable. How, then, were the priests to preserve the integrity of their sacred knowledge? The answer was a linguistic theory that explained how names had been given to particular objects, and how the efficient sacred essences of these objects could be preserved even though the objects themselves would be replaced.

Theory of universals. Thus, for example, one of the central concerns of later authors was the principle by which words were connected to the objects that they denoted, and the systematicity of such links. According to earlier grammarians, these links are a permanent part of reality and grounded in qualities that objects have in their essential selfsameness – a sheep is a sheep because of its 'sheepness'. Similarly, the sentence 'the sky is blue' refers to a 'sky-is-blue-ness' that characterizes reality at that moment, a little like 'the snow is white', in Tarski's view, is true if and only if the snow is white. Approximately eight centuries later, however, this theory was superseded by that of **Bhartrihari** (c. fifth century CE), who developed the observations of other earlier grammarians into a claim that meaning is not sustained by qualities of things, but universals. The distinction may seem like hair-splitting, but is actually substantial. For example, both aspirin and paracetamol can help against headache. But there is a difference between drugs sold under various commercial labels that contain paracetamol and those that are based on aspirin, because quite a few people are allergic to paracetamol, while aspirin would not be a problem for them. So it is possible that two things share the same universal as two concoctions based on the same ingredient, while sharing a quality such as curing a headache would not necessarily require that. This makes it possible to put the priestly concerns on a more substantial footing. For example, if the texts specify that a white goat has to be sacrificed and white goats are not available, then one should sacrifice a black goat, and not, for example, white flowers, because it is the 'goat' universal on which the meaning of the text relies. Another difference lies in that a quality is contained by the thing it is the quality of, while a universal, in Bhartrihari's view, is independent of any of the phenomena that manifest it. More than that: these universals form a hierarchy. Higher-order concepts are entailed in the lower-order concepts, and in turn they themselves also entail yet higher ones, so that finally all concepts are contained in one, a primary Meaning, which is the equivalent of the Absolute in religious thinking. According to Bhartrihari, the universe thus has a conceptual, logical structure, ordered as neatly as Pānini's grammar – which is precisely why grammar is in his view the most direct way to cognizing the absolute, the 'door to salvation' and the foundation of philosophical reasoning. The theory of universals was later developed and acquired an even more prominent role in the Vaisheshika school of philosophy.

Words and sentences. Bhartrihari also proposed a philosophically more solid ground for the phonetic selfsameness of words. Similarly as things, he argued, words also have universals, ideal phonetic shapes to which they, in principle, should conform, but do not, in actual speech practice, which in Bhartrihari's times had evolved from a range of dialectal variations into a multitude of languages incomprehensible to each other's speakers. And the relation of meaning obtains precisely between the word-universal and the thing-universal, both being